

The Wire and the Disenchantment of the Outsider

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Abstract: *This article is a contextualist reading of the television serial *The Wire* (2002-2008). Drawing on Grace Hale's *A Nation of Outsiders* (2011), this article examines the tension between how the paratexts of *The Wire* embrace an outsider rhetoric while the serial itself tries to deromanticize the trope of the outsider. The article argues that the producers of the serial embrace an outsider rhetoric in an effort to gain legitimacy for themselves which is at odds with how the serial debunks the charisma of the outsider. This deromanticization of the outsider is an important part of the serial's politics as this is a part of *The Wire*'s "sociological gaze." *The Wire* is shown not to accept the notion of a free space beyond the restrictions of contemporary society that the romance of the outsider depends on.*

Keywords: *The Wire, outsiders, David Simon, television serials*

To historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, the United States is a nation of outsiders. People seen as outsiders are imbued with a particular power and charisma. This is rooted in "the belief that people somehow marginal to society possess cultural resources and values missing among other Americans" (1). Hale argues that this notion first really took hold in American culture in the postwar era, where, as a symptomatic example, a philosopher such as Melvin Rader discussed the idea that "the contemporary artist has to alienate himself to keep his artistic integrity" (Rader 1958, 315). This idea – that artistic integrity needs a distance to certain "central" elements of society – is rooted in the imagining of the outsider. Hale shows how this trend manifests itself both in a broader social space but also in American literature, which features a strong tendency of seeing outsiders as holding a particular authority in relation to their surrounding society. Don DeLillo argues that the

American author should remain in opposition to power centers of society and that she who “writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation is one beat away from becoming elevator music” (DeLillo in Begley, 97). DeLillo infers that if an artist participates in, for instance, a market economy, she is running the risk of becoming reduced to the economic transaction she participates in, thus losing the position that makes it possible for the artist to criticize society. To DeLillo, like Rader before him, the credible artist must be an outsider.

The television serial *The Wire* (2002-2008), however, contests this idea. Though it plays on the trope of the outsider, it does so in order to discard the romance of the outsider. The serial forwards a “sociological gaze,” which emphasizes that all social phenomena are to be understood in relation to one another, and the serial consequently does not acknowledge that there is a “place outside” the boundaries of society.

The Wire

The Wire tells the story of an urban America in a highly ambitious manner that links formal innovation and aesthetic sophistication with an advanced political argument. Taking on the shape of a police procedural, the first of its five seasons focuses on a police unit’s efforts to build a case against a crime ring led by Avon Barksdale. However, where traditional police narratives tend to be highly episodic in structure, *The Wire* helped pioneer a more serialized form of storytelling where each episode is more of a chapter in a long-running narrative rather than a self-contained story. Due to this format and other innovative stylistic elements, the serial is a landmark achievement in the history of American television drama and part of the emergence of what television scholar Jason Mittell calls “complex TV” (Mittell 2015).

Set in Baltimore, Maryland, *The Wire* continually expands its portrayal of the contemporary city by adding a new setting with each season. Whereas the first season zooms in on the drug trade and the police’s almost futile attempts at stopping – or even containing – it, season two extends and expands narrative arcs from existing storylines. It also establishes Baltimore’s harbor as a new setting, portraying a working class facing the risk of losing their unionized jobs. The third season expands the narrative to the political arena by introducing the storyline of a mayoral candidate, Thomas Carcetti, intent on making a positive change in Baltimore while also portraying how a rogue police major, Bunny Colvin, tries to deal with the war on drugs in

his own way. Season four looks to the public schools and examines institutional issues that link poverty and social stratification with the reproduction of social ills. The fifth and final season portrays the role of the media through a new storyline set at the newspaper *The Baltimore Sun*. Seen as a whole the serial demonstrates how these social arenas are interconnected (Chaddha and Wilson 2011; Kinder 2012; Jensen 2017).

Arguably, the politics espoused by this television serial veers away – as an outsider? – from mainstream American political culture. To its showrunner,¹ David Simon, *The Wire* represents a form of “political dissent” (Simon in Abrams, 10). Its portrayal of contemporary Baltimore connects race and class with the effects of deindustrialization, portraying how the accountability thinking of New Public Management has diminished the functionality of public institutions. It is, however, quite common for contemporary television series to contain social critiques, so *The Wire* is a part of larger trend in television drama. But it is remarkable how seriously it has been taken as a political statement. For example, David Simon was invited to discuss sentencing and the prison system with President Obama in 2015 (Obama 2015). *The Wire* is even cited as the best television drama ever made, suggesting that in aesthetic-cultural terms its position is becoming increasingly central and canonized in television history. *The Wire* is frequently discussed in the scholarship on contemporary American drama serials (Halskov, Højer & Nielsen 2011; Martin 2014; Mittell 2015). It is the topic of five monographs (Vint 2013, Lavik 2014, Williams 2014, Kelleter 2014, Corkin 2017), at least five edited collections (Potter and Marshall 2009, Bzdak et al 2013, Dillon and Crommey 2015, Keeble and Stacy 2015), as well as special issues of *Criticism*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Darkmatter*. Most recently it was the topic of an “oral history” featuring interviews with writers, actors, directors who had worked on the serial (Abrams 2018). This vast literature helps canonize the serial. This has, in turn, helped create a platform for David Simon that allows him a voice in American public debates. In this sense, he is not the outsider he once was.² So while its political stance may not be particularly mainstream, the recognition the se-

1 A showrunner is a term for a producer and head writer of television series who has a large say in both creative and administrative matters. While the role of the showrunner goes back to the 1950s it was not until the 1990s that the label itself emerged (Perren & Schatz 2015, 87).

2 See Anderson 2008 and Levine & Newman 2012 for a discussion of the canonization of television drama as an art form.

rial has garnered since the end of its run has helped *The Wire* to become a central text in the canon of television serials. The serial's rejection of institutional dysfunction and criticism of the war on drugs make it something of a political outsider, while it has become a canonized insider in the realm of televisual culture.

Outsiders All Around

Though Hale argues that the romance of the outsider emerged in the post-war era, this phenomenon does have several precursors in American cultural history. Consider, for example, Edward Whitley's remark that Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), "crafted a poetic persona that functioned as a representative national figure and as an outsider on the fringes of national society" (463). Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis also spoke to the idea of people far removed from the cultural centers were imbued with a certain legitimacy and potency (Turner 1893). These precursors speak to the flexible nature of the romance of the outsider and *The Wire* contributes to the ongoing discussion over the nature of the outsider in American culture.

Hale's study, however, focuses on how middle-class whites in the post-war era became fascinated with outsiders epitomized in such fictional characters as *The Catcher in the Rye*'s protagonist Holden Caulfield (1951) and Sal Paradise in *On The Road* (1957). Convincingly demonstrating how outsider labelings were prevalent also within the conservative movement (Hale, 132-159) and how white liberals in the Civil Rights Movement sometimes romanticized – and thus pigeonholed – African Americans as embodying the outsider role par excellence in the South (Hale, 204-236), Hale shows how this discourse travelled both in literature as well as in broader social spheres. So while "culture" is one of the most contested terms in the humanities, it seems fruitful – in order to appreciate Hale's argument – to distinguish between cultural *objects* (e.g. novels and TV-series etc.) and cultural *practices* (e.g. norms of behavior etc.). Hale stresses that the trope of the outsider travels in both spheres, which suggests how prevalent this discourse is in contemporary American culture. She argues that a "[s]eparation from a space imagined as the arena of the dominant culture appeared ... as an act of self-determination, and social connection became possible in a separate place imagined as existing on the margins" (6). Her use of the phrase "a space imagined" shows that the potency and appeal of the

outsider lie in how it can be separated from social realities. Indeed, Hale's study is more a cultural history that examines how people have *understood* and *thought about* outsiders rather than a social history of the truly socio-economic marginalized people in American society.

The romance, however, lived on and by the late twentieth century it "remained a compelling tool of white middle-class self-invention" despite the fact that some "acts of opposition had grown so common that people who performed them barely registered as outsiders at all" (303). As such, Hale argues that Christopher McCandless, the young protagonist of the 2007 biopic *Into the Wild*, is an example of a person who is wrapped up in this way of thinking. But, as she notes, McCandless did not "invent the lens through which journalists interpreted" his life (307). That outsider romance had been there to draw upon and identify with for a long time. Today, however, this idea makes it possible for members of the political and economic elites to disavow their power. They are able to achieve legitimacy by casting themselves as outsiders despite their socio-economic status (308). In a 2011 blog entry at *The Washington Post's* website, she expanded her argument and identified how Tea Party activists played on the idea of the outsider:

Contrary to popular opinion, the rebel has always been politically promiscuous. The rebel is not a set of political or intellectual or spiritual beliefs. It is a character or role characterized by opposition to whatever appears to be central in a particular time and place. Seemingly outside the history they actually live within, rebels claim a powerful innocence.

Across the last half century, this sense of alienation has proven remarkably productive in both politics and popular culture. Sarah Palin and her Tea Party supporters are simply the latest in a long line of Americans who draw power from their sense that they are outsiders (Hale 2011b).

Hale's point about the outsider always having been "politically *promiscuous*" and the fact that she uses the term "rebel" instead of "outsider" without changing her core argument speaks to how open the notion of the outsider is. Despite the slipperiness of the term, the word calls forth the notions of being inside or outside of *something*. In that sense, the outsider depends upon a center – which, it appears, can be almost anything – against which the outsider is in an oppositional role: "It is a character or role characterized by opposition to whatever appears to be central in a particular time and place." It is this romance of the outsider that *The Wire* reimagines and reevaluates.

Outside *The Wire*

David Simon has repeatedly cast his role in the television industry as that of an outsider. Though we may today be critical of that assessment, it is evident that it is not enough that he sees himself in that role; it is also a part of how he projects himself to the world. His experiences working as a Baltimore newspaper reporter from his early 20s until his mid-30s has surely shaped Simon and given him an outlook and repertoire of experience that he has been able to draw upon in his portrayals of urban life. It also sets him apart from many other figures in the television industry. Drawing on his personal background in order to legitimize *The Wire*'s claim to realism through authenticity and outsiderhood, Simon is in line with the tradition Hale describes; by labeling himself an outsider he tries to legitimize the credibility of his artistic expression, as, in this logic, it is important to mark one's distance to dominant cultural norms and power centers.

When Simon recounts the diverse backgrounds of the people who worked in *The Wire*'s writers' room, he adds for emphasis that they were "all rooted in a different place than Hollywood," suggesting that Hollywood is the center which they remain in opposition to (Simon in Hornby 2007, NP). Jason Mittell supports Simon's claim, arguing that practically no other American TV drama series has a writing room populated by television industry outsiders like *The Wire* (Mittell 2012, 21).³ Describing his transition from reporter to showrunner, Simon said that he

made an improbable and in many ways unplanned transition from journalist/author to TV producer. It was not a predictable transformation and I am vaguely amused that it actually happened. If I had a plan, it was to grow old on the Baltimore Sun's copy desk, bumming cigarettes from young reporters and telling lies about what it was like working with H. L. Mencken and William Manchester (Simon in Hornby 2007: NP).

When Hornby conducted this interview in 2007 (i.e. before the fifth and final season had aired), Simon had already established himself as a showrunner. But it was never a given fact that he would be successful in this transition, which means that Simon's description of how he made "an *im-*

3 Despite Mittell's comment on just how much the writers' room on *The Wire* stands out in comparison with other television series, Simon is not alone in making the transition from journalism to writing and/or producing television drama. Beside other writers on *The Wire* like William Zorzi and David Mills, one could point to Cheo Hodari Coker, the showrunner on *Luke Cage*.

probable and in many ways unplanned transition” to producing television series seems fair. But his remark about how he otherwise would have lived “bumming cigarettes from young reporters” speaks to just how much Simon plays on this biographical fact. Simon uses the journalist desk as a metaphorical space that forwards his outsiderhood in the television industry. In doing so, he speaks to Hale’s idea about the value in being separate from “a space imagined as the arena of the dominant culture.” This issue, however, is related to the political ambitions that are at the heart of *The Wire*.

“*The Wire*,” Simon argues, “was not merely trying to tell a good story or two. We were very much trying to pick a fight” (Simon 2009, 3). Picking a fight through a television drama, however, can surely be challenged by the costs involved in producing television drama. This commercial art form is inextricably linked to the logics of the market and the need to turn a profit. This challenge can be addressed in numerous ways, e.g. by producing and promoting the serial in a way that underlines its political angle and ambitions or its claim to realism. As Vint shows, the casting of quite a few Baltimore actors and former criminals sets *The Wire* apart from many other series (87), and Erlend Lavik argues that these actors’ backgrounds have a rhetorical effect. They legitimize the serial’s right to speak about its content while also strengthening *The Wire*’s sense of authenticity (Lavik 2014, 136), which the serial uses as a rhetorical strategy for maintaining credibility in the context of the commercial realities of producing television.

Simon, however, emphasizes that producing the serial at HBO offered the artistic freedom needed: “[o]n HBO, nothing other than the stories themselves was for sale and therefore – absent the Ford trucks and athletic shoes – there is nothing to mitigate against a sad story, an angry story, a subversive story, a disturbing story” (Simon 2009, 2-3). Simon uses – both in rhetorical paratexts and in the actual production – the artistic freedom provided by HBO as a form of solution to the dilemma that he (in his own opinion) faces when producing political television series. Presenting himself as an industry outsider who tells stories of outsiders in American society, Simon plays into a rhetoric, which according to television scholar Erlend Lavik is one of the rhetorical solutions for showrunners with a political agenda. Wanting to foreground the political aspects of their productions and distance themselves from the economic logics of television production, such showrunners need a rhetorical strategy:

The dominant mentality in the television industry as a whole is at all times to minimize risks and cater to its audience as well as its sponsors. That is the norm and it is difficult to see another countermove for artistically ambitious showrunners than the romantic rhetoric of difference (Lavik 2014, 260, my translation).

Owned by Time Warner, HBO is financed mainly by subscribers and does not use sponsors in the same way as basic cable networks do, apart from product placement. The creators of *The Wire* nevertheless play on this “romantic rhetoric of difference.” To Jason Mittell, there “is a romantic notion that a writer’s creative vision starts as ‘pure’ and then gets compromised through the process of realizing that vision, especially in the commercially inflected world of mass media” (92). Similarly, film scholar Dana Polan argues that auteurist thinking operates with a “dialectics of freedom and constraint in the Hollywood system” (Polan 2001).

Lavik, Mittell, and Polan thus share a view on artistic freedom in relation to a commercial system in which the trope of the outsider offers the promise of a cultural space where artists can envision and construct themselves as (not) being part of that ‘system.’ The cultural trend that Hale identifies thus takes on a particular form in the media industry. Simon very much reproduces the romance of the outsider, which represents a contrast to *The Wire*’s deromantization of the outsider. So even though *The Wire* tries to debunk the romance of the outsider, this cultural trope is so powerful as a strategy of legitimization that its producers nonetheless reproduce it themselves. This is a testament to the power of this trope: even people who try to criticize it (within a text) nevertheless reaffirm it paratextually.

The Outsider on the Streets – The Appeal of Omar

By examining more closely three different characters, one sees how outsiderhood works in different ways in *The Wire*. A key example is Omar Little, the stick up man who robs people in the drug game and who is surely an outsider in relation to “the game” – *The Wire*’s metaphor for the drug industry. Omar is a distinct and unique character in contemporary television whereas detective Jimmy McNulty of the Major Crimes Unit is a much more generic character: the classic, dysfunctional, semi-alcoholic yet brilliant outsider detective known from many other police procedurals. He and his unit are outsiders within the police department that is run with a reverence for the importance of statistics. But where both Omar and McNulty

generally embrace their status as outsiders, the drug ring lieutenant Stringer Bell sees himself as an outsider in a bigger game. Unlike Omar and McNulty, Stringer wants to shed his outsider status. His attempt to ascend to legitimacy, however, is ultimately unsuccessful.

These three characters form a narrative triangle. Omar's outsider status is likened to McNulty's status in the police department, yet Omar is Stringer's worst foe. Conversely, McNulty understands himself as an exceptionally brilliant detective and therefore sees a "worthy opponent" in Stringer Bell. All three characters, however, are laid to rest. Stringer dies first (3.11),⁴ then Omar two seasons later (5.8), and McNulty dies a symbolic death when he, in the final episode of the series, is eulogized at a wake at a bar (5.10). McNulty's "symbolic death" lies in the fact that he sheds the key traits that have characterized him throughout the serial. By killing off all three of these charismatic outsiders, *The Wire* strongly signals its skepticism of the idea that the outsider is a viable figure.

While many criminals in *The Wire* are not portrayed as having any strong sense of ethos, Omar Little represents a striking exception. His role is that of a "stick-up-man" who robs people in the drug trade but who is adamant about not interfering with people outside "the game." In the fourth season, he stresses this point to detective Bunk Moreland saying "A man got to have a code" (4.7) which harks back to a scene two seasons earlier when he, while giving testimony in a courtroom, stresses that he "ain't never put [his] gun on no citizen," at which point the camera goes in for a close up showing his facial expression showing how important this is to him (2.6). This ethics allows viewers to sympathize with Omar who, according to media scholar Margrethe Bruun Vaage, is presented as more likeable than other gangsters. The fact that he is shown to be affectionate to his lovers – also in intimate settings – creates a "clear contrast to many other criminals in the series, who are portrayed as cold, or at least emotionally numb" (233).

Showing Omar in such situations allows viewers to get a more nuanced picture of him. This invites the viewer to sympathize with him and, by extension, maybe also with some of his opinions and actions. As Omar is also shown to commit violent crimes, these intimate scenes "mitigate" this violent side. Vaage also argues that while *The Wire* portrays a social world marked by each character being a function of this social world, Omar, on

4 This is how I cite individual episodes. The first digit represents the season and the second one refers to the episode making "3.11" the eleventh episode of the third season.

the other hand, “enjoys a sense of freedom from these institutions granted few other characters” (Vaage 233). His status in his community and his ethos set him apart from his community and make him an outsider. In one scene, Omar is shown wearing a t-shirt that says “I am the American Dream” which suggests how the unrestrained freedom afforded to him by his outsider status is central to American culture (2.10). *The Wire* agrees with Hale’s argument about the prevalence of the romance of the outsider.

Omar’s sexuality further adds to his outsider status. While he is combatting the Barksdale drug ring it seems that Avon and his cohorts resent Omar’s sexuality as much as they hate the damage he is able to inflict on their organization. Hillary Robbie argues *The Wire* is more diverse in its portrayal of sexuality (esp. Omar & Kima Greggs) than in its representation of gender (Robbie 2009, NP). To make Omar gay is surely a point in itself. Robbie explains that “Omar is a rare example of a character that is able to reconcile [...] issues of masculinity and homosexuality on screen; he is groundbreaking in presenting the idea that black men can be gay, and masculine, and masculine without being purely sexually driven” (Robbie 2009, NP). Robbie also argues, in an openly normative fashion, that “[t]he prospect of seeing homosexual minority couples has remained largely untouched by major media outlets and it is therefore worth applauding” and that “the work that it has done involving homosexual partnerships serves as one of the sole examples of normalized homosexuality” (Robbie 2009, NP). Robbie’s assessment of how much Omar’s sexuality goes against the grain of representing sexual minorities in American media points directly to the politics of *The Wire*. Interestingly, Kathleen LeBesco’s analysis of online fan forums on the HBO website reveals that most fans do not see “queerness and hardness/gangsta status” as a contradiction in terms. But her analysis still found an ambivalent attitude about Omar’s homosexuality: “Most posters who mention it maintain a distance, saying things like ‘despite Omar being a fag, I liked him ...’” (221).

Omar’s status as an outsider, however, is both seen in intra-diegetic as well as extra-diegetic terms. He is no generic figure and by making one of the serial’s most likeable, charismatic, and ethical criminal characters gay, *The Wire* forwards a progressive representation of sexuality.⁵ Omar

5 Laura Lippman, Simon’s wife, argues that Kima Greggs, *The Wire*’s other prominent gay character, is favorably portrayed as “[s]mart, tough, and hardworking” and that she “seem[s] almost *too* admirable in the early going” (Lippman 2009, 55).

adamantly proclaims that he does not believe in “snitching,” yet detectives Kima Greggs and Jimmy McNulty are successful in getting him to talk after Omar’s lover, Brandon, is killed by the Barksdale crew, Omar’s enemies. Omar walks into the basement room that the officers have to work in and is puzzled by their surroundings:

Omar: Say why we ain’t in a real police office?

McNulty: Well we’re a little like you, Omar. Out here on our own. Playing the game for ourselves.

Omar: Hard way to go sometime. (1.6)

McNulty’s use of the phrase “the game” and his comparison of his unit’s standing in within the police department to Omar’s status within the drug game underlines the commonalities between the institution of the police department and the institution of the drug running.⁶ Omar’s reply, however, speaks to how that marginal standing is not necessarily an enviable position. But seeing how these two characters, McNulty and Omar, are two of the most charismatic characters in the serial, the viewer is called to sympathize with characters in this position and is invited to see that is the position from which actual police work can get done and where Omar, though a killer and a part of the drug industry, can retain a moral “code,” in his own words.

The Wire’s portrayal of Omar as a highly charismatic character is in line with the romance of the outsider, but his death suggests that this outsider status is an unsustainable position. Sherryl Vint argues that it is only in Omar’s death scene “that *The Wire* retreats from this heroic myth” (91). One of the real life inspirations for Omar was drug world hitman Donnie Andrews who went to jail for his crimes (Patashnik 2009). *The Wire* could have sent Omar to jail, but instead it kills him off to show that this outsider role – while highly charismatic – is fundamentally unrealistic. As *The Wire* avoids questioning Omar’s commitment to his ethics, it lets Omar retain some of the charisma of the outsider, which thus represents a different way of disenchanting than in the case of McNulty who isn’t killed off but whose

6 Philip Abrams sums up eloquently how a form of action over time becomes an institutional structure: “When we refer to the two-sidedness of society we are referring to the ways in which, in time, actions become institutions and institutions are in turn changed by action. Taking and selling prisoners becomes the institution of slavery. Offering one’s services to a soldier in return for his protection becomes feudalism” (Abrams 1982, 2-3). This is how the practices of drug running can be said to constitute an institution in itself.

outsider status is rejected more fully. Omar's death does not invite viewers to change their views about Omar and he remains a romanticized outsider. Yet his death suggests that this outsider position is untenable and that is *The Wire's* way of arguing that the outsider cannot "ride off into the sunset" in this system. This outsider of the drug world, however, has a parallel in the outsider of the police department, Jimmy McNulty.

Outsiders within Institutions – McNulty and the Major Crimes Unit

The purpose of the Major Crimes Unit of which McNulty is an important member is to build cases against high-level players in the drug game instead of trying to charge any numbers of street-level "drug slingers." Giving more screen time to this unit than any other players in the police force, *The Wire* invites its viewers to align their views with the views expressed by its members, rather than, say, their superiors who are repeatedly shown to almost thwart the unit's ambitious investigations. McNulty is so much at the heart of the plot in the first season that he almost functions as a main character though he later becomes just one character among many in *The Wire's* sociological overview of Baltimorean society.

Jasper Schelstraete and Gert Buelens argue that the Major Crimes Unit "is virtually the only unit that is depicted as effective" and the unit's "position as outsiders allows them to circumvent, and sometimes to subvert, the mechanisms of the justice system, which are presented as obstacles for police work" (290). The institutional machinery is presented as an obstacle for productive police work, which is the background for portraying the Major Crimes Unit as a positive force for change that the audience can root for, align with, and sympathize with. Here again *The Wire* advances the trope of the outsider. This, then, becomes an integral part of *how* the serial formulates a critique of contemporary American culture. The textual feature of the outsider, however, carries with it a *cultural* component of romanticism which the serial aims at disenchanting.

The reason why the commanding officers focus so much on the clearance rates, however, has to do with how the effectiveness of the police force is *measured*. This way of measuring public institutions affects the overall effectiveness of the police force and thus *The Wire* points to the detrimental effects of such measuring (Jensen 2017, 126-127). As the brass' tunnel vision is shown to be detrimental to the overall mission of policing – upholding the law and making a positive change in its community – the Major

Crimes Unit's countermeasures against this managerial discourse is shown to attend to society's ills in a way that the police is otherwise able to do. The outsider unit thus counters the harmful discourse found at the center of power.

McNulty, however, can only be said to be marginal within the diegesis of *The Wire*. Being a highly skilled, dysfunctional, semi-alcoholic, vigilante police officer, he echoes a wide range of leading men from American police series and films. As a rather generic figure, McNulty is not an outsider in extra-diegetic terms, but he is very much an outsider within the storyworld of *The Wire*. Hale's remark that "people somehow marginal to society" are viewed as possessing "cultural resources and values missing among other Americans" fits almost too perfectly. McNulty's marginality within his institution is a central to his ability to navigate somewhat freely in fighting crime. In this way, this *formal* trait of the rogue police officer carries with it a *cultural* component which then becomes an integral part of how *The Wire* advances its societal critique of just *in what way* it goes about picking a fight, to paraphrase Simon's words.

The rogue cop, however, is a canonized figure which connotes ideological premises that suggests that the outsider individual is the solution to big societal problems. In the final scene of *Dirty Harry* (1971), Harry Callahan throws his police badge into a lake as a symbolic act of rejecting the institution he works in as being ineffectual in fighting crime; *Dirty Harry* can get the job done but will do so in spite of and not because of the police force. When McNulty, in season five, forges evidence to make it seem that a serial killer is on the loose in Baltimore so that his department will get more funding from politicians to carry out good police work, it is clear that the viewer is not supposed to endorse the politics and ethos of McNulty. Instead, the viewer is called to see the problematic consequences that the actions of an outsider rogue cop can lead to. As Younghoon Kim notes, *The Wire* "portrays McNulty and Freamon as righteous because they sacrifice themselves for the sake of great ideals they believe to be just. [...] However, the show never fully endorses their transgression of the law" (209). McNulty ends up transgressing his own ethos, and *The Wire* suggests that the outsider is an anti-social figure that it cannot endorse as a solution to societal problems. The rogue cop is not the answer to the systemic reality that *The Wire* portrays. Sherryl Vint argues that in *The Wire* crime "is shown to be the result of systemic problems and thus to require systemic solutions" (28), which is why McNulty cannot hold the moral high ground at the end of the serial.

The outsider must be rejected as a solution to societal problems and that point is at heart of the politics *The Wire* espouses.

One key example of the romance of the outsider predating the post-war era is the trope of the cowboy, which is premised upon the idea of an outsider enforcing what is right and wrong but who remains at a distance from established society. According to Lavik, *The Wire* uses its “central intertextual framework” of the western to “call forth the mythic, macho *ethos* of the frontier” (Lavik 2012, 64-65). Though Hale does not explore this trope, this figure embodies the dynamics of the outsider who has the potential to do things that are good for the community but who, in the end, cannot live within the confines of established society. The positive valorization of the figure is thus directly connected to his marginal position. *The Wire* revises this logic of the cowboy narrative, which is a point that Simon has also forwarded paratextually (Simon in Mills 2007; Lavik 2012; Jensen 2017, 132).

The cowboy is not a part of the town and that is what gives him the – in this ideology – necessary position *outside* society to effect positive change. *The Wire* eschews that very logic and David Simon has used the cowboy narrative to explain what notions he deliberately evades in *The Wire*: “Guy rides into town, cleans up the town, rides out of town. There’s no cleaning it up anymore. There’s no riding in, there’s no riding out. The town is what it is” (Simon in Mills 2007). The Major Crimes Unit serves as an unruly element within the city making them proverbial outsiders, who try to clean up the mess that established society is unable/unwilling to really attend to. Lavik argues that “[t]he westerns quoted are exclusively revisionist, both sentimentalising the *ethos* of the Old West while exposing it as cynical, hypocritical and/or even dangerous” (Lavik 2012, 65). Season three’s opening episode, “Time After Time”, thus contains several lines that sound like they have been lifted straight out of a western. Daniels tells the Major Crimes Unit to “Mount up [and] Find your way home.” Rawls similarly suggests that the Baltimore Police Department leadership “let no man come back alive,” and Lieutenant Dennis Mello says to his officers: “Alright, get outta here, don’t get captured,” and, finally, Lester Freamon asks McNulty “It’s you against the world, is it?” as if McNulty were a vigilante cowboy. But the Major Crimes Unit is *inside* the contemporary city and is even employed *by* the city.

McNulty and his partner Lester Freamon end up being dismissed from the police force without having effected change. *The Wire* suggests that social change will not come from any outsider. Though the serial is pes-

simistic about the outlooks for change from within, it also makes a point of rejecting that change can come from the outside(r). The inability of these “cowboys within the city” to bring about change is a major point in *The Wire*. It cannot be an outsider who cleans up, because (1) outsider is a fiction and (2) if change is to be adequate and substantial enough to address the issues that *The Wire* points to, it needs to come from within the city. *The Wire* rejects the outsider because it is situated in a liminal space on the edges of society and *The Wire* does accept that such a space exists. In *The Wire*’s sociological gaze, all spaces are part of the same web of social connections. It also goes against the serial’s politics to believe in single individuals being able to clean up society’s problems. Marsha Kinder argues that *The Wire*’s societal criticism is systemic (Kinder 2012), and a potent outsider goes against this systemic politics. The cowboy outsider’s potency is put to rest in order for the serial to remain consistent in its portrayal of the individual being overpowered by society. It does not allow the outsider to change anything.

Grace Hale ends her book on a normative note by suggesting that American culture needs to come up with a new romance and move on from the romanticization of the outsider. *The Wire* seconds Hale’s argument. This serial rejects a standard narrative model in American film and television because that narrative model is built on the myth of the lone outsider being able to “clean up.” Though it portrays institutions as being detrimental to many people’s lives, *The Wire* nonetheless tacitly suggests that the solutions it calls for are based on cooperation between people. Freamon and McNulty do ‘ride off into the sunset’ in the sense that Freamon continues to make his hobby sized furniture and is in a relationship, and McNulty finally goes home from the bar without drinking himself senseless (5.10). But in doing so *without* having effected change, *The Wire* tries to dissuade the viewer from rooting for McNulty and the other outsider McNultys on television. He may be a charismatic outsider but he is impotent in the face of Baltimore’s institutions and structures. When *The Wire* emphasizes how structural forces trump individual actors’ ability to effect change in this system, it follows that the serial must reject the lure of the outsider. This plays into why McNulty crosses too many lines in the last season. Here *The Wire* shows its viewers that McNulty’s outsider mentality must be rejected as it ends in an indefensible ethics.

When McNulty learns that Stringer Bell apparently has transitioned into the life of a legitimate businessman, McNulty expresses his disappointment

by saying “I had such fuckin’ hopes for us,” which is also the epigraph of that episode (3.5). If Stringer is out of the drug trade, McNulty lacks the target he needs to envision himself as the rogue cop that can chase a worthy adversary. After Stringer has been killed, McNulty is sitting at the murder scene looking utterly disappointed telling his partner that “I caught him, Bunk. On the wire ... I caught him and he doesn’t even know it” (3.12), suggesting how McNulty’s sense of self depends on being part of a traditional adversarial trope in American popular culture. Stringer Bell represents *The Wire*’s third way of discussing the outsider.

The Reluctant Outsider – Stringer Bell’s Failure

The police investigation in *The Wire*’s first season centers on the Barksdale crime organization. When the leader of this organization, Avon Barksdale, is incarcerated his lieutenant Stringer Bell is left in charge. Bell is a different form of outsider than Omar and McNulty. He is arguably portrayed as less charismatic than they are and where they embody and actively engage with the outsider identity, Stringer is the exact opposite. He sees himself as an outsider in relation to the “big game” of real estate and big money and wants to transcend his background but is unsuccessful in doing so. Through Bell, *The Wire* portrays some of the untoward realities of outsiderhood. This is a different way of disenchanting the lure of the outsider.

Taking economics courses at a local community college (1.8), Bell tries to rethink Avon’s organization. He adopts the language and insights of his college courses, trying to explain to his subordinates working at a copy shop how they are “not gonna bring [their] corner bullshit up in here” and how he wants his copy shop “to run like a true fucking business” (1.8). As the serial progresses Avon and Stringer slowly go in different directions and these lines reflect how Bell’s way of thinking already at this point is moving away from the logics of the street. Halfway through season three, Avon and Stringer are sitting in a car discussing the fact that a new competitor, Marlo Stanfield, has overtaken some of their corners. Stringer does not mind this development as he believes that their business should focus on their “product” (drugs) rather than fighting Marlo over territory. But Avon is angry; to him, everything is about territory and corners. The scene ends with the camera panning sideways from a close-up of Avon sitting in the passenger seat to Stringer sitting in the back looking at Avon with a skeptical look on his face; it frustrates him that Avon is sticking to his street level logic

(3.6). Despite belonging to the criminal world of drug running, Stringer's mindset is in another place and he eventually tries to transcend his criminal background and become a legitimate businessman and move beyond the economy of "muscle and corners."

Bell bribes state senator Clay Davis in the belief that Davis will help him get building permits through City Hall. Davis, however, has no intention of helping him and Bell wants revenge when he realizes that Davis has conned him. But not in the way associated with the circles that he wants to move into, but revenge more akin to his gangster background. He wants to kill Clay Davis. Avon, now out of prison, admonishes Stringer's desires of revenge. Slim Charles, a hitman, tells Stringer that that "Murder ain't no thing, but this here some assassination shit, man..." and Avon asks Stringer "What did I tell you about playing them fucking away games? Yeah, they saw your ghetto ass coming from miles away, nigger. You got a fucking beef with them? That shit is on *you*." (3.11). Avon knows his place and criticizes the very notion that Stringer tried to strive for more. Bell could have maintained his high standing in the drug game but is marginalized when he attempts to translate his high standing to another social sphere.

While Simon uses outsider rhetoric in *The Wire's* paratexts, the serial points to how society's margins do not represent an enviable position in social or economic terms. In the opening scene of *The Corner*, the first drama David Simon created, director Charles S. Dutton presents the mini-series' ambition of telling about "men, women, and children living in the midst of the drug trade. Their voices are too rarely heard" (episode 1, *The Corner*). Stringer Bell tries to go from the drug game to a more legitimate game *and* keep his enviable social standing in the former. His tragic death also becomes a part of *The Wire's* portrayal of the tragic stories that lie in the margins of society, even for those who look like they are able to make it.

Stringer's demise, however, is foreshadowed by one of his own victims, D'Angelo Barksdale, who, in a reading group in a Maryland prison, discusses the fate of the "great" Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous 1925 novel:

D'Angelo: He's [Fitzgerald] saying that the past is always with us. Where we come from, what we go through, how we go through it. All this shit matters. I mean, that's what I thought he meant.

Book club leader: Go ahead.

D'Angelo: Like at the end of the book, you know, boats and tides and all. It's like you can change up, right, you can say you're somebody new, you can give yourself a whole

new story. But, what came first is who you really are and what happened before is what really happened. It don't matter that some fool say he different 'cause only the thing that make you different is what you really do, or what you really go through. Like, you know, like all them books in his library. He frontin' with all them books, but if you pull one down off the shelf, and none of the pages have ever been opened. He got all them books, and he ain't read near one of them. Gatsby, he was who he was, and he did what he did. And 'cause he wasn't ready to get real with the story, that shit caught up to him. I think, anyway. (2.6)

These lines speak to many characters' futile attempts to turn their lives around. There are, to be sure, also more positive outcomes for several characters, e.g. the drug addict Bubbles who gets clean. But D'Angelo's words about how "what came first is who you really are and what happened before is what really happened" speak to Stringer's end, and, tragically, foreshadow D'Angelo's own imminent death at this point in the serial. After Stringer's death, McNulty is baffled when he goes through Stringer's apartment which obviously is a striking contrast to what the police detective had expected to find. Asking himself, "Who the fuck was I chasing?" the camera tilts down to show McNulty holding Stringer Bell's copy of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in his hand (3.12). Through D'Angelo's monologue and this use of mise-en-scène and cinematography, *The Wire* suggests a link between Gatsby and Stringer Bell. Having taken college classes, Stringer presumably did read some of those books, but the point remains; his past eventually caught up with him. D'Angelo's words foreshadow how Stringer will stay in the same place whether he wants to or not. His story is thus but one thread in the warp and woof of *The Wire*'s portrayal of social reproduction. The logic of the serial is that he will ultimately be unable to transcend the game, and he therefore remains the reluctant outsider, who ultimately fails at becoming an insider in the legitimate game.

Connecting these analyses, we can see *The Wire*'s ambivalent use of the outsider. In paratexts, David Simon continually uses the romance of the outsider in order to create a sense of legitimacy or ethos for himself and the serial. The serial itself, however, reevaluates the romance of the outsider and here lies *The Wire*'s relationship to the romance of the outsider. When the outsider is uncritically reproduced in the paratexts it is because the creators know what sort of legitimacy they can attain from that, but that sort of reproduction becomes peculiar when one considers how *The Wire* itself makes a point out of debunking and reevaluating the romance of the outsider.

That discrepancy, however, has to do with what the outsider is an outsider in relation to. To Simon and *The Wire*, the center is a media con-

glomerate that often produces narratives with ideological implications that Simon wants to criticize and stay away from. The creators of *The Wire* thus reproduce the idea that a *media oriented* outsider status is necessary or helpful in not playing into larger discourses that – in their view – are premised on false ideas about society. In that sense, *The Wire* posits that in this media landscape the outsider position is helpful in trying to forward non-mainstream political ideas but the serial nonetheless does not want to reproduce the romance of the outsider and its political implications.

Summing Up

The Wire's paratexts wholeheartedly embrace the romance of the outsider though the serial itself shows that the outsider is an untenable fiction. It takes more than a charismatic outsider-cowboy to attend to the problems that the contemporary city faces. McNulty is eulogized and forced to retire, and the viewer is strongly invited to reject his moral stance. Omar ends up dead though his moral “code” remains untarnished, and Stringer’s dreams of becoming an insider are shown to be futile, all of which suggests that the serial does not embrace the politics associated with these outsiders. However, for *The Wire* to be able to reject the outsider it first has to create the outsiders and do so with all the charisma of Omar and McNulty. So though some of the outsider characters are an integral part of *The Wire's* *aesthetic* and *narrative* appeal, the serial makes a *political* point out of demasking their outsiderhood.

But that does not change the fact that *The Wire* does not entertain any notion of an outsider being able to effect change. This is *The Wire's* subtle yet crucial reinterpretation of the romance of the outsider. However charismatic these outsiders are, the viewer is called to understand that their oppositional stance is both unproductive and unsustainable. This rejection lies in the fact that none of these outsiders can stay alive or remain outsiders. They either end up being fired or killed. In *The Wire*, the lone outsider is unable to offer any solutions to the problems that Baltimore faces. The gridlocked state of the *The Wire's* storyworld does not allow the outsider any promise in terms of changing this situation. So though the serial’s outsiders are an important part of its textual appeal, it is important for *The Wire* to disenchant this trope.

Hale argues that the romance of the outsider works because “it denies at the imaginary level the contradictions between the human fantasy of abso-

lute individual autonomy and the human need for grounding in historical and contemporary social connections” (308). The romance works because it ignores a fundamental tension between the need to belong to a community and the fantasy of, or wish for, unobstructed freedom. *The Wire* also criticizes this denial of the tensions between individuals’ need for social connections and the fantasy of autonomy. McNulty’s fantasy of complete autonomy is cast aside, and Omar’s death is a rejection of the fantasy of the completely free individual. Stringer’s character arc does not play into the romance of the outsider but shows just how much his dreams were hubristic in this version of Baltimore. As a whole, *The Wire*’s portrayal of the contemporary city emphasizes how the community has failed and it is, in Simon’s words, a story of “the America left behind” (Simon 2009, 9). In this perspective, the rejection of the outsider is an important part of *The Wire*’s political project. It does not show the lone romanticized outsider to be able to address the failings of the community.

There is, however, an element of irony in the fact that Simon presents himself as the outsider, considering how *The Wire* suggests that the outsider is an untenable position for creating change. In several of *The Wire*’s authorial paratexts, Simon casts himself as an outsider despite the fact that the serial has been lauded extensively by critics and academics. Simon’s thirteen years as a Baltimore journalist and his politics as a self-proclaimed social democrat (Simon in Mills 2007) – which very well may be described as an off-center political stance in an American context – arguably do set him apart from many people participating in public discussions in the United States. In this perspective, his politics on several subjects are in opposition to a big part of the American political establishment. So though he casts himself as an outsider, he is an outsider trying to take center stage.

As Hale demonstrates, the rhetorical effect of this outsider rhetoric can be strong nonetheless. People with much more political clout than Simon claim to be outsiders and embody the romance of the outsider, and a show-runner like Simon can also use discourse to establish for himself a sense of credibility in cultural and political discussions. But he does so despite the fact that *The Wire* portrays outsiders as embodying untenable positions and that the serial rejects the notion that the lone, isolated individual is able to affect the form of societal change that the serial implicitly calls for.

Lawrence Blum correctly notes that in *The Wire* “[t]he rules of the institution are constantly at odds with constructively addressing any of the issues with which the institution is meant to engage (crime, education, gov-

erning the city)” (NP). The city’s institutions do not change anything and it is important for *The Wire* to show that neither do its outsiders. One might argue that it is a common trope in American fiction to suggest that when society is not able to fix its problems there is a chance that the outsiders will be able to affect change. Several critics have argued that *The Wire* is a pessimistic drama (Coates 2008, Atlas and Dreier 2009), but as Erlend Lavik points out that criticism reads like complaining that a fire alarm is noisy (Lavik 2014, 142). The serial emphasizes how interconnected the social problems it portrays are and does not suggest to the viewer that everything will work itself out. Neither institutions nor outsiders are capable of attending to society’s detrimental structural and social issues. For that reason *The Wire* needs to disenchant the outsider.

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