

# The Wire's America: An Exploration of Race, Power, and Systemic Inequity

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2023

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:021750>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-12-12**



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Odjel za anglistiku

Dvopredmetni diplomski studij anglistike; znanstveni smjer

**Pavao Lepur**

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The Wire's America: An Exploration of Race, Power, and Systemic Inequity

Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2023.



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Zadar, 5. listopada 2023.

## Table of contents:

1	Introduction .....	1
2	America, Baltimore and “The Wire” .....	3
2.1	America .....	3
2.2	Baltimore .....	7
2.3	„The Wire“ .....	9
3	Neoliberalism and „The Wire“ .....	12
3.1	Marlo Stanfield: Neoliberalism Personified .....	14
4	Critical Race Theory (CRT) and "The Wire" .....	16
4.1	Institutional Racism in the Police Department .....	17
4.2	The Legal System and The Racial Bias .....	18
4.3	Education and Systemic Disparities.....	19
4.4	Politics, corruption and racial disparities .....	20
5	W.E.B Du Bois and „The Wire“ .....	22
5.1	Stringer Bell: A Man without a Country .....	24
5.2	Bodie Broadus: Code of the Street.....	27
5.3	Omar Little: A Man Must Have a Code.....	29
6	Frantz Fanon and „The Wire“ .....	32
6.1	D’Angelo Barksdale: A rejection of violence .....	33
6.2	Reginald "Bubbles" Cousins: A Life on the Margins .....	35
6.3	Michael Lee: A Youth Shaped by Circumstance .....	35
7	Conclusion .....	37
	Works Cited .....	41
	The Wire’s America: An Exploration of Race, Power, and Systemic Inequity: <i>Summary and Key Words</i> .....	45
	Žicina Amerika: Pregled rase, moći i sustavne nejednakosti: <i>Sažetak i ključne riječi</i> .....	46

## 1 Introduction

America, often heralded as the “land of the free”, has often been described as a beacon for many seeking liberty, opportunity and the promise of the American Dream (Tocqueville, 1835). However, beneath the surface of its storied historical importance and influence, lies a complex variety of social issues that follow the country from its beginnings, forever changing the trajectory of its development. From its inception, the nation grappled with questions such as freedom, equality, even the very definition of what it means to be a citizen. As the country expanded and evolved to its current state, so did its challenges, ranging from economic disparities, political divide to healthcare access.

Among the most prominent of the challenges is the one that is most enduring throughout American history; the issue of race. The legacy of slavery, the tumultuous Civil Rights era and even the current ongoing struggles for racial justice have left undeniable marks on the American psyche (Kendi, 2016). Racism, both overt and systemic, infiltrated every facet of American existence, from housing and employment or education and the criminal justice system. The issue of racism is deeply rooted in historical injustices and has only been exacerbated by the current societal structures. which in turn continues to influence the everyday life of countless individuals, especially those most exposed in marginalized communities. Considering this, it is evident that America's racial problem is a complex subject that should be investigated by acknowledging historical wrongdoings as well as by confronting contemporary realities and, in the end, by imagining a more inclusive future.

Media today serves a more powerful cause than it ever has; not only is it a form of entertainment, but a tool used for shaping perceptions, narratives and ultimately discourses within society. It influences our surroundings, reflects and at times challenges societal values and norms. It is easy to see then how crucial the role of media is in America, where the issue of race is deeply entrenched in everyday culture. The issue of race representation through media is therefore vital, as it plays a crucial role in challenging racial stereotypes, even though unfortunately many times the opposite can be said. HBO's “The Wire” is a hallmark example of the former. Through its raw and unfiltered portrayal of the racial dynamics of the 2000s Baltimore, it serves as a blueprint based on which societal landscape of ethnic America can be mapped.

“The Wire” has been heralded as a groundbreaking achievement in American television since its debut. Clark (2009) states that this is not only because of the narrative prowess displayed, but maybe more due to the deep dive into the systemic racism in urban America. Set in the heart of Baltimore, the series is a biography of Baltimore as much as it is of its citizens, examining the city's socio-economic intricacies, serving as a depiction of the broader prevalent systemic challenges throughout the United States (Johnson, 2011). Through its complex and multifaceted narratives, “The Wire” is easily distinguishable from its crime drama contemporaries; it escapes the genres traditional confines in order not to only depict real humans as the victims of the malfunctioning system, but also highlight institutional decay and racial disparities across various governmental sectors, whether it be the police and judicial system, education and even media in its final season (Alvarez, 2014). As Pierce states (2013), what allowed the show to be so enduring is not merely its detailed storytelling but its capacity to cause critical discussion on the enduring issue of race, which is a pivotal characteristic of the American socio-political landscape even today. This thesis goal is to examine “The Wire” as a pivotal work of American television and, in accordance, use it as a proxy in order to examine portrayal of racism in American society. Specifically, the analysis will be formed through macro-micro approach, meaning that firstly the macro elements that constitute The Wire's reality will be examined, which will in turn lead to micro level character analysis. Firstly, neoliberal context will be examined, specifically through the influence of the shifting Baltimore economy and the resulting change in general working class, which will be used as a background to examine the position of impoverished African-American class. ”. In order to follow up the lack of economic safety nets, the principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be integrated in order to examine the lack of institutional ones. CRT is a theory concerned primarily with the interplay of race, law and power, primarily in which ways society and culture intersect the named three. Then, W.E.B Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness will be used, which states that African-Americans consistently through their existence navigate between their African heritage and the American socio-cultural environment, leading to an internal duality (Du Bois, 1903). This framework is especially potent for this series, as it offers a nuanced understanding of the conflict between individuals, their identity and struggles, and societal expectations, which is very apparent through some of the series characters. Finally, Frantz Fanon’s theories on race will be used, which focus on the dynamics of power and oppression present between individuals and society, which the author believes is the remnant of the psychological impacts of colonization. His theories will provide a deeper context for systemic challenges depicted in the series, as well as colonization remnants which are

responsible for affecting even individuals behavior on a micro-level, which will be explained with the use of concept of “white gaze Through this quadruple approach, the aim of this thesis is to provide an comprehensive exploration of social dynamics in “The Wire”, specifically the role and everlasting effects of racism, with a broader goal of shedding light on the layered and deeply rooted nature of racism in America.

## **2 America, Baltimore and “The Wire”**

McNulty: *“I got to ask ya, if every time Snot Boogie would grab the money and run away...why’d you even let him in the game?”*

Snot Boogies Friend: *“...What?”*

McNulty: *“If Snot Boogie always stole the money, why did you always let him play?”*

Snot Boogies Friend: *“Got to, This America, man.”*

### **2.1 America**

The volatility and the ever changing nature of the American economy is nowhere as apparent as in the industrial cities, specifically from the 19th century to the mid-20th century. Cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and finally Baltimore, emerged as hubs responsible for the flourishing of manufacture, innovation and most importantly, employment. However, tides turned with the passage of the 20th century, as the influence of the global economy's unstable nature, general technological progress and internal domestic policies ultimately spelled their decline. Globalization was among the most important factors responsible for the said decline. As the interconnected global economy developed, manufacturing jobs were relocated to countries which could offer cheaper labor costs (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Aforementioned technological advancements, particularly in automation, also influenced the job market, as manual labor proved less and less valuable, resulting in job losses (O'Sullivan, 2007). The post-World War II era was marked by the migration from downtown apartments to suburb homes, as the workers once living in downtown areas near factories reallocated to suburbs, driven by allure and the sudden affordability of homeownership (Taylor,



2010). Domestic policies played a significant role too, as redlining and urban renewal planning had a disproportionate impact on inner city communities, especially those of color (Williams, 2015). The interrelation of the named factors culminated in a number of socio-economic challenges, just some of which were decaying infrastructure, problems with school funding, or rather underfunding, and generally overburdened social services, especially healthcare. All of these factors will be elaborated on further.

However, the first factor connected to the urban decay relevant to this thesis to be explored is The “War on Drugs” policy in the 1980s. The policy’s aim was to combat drug use and all of the associated crimes with drug use, however, it left a lasting effect on urban communities, specifically Black and Latino neighborhoods, most of which never recovered from the socio-economic devastation. The most tumultuous factor which the War on Drugs introduced was the mandatory minimum sentences for drug related offenses. The sudden strictness in penalizing even minor crimes resulted in a broken system, where minor offenses involving possession rather than distribution were disproportionately targeted. As a result, urban communities witnessed a sudden surge in incarceration rates, with many individuals receiving lengthy prison sentences for non-violent offenses (Alexander, 2010). The cycle of incarceration did not only have an impact on individual families, but it also further perpetuated poverty, as the incarcerated even upon release struggled to find employment, due to now obtained criminal records. In addition, less subtle tactics were employed on urban areas, specifically the areas became aggressively policed, with stop and frisk policies, no-knock warrants and even the militarization of local police becoming commonplace (Cooper, 2015). Even though these tactics were intended as a way to halt drug trafficking, what resulted was an erosion in the relationship between communities and law enforcement. As the encounters between police and urban inhabitants became frequent, sometimes even violent, it caused a permanent divide, instilled with fear and mistrust.

It is important not to understate the economic implications the War on Drugs had. With further funneling of resources into law enforcement and adjacent structures, pillars of communities such as education, housing and healthcare suffered great consequences with underfunding. This relocation of resources furthered poverty, which in turn made communities even more disadvantaged, with the lack of necessary support to break free of cycles of injustice, poverty and crime (Goffman, 2014). What resulted was a process of criminalization of poverty, where those with no access to rehabilitation services due to economic misfortune

were more likely to face incarceration. This effectively meant that drug addiction was treated as a criminal issue rather than a public health concern. As Saxe (2017) notes, by the way of this approach, the root causes of drug addiction, such as social and economic disproportions, trauma and lack of mental health services were completely ignored. While the War on Drugs was initiated with the intent to combat drug use and its associated crimes, it left an everlasting impact on urban communities across the nation. The policy not only influenced incarceration rates, specifically of those in urban areas, but also further entrenched cycles of poverty and criminalized addiction. With this in mind, it is important to understand that in order to craft an effective drug policy, the root of drug consumption and trafficking should be examined as a systemic failure and the result as a public health concern rather than an indictable offense in order to be tackled properly, something that the show does impeccably.

Adding to the list of contextual misfortunes, it is impossible to omit the 2008 housing crisis. Although the fictional Baltimore in the show does not experience the crisis, real Baltimore still bears its consequences. It is also important to note the crisis as it served as a catalyst which illuminated the deep-seated racial and economic divide in America, with Baltimore serving as a poignant example. The crisis resulted in a massive wave of mortgage defaults and home losses and in doing so affected minority communities disproportionately, further dividing the fortunate from not-so fortunate. However, the housing problem has been apparent even before the crisis, particularly due to practices like redlining, which affected mostly industrial cities like Baltimore. Redlining is a practice that began in the 1930s and, as the name states, involved marking out areas which were mostly populated by Black population and marking said areas as high-risk for mortgage lenders (Rothstein, 2017). As a consequence, Black families were barred from accessing mortgages, resulting in decades of disinvestment in said neighborhoods. Therefore communities that have been redlined were already particularly economically vulnerable by the time the housing bubble burst in the late 2000s. The crisis only exacerbated these disparities. Lenders aggressively marketed subprime loans, which carried higher interest rates, to minority communities. Many of said loans were designed with adjustable rates, meaning that although they seemed affordable at first, they quickly became untenable as interest rates rose (Dymski, 2009). Rough and Massey (2010) found that when the bubble burst, Black and Latino homeowners were almost twice as likely as white homeowners to face foreclosure.

The chaos that resumed in cities like Baltimore was harrowing. Foreclosures led to a decline in property values, which in turn reduced tax revenues for distinct municipalities. This decline in revenue further strained already underfunded public services, including schools, public transportation, and healthcare. The vacant homes left in the wake of foreclosures also became hotspots for crime, further destabilizing communities (Fields, 2015). Moreover, even after the stabilization of the housing crisis, affected families still had long-term economic problems. Foreclosure not only meant the loss of a home but also severely impacted credit scores, making it challenging for these families to secure housing or loans in the future. This further perpetuated the cycle of poverty, as families were forced into substandard rental housing or, in extreme cases, homelessness. The housing crisis did not only showcase the instability of the American economy, but also shed light on the systemic racial and economic disparities that have plagued American cities for decades. Baltimore, particularly in its current state, but also in the state that “The Wire” depicts, is a testament to what history of discriminatory housing practices and economic challenges, combined with the profound and lasting impact of the crisis can do to an urban minority community.

Circling back on the less context dependent factors which influenced the urban decay in cities like Baltimore, healthcare access, a fundamental determinant of community well-being, cannot be omitted. Healthcare access still remains a significant challenge in marginalized communities across the United States to this day. It is needless to say that these challenges are deeply rooted in systemic inequalities which further pronounced health disparities and economic misfortune for marginalized communities. These communities, often characterized by lower socio-economic status and a higher proportion of racial and ethnic minorities, face a myriad of barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Firstly, there's the issue of affordability. Despite efforts to expand coverage through mechanisms like the Affordable Care Act, many individuals in these communities remain uninsured or underinsured, making medical care incredibly expensive (McKenna, 2016). Even those lucky enough to be insured struggle with high deductibles, co-pays, and uncovered services. Logistical and geographical barriers further exacerbate the issue, as many marginalized neighborhoods are situated in so-called “medical deserts”, which are areas where medical facilities, particularly specialists and urgent care centers, are scarce (Probst, 2019). Residents may have to travel long distances for care, which is further complicated by the lack of transport options in the areas. Flores (2006) also states that cultural and linguistic barriers also prove to be a great challenge, as miscommunication, mistrust and ultimately suboptimal care can happen as a result of diverse

cultural and linguistic needs of said communities. This is particularly evident in communities with a significant immigrant population, where language barriers can significantly impede patient-doctor interactions.

These barriers to healthcare access have tangible health outcomes, as Williams & Collins (2001) note, marginalized communities consistently exhibit higher rates of chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and asthma. They also face higher infant mortality rates and lower life expectancies. These issues are not only a reflection of a failing healthcare system, but also signify the interplay of other socio-economic factors, such as housing quality, environmental factors, and employment opportunities. The end result ultimately is a cycle of mutual influence of economic consequences on health disparities and vice versa. Poor health outcomes often translate to increased absence from work, reduced productivity, and in severe cases, job loss. This not only affects individual and family incomes but also has broader economic implications in terms of lost economic output (Gaskin, 2012). In addition to this, the high cost of medical care mentioned before may plunge families into debt, perpetuating the aforementioned cycle.

## **2.2 Baltimore**

Baltimore, often referred to as "Charm City", stands as a poignant example of the systemic failures mentioned before. Through its rich history, juxtaposed with its contemporary struggles, Baltimore offers a lens through which issues such as urban decay, racial divide and socio-economic struggles can be observed, examined and ultimately applied on other cities and urban America as a whole.

Historically, Baltimore was a thriving industrial hub characterized by its strategic position as a port city. However, as the U.S. economy shifted from manufacturing to services the city, like many other industrial cities, faced significant economic decline. As factories closed, jobs slowly disappeared, leaving the city's once vibrant neighborhoods into emptiness and deterioration (Brennan & Hill, 2018). Once a bustling hub of industry, Baltimore has witnessed a significant decline in its manufacturing sector over the past few decades. The city's economy previously thrived on shipyards, steel mills and factories. However, as globalization took hold of the US economy, companies sought cheaper labor overseas and many of the industries which made Baltimore appealing began to shutter. As a testament of this decline

stands the Bethlehem Steel plant at Sparrows point. The plant which once employed thousands now stands as a symbol of an industrial shutdown. The ripple effects that followed were devastating. As jobs disappeared, unemployment rates soared, particularly in communities that had relied on these industries for generations. The economic devastation led to soaring poverty and crime rates, setting the stage for many of the city's contemporary challenges.

The city's education system tells a similar tale. Baltimore's public schools, which serve primarily Black and poor populations, are massively underfunded and often lack even the basic resources to provide quality education to its students. One of the most enduring characteristics of the Baltimore education system is the infamous school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon where students are funneled from public schools into the criminal justice system. Beckett (2019) notes that this reflects the intersection of educational challenges with issues of over-policing and criminalization of youth. Teacher turnover rates are high in Baltimore and many students face challenges outside the classroom, from food insecurity to trauma, which impact their academic performance. Even though these issues are very prevalent in Baltimore, they are not exclusive to it; in fact, across America, schools in marginalized communities face similar issues, reflecting a broader systemic failure to prioritize education for all. The results of this neglect are students who graduate without the skills needed for higher education or, for that matter, employment, further continuing the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

When talking about systemic failure of an American megalopolis, law enforcement is almost always at the center of attention, and Baltimore is no exception. The relationship between Baltimore's police force and its residents has been tumultuous to say the least. Tension and mistrust are apparent as incidents of police brutality, racial profiling and misuse of power, as well as allegations of corruption have eroded the community's trust in the very institution meant to protect them. The Gun Trace Task Force scandal, where a group of elite police officers were found guilty of robbery, planting evidence, and other corrupt practices, further deepened the divide. Such notable scandals have irreversibly undermined the legitimacy of the police force. Moreover, such actions proved to be detrimental as they may impede genuine community policing efforts, which in turn makes ensuring public safety and addressing crime challenging. Baltimore's law enforcement in particular garnered national attention with their lapse in judgment in policing and providing fair citizen protection following the death of Freddie Gray in 2015. The protests that resulted highlighted not just the immediate issues of police brutality but also the broader systemic failures that have marginalized large segments of Baltimore's

population. The city's approach to crime is often characterized by aggressive policing tactics, which has further eroded trust between law enforcement and the community (Fenton, 2017).

Baltimore also struggles with health disparities. Access to quality healthcare is uneven, with many of the city's marginalized communities facing higher rates of health issues and lower life expectancies. The opioid crisis, in particular, has hit Baltimore hard, resulting in further problems with administering proper healthcare relief (Wen, 2018).. This correlates with the before mentioned influence of socio-economic factors and healthcare, which perpetuate each other constantly.

Corruption and mismanagement run rampant in the city, which have had tangible impacts on its infrastructure and public services (Richardson, 2019). Many acts of transgression have surfaced through the years, such as allegations of embezzlement, bribery and misuse of funds, which lead to skepticism and cynicism among residents. However, it is not a mystery why. Funds meant for infrastructure development, public transportation and other essential services are often misallocated or wasted, leading to crumbling roads and unreliable public transit. Such mismanagements directly impact residents quality of life, and in turn affects city's ability to attract business and investments, culminating in economic decay, as per theme.

As it's often the case, the appearance of a problem sheds light on the further existing disparities, in this case the glaring issue of racial divide in the city. Historically rooted in policies like previously mentioned redlining, racial divides persist today. Predominantly Black neighborhoods in Baltimore face higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and crime compared to their white counterparts (Gomez, 2016). This racial divide is not just spatial but also economic and social. Taking all of this into consideration, it is easy to see why Baltimore is often in the center of discussions surrounding urban decay, systemic challenges, and racial disparities in America. Baltimore is a perfect representation of broader modern America, as it encapsulates the wide spread struggles of many urban centers across the nation.

### **2.3 „The Wire“**

Using Baltimore as a backdrop, many individual and personal narratives can delve into much broader issues. It's within this context that "The Wire" emerges, a show whose existence is a portrayal of modern America, proof that television can have an understanding of societal

processes and cultural dynamics. Hugely influential and colossally important as a window into the inner workings of pillars of society such as law and education, and the dysfunctions that come with inequality and poverty, *The Wire* is a watershed moment in television, lightning in a bottle creation, made only more impressive by the fact that it aired in 2002 on HBO, at the time where prime-time HBO airing slots were taken by the giants of television art, such as *The Sopranos*. This is no coincidence, considering that the show was written by David Simon, a well respected Baltimore crime reporter, and Ed Burns, an ex-policemen, later turned teacher. Simon's work as reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* provided him groundwork for further investigation of Baltimore's underbelly, which resulted with *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*; a critically acclaimed book which saw Simon following Baltimore's Homicide Unit for calendar year 1988. Following the release of the book, Simon's exploration of Baltimore's crime problem led him to the aforementioned Ed Burns. The pair wrote *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood*, a spiritual predecessor of *The Wire*. Both of the works are based loosely on Burns' experience as a public school teacher and homicide detective. Single characteristic was apparent from the pair's work: faithfulness to the problems real Baltimore faces. The show aired on the 2nd of June in 2002 and ended on March 9th 2008, capping out in 5 seasons. The show developed a cult following, as well as critical acclaim, illustrated best by the words of San Francisco Chronicle's Tim Goodman, who said that "few series in the history of television have explored the plight of inner-city African Americans and none—not one—has done it as well". According to Corkin (2017) the show seemingly conforms to genre specific crime drama norms, taking in crime as a generalized plot starter, however, as the series develops, it creates a landscape of urban decay and real dystopia, shedding light on the core of American society. Such is the case in all of the seasons, one through five; in Season 1, the murder of the civilian witness William Gant starts as the central point, as he testifies against the Barksdale organization. Soon, the focus pivots to the Barksdale organization and the efforts of law enforcement to control the gangs drug trafficking. Season 2 begins with Officer Jimmy McNulty finding a female corpse in the Baltimore harbor. Season 3 starts with the shooting and the theft of an officer's gun. In Season 4, missing bodies in West Baltimore take center stage, and in season 5, detectives are concerned with the murderer of the homeless who does not seem to exist. Each of these surface level themes are strong enough to carry a season of crime drama on their own, however, as most critics and David Simon himself agree, *The Wire* is not a surface level show. The first season of the show may drive its plot through the murder of the witness, however, at the core of the plot is the examination of the impact absence of work and resulting proliferation of the drug trade have in the African

American neighborhood of West Baltimore (Corkin, 2017). Similarly, Season 2 examines another class identity through the case of the shipping industry, its decline and the consequences which shipping unions faced. Season 3 sees a return to a similar topic of the first season, with the shift in focus towards the implications of inept city government. The fourth season focuses on the public schooling system, specifically on the issues that arose due to the public domain defunding and the impact the loss of influx in capital had on poor citizens of Baltimore. Fifth season rounds out the series with the examination of daily press, a topic very close to Simon. The show demonstrates a capitalistic conundrum at the heart of the unstable business model of daily newspapers, where stories published and covered do not result in enough profit for corporate owners.

Considering this, it is safe to say that “The Wire” encapsulates the essence of a contemporary U.S megalopolis, as well as the entire country as a whole. Set in a city significantly impacted by economic transformations and crucial population shifts, it depicts the results of the global shifts and internal U.S politics; substantial unemployment rates and the desertion of inner-city communities. With that said, even though Baltimore takes the central role in the series, the narrative can be applied to any other former industrial hubs in the Northeast and Midwest, which suffered similar systemic breakdowns of crucial political, economic and social structures (Chaddha and Wilson, 2011). The setting of the late 1990s and early 2000s depicts the raw reality of modern American megalopolises. The setting depicted is vibrant and energetic, yet on the other hand grappling with deeply ingrained socio-economic issues. Settings of each season mentioned before vary in order to expose the system as a whole, whether it be public housing projects, industrial blue-collar dockyards, downtown districts filled with corporate and political power plays, underfunded schools or city hall offices ripe with corruption and political maneuvering. The city’s problems are front and center: an economy in decline, escalating crime rates, rampant drug trafficking, corruption seeping into all levels of society, and an institutional system that often fails those it is supposed to protect. However, amidst the cruel reality, there is beauty depicted in Baltimore, as hard as it may be to spot considering the harsh environment. Baltimore's soul shines in the series through local dialects, pulsating music choices and finally, local heroes ready to spot and confront apparent flaws in the system. Baltimore and its “corners” are depicted as a live entity, responsible for shaping lives of the characters, and in return shaping Baltimore back. Through explorations of the city's battles Baltimore becomes a powerful narrative element, bringing to light the



humanity, the resilience and the will to survive of its inhabitants. This is what makes "The Wire" a compelling urban mural and a tribute to the city and its people.

### **3 Neoliberalism and „The Wire“**

Neoliberalism serves as a political and economic philosophy which emphasizes the value of free market, strong, deregulated private sector and reduced government intervention in the economy. What that means in practice is that practices of economic liberalization, such as privatization, deregulation, globalization and free trade are thought to foster innovation, efficiency, and economic growth. However, many authors believe that when such practices are employed in an urban environment, it leads to significant alterations in socio-economic structures and exacerbates class disparities (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005, Smith, 2002; Wilson 1996). The implementation of neoliberal policies, such as the privatization of public services and deregulation of industries, prioritizes market-driven solutions and individualism, often at the expense of collective welfare and equitable resource distribution (Harvey, 2005). Smith (2002) notes that this emphasis on economic efficiency and competition leads to increase of inequality and spatial segregation within cities (Smith, 2002). The exploration of neoliberalism in urban settings is well-documented in academic literature, with scholars like previously mentioned David Harvey and Neil Smith providing comprehensive analyses of its implications. Harvey (2005) illustrates the historical evolution of neoliberalism and its everlasting impact left on the urban landscapes, primarily observable through the reshaping socio-economic structures and the deepening of class disparities. Similarly, Smith (2002) delves into the phenomena of new globalism and new urbanism, examining how gentrification operates as a global urban strategy under neoliberalism, leading to spatial reconfigurations and socio-economic transformations in cities.

When examining "The Wire", there is no better example of the consequences of neoliberalism than the dock workers in Season 2. They are a depiction of the working class, particularly those grappling with the repercussions of the decline of industrial jobs due to neoliberal economic restructuring. They symbolize the "struggles and vulnerabilities of individuals within the lower economic strata, navigating the challenges posed by economic shifts and diminishing employment opportunities in traditional sectors" (Levine, 2013). The socio-economic conditions of the dock workers in "The Wire" are marked by job insecurity,

financial instability, and a constant struggle to put food on the table. It is exactly through them where “The Wire” shines in portraying liberal policies, especially the ones discussed in the earlier historical view of the real Baltimore, as deregulation, market-driven reforms such as relocating factories, globalization and similar factors have led to the erosion of job security and workers' rights, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and economic hardship (Alkon, 2012). Their struggles are emblematic of the broader working-class struggles in a neoliberal urban landscape, reflecting the systemic inequities and class disparities inherent in such a system (Jameson, 1991). In “The Wire”, the character of Frank Sobotka personifies the working-class struggle with neoliberalism outcomes. Union leader and the treasurer of the stevedores, Frank is uncertain of their future amidst economic decline and the obsolescence of the docks. Frank is a man relentless in his pursuit in order to revitalize the docks, which mirrors the working class desperation and helplessness in deindustrialization context. It is precisely this desperation that leads him to become entangled into illicit activities. Sobotka involves himself in drug smuggling in a bid to raise funds to support the union, which he sees as a reluctant but necessary compromise. However, Sobotka in the end pays the price, and his story is not only emblematic of Baltimore's dock workers, but the whole working-class desperation after the disappearance of the industrial jobs they were depending on.

So, “The Wire” makes an apparent depiction of the working-class downfall in Baltimore. However, the show is primarily concerned with the most marginalized group, impoverished Black Americans. This begs the question; how did the rise of neoliberalist policies influence them? To answer this, findings of William Julius Wilson will be employed. Wilson, a prominent sociologist, has extensively explored the intricate interplay between race and class in the context of urban poverty. In his seminal work, “The Truly Disadvantaged,” Wilson posits that economic structural changes, particularly the decline of manufacturing jobs and the rise of service-sector jobs, have had a profound impact on urban African American communities, causing the disappearance of accessible, decent-paying jobs in urban areas, significantly affecting African American communities by leaving behind high levels of unemployment and poverty (Wilson, W. J., 1987). Wilson argues that these shifts, coupled with the outmigration of middle-class African Americans from inner-city neighborhoods, have resulted in the concentration of poverty and the isolation of poor African Americans in urban areas. It is precisely the concentration of this poverty what Wilson feels is the main exacerbator of social problems and problems with social mobility.

Furthermore, the intersection of these economic forces and structural elements such as residential segregation, inadequate educational opportunities and systemic discrimination is what Wilson finds as the cumulative result of neoliberalism effects and racial disparities. These impoverished African-American communities are spatially and socially isolated, stuck in the cycle of poverty. The series depiction of West side Baltimore is the living encapsulation of these findings. The series prominently features rows of vacant houses, symbolizing the economic decline, urban decay, and systemic neglect prevalent in impoverished neighborhoods. These vacant homes paint the full picture of Westside Baltimore: surrounded by unemployment, impoverished African-Americans live in the area which was once testament of the Black community, vacated by the middle class who managed to escape the urban areas harrowed by the consequences of neoliberalism, which consequently isolated poor African-Americans to fend for themselves in a space with no governmental safety nets. In such a context, neoliberalist socio-economic decay has created a fertile ground for the proliferation of illicit economies, particularly the drug trade. The lack of viable economic opportunities and the absence of social mobility avenues drive individuals towards the drug trade as a means of survival and economic empowerment (Peters, 2015).

It is precisely the drug trade that is the focus of the show, as it has grown into an alternative economic system. Drug trade becomes an economy which offers a semblance of agency and empowerment to individuals disenfranchised by mainstream socio-economic structures, however it is a neoliberal economy in itself, carrying the same consequences which further entrench inequality and poverty. The best example of the destructive nature of neoliberalism portrayed through the character of Marlo Stanfield.

### **3.1 Marlo Stanfield: Neoliberalism Personified**

*“Tomorrow ain’t promised to no one.” - Marlo Stanfield*

Marlo, played by Jamie Hector, is a character who emerges in the third season of the show and represents a new generation of drug trade in the fictional Baltimore. He is initially depicted as a calculated, ambitious, and ruthless individual, seeking to establish his dominance in the drug market. His character is a vivid embodiment of neoliberal principles, reflecting values such as relentless competition, individualism, and an unyielding pursuit of power and wealth. His strategic acumen is coupled with a cold and pragmatic approach to drug dealing,

indicative of the market logic present in neoliberalism, where the pursuit of individual success and economic gain overshadows moral considerations and communal bonds. It is precisely the ruthlessness and the disrespect Marlo has toward community values which make him a neoliberalist; he breaks every rule in the drug trade in favor of efficiency. For example, his readiness to sacrifice Chris, his right-hand man and enforcer throughout the show who is unwaveringly loyal to Marlo and executes his orders without question, reveals his lack of loyalty and disregard for communal values. His readiness to betray his closest associate shows that Marlo is focused only on individual success and self-preservation at the expense of communal bonds.

This is a recurring motif as well, as a part of Marlos' modus operandi is ruthless elimination of rival drug dealers, including key figures like Prop Joe and Stringer Bell. Not only do his actions underscore the moral compromises and the normalization of violence inherent in a neoliberal paradigm where the pursuit of power and economic gain overshadows ethical considerations, but they also break every rule set in the ruleless drug dealing business; Marlo kills Prop Joe, through which he not only breaks the established peace between West and East Side Baltimore, but also betrays Joe on a personal level, as he was helping him with Marlos' money laundering operation:

Prop Joe: *"I treated you like a son."*

Marlo: *"I wasn't made to play the son."*

Marlo is ready to sacrifice so much and cause so much havoc in Baltimore, all in order to cut Joe out of the game and get direct hold of his Greek drug supplier; in other words, all in order to cut costs. He is not afraid to transgress existing territorial boundaries, all to fuel his ambition to control the drug market and disrupt the existing power dynamics. Marlo not only eliminates rivals, but also anyone who comes in his way. He is willing to employ extreme violence and intimidation only to maintain control and quell dissent. It is exactly this devaluation of human life which sees Marlo as a neoliberalist personification, a figure which causes chaos on the streets of Baltimore. With his arrival, murders and instability skyrocket in "The Wire" Baltimore, causing further harm on the community.

This examination served as a way to dismantle the economic impacts of neoliberal policies on Black community in The Wires Baltimore, however as was previously mentioned, this is only one side of the coin. The Wire presents how inequity is entrenched by uneven

economic playing field, but it also depicts entrapment of impoverished African-American class through inability to access social security nets, which is a similarly important element.

#### **4 Critical Race Theory (CRT) and "The Wire"**

During the mid-20th century Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged as a multidisciplinary framework which critically examines the intersections of race, power, and society as a counter to the perceived limitations of traditional civil rights approaches. CRT was initially rooted in legal studies and focused on challenging dominant narratives of racial neutrality, meritocracy and colorblindness, implying that systemic racism is a foundational and enduring feature of American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Derrick Bell emerged as a pioneering figure in CRT, and his contribution to the theory stated that racism is a regular everyday occurrence for people of color, which directly negates the notion that society has moved past racial discrimination. Furthermore, he introduced the concept of interest convergence, which argued that advances in racial justice for African-Americans only happen when they directly align with interests of white Americans, meaning that progress is only possible if it's in the dominant parties interest (Bell, 1980). CRT scholars claim that race is a socially constructed concept rather than a biological one. Racial hierarchies are created only to be manipulated or to propagate existing power dynamics. CRT emphasizes the importance of storytelling, as they believe that personal narratives and counter-narratives serve as tools to challenge and disrupt mainstream perspectives (Delgado, 1989). Kimberlé Crenshaw's introduction of intersectionality further expanded CRT's scope, exploring how various social identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and compound experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). CRT places a strong emphasis on analyzing society and culture, specifically the intersections between power, law and race. Through this approach, the aim is to uncover structural layers of racism embedded in governing institutions and explore its further propagation in legal, social and cultural domains.

Considering this, CRT should provide a solid groundwork in the process of analysis of *The Wire*, as the show's plot, especially in latter seasons resonate deeply with many of the CRT foundational principles.

#### 4.1 Institutional Racism in the Police Department

*"You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers. But you start to follow the money, and you don't know where the fuck it's gonna take you."* - Detective Lester Freamon

Institutional racism, a term coined by Black Power activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in the late 1960s, refers to the systemic ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The characteristic of this type of racism is its deep embeddedness in institutions historical and cultural fabric is less overt, even though its effects are just as devastating. *The Wire* serves as a great portrayal of such racism, particularly in the depiction of the police department. The fictional Baltimore Police Department provides a realistic insight into broader challenges faced by law enforcement agencies across America. Firstly, the practice of "joking the stats" is introduced, where crime statistics are manipulated to present a more favorable image of the city's safety. Such practice highlights systemic pressures that prioritize optics over genuine community safety, as Detective Lester Freamon points out,

*"You joke the stats, and majors become colonels"*

Such manipulation serves only to misrepresent the reality of the severity of the city's problems, and even though it is born out of selfish ambitions, it perpetuates a system which values superficial success over actual impactful change. The show does a fine job in illuminating the institutional barriers presented before the "good police", which serve as a way to mitigate risk of genuine reform. Public servants like Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin seek to engage with the community and address the root causes of crime, but often find themselves marginalized and ostracized for it. Their efforts are often made difficult by a system that values arrest numbers over genuine change in the community, and rewards punitive measures over rehabilitative ones. No character experiences and understands this more than Detective Jimmy McNulty, who is constantly falling in and out of favor within Baltimore's Police Department, based on which narrative currently suits the system:

*"You start to tell the story, you think you're the hero, and then when you get done talking..."*

Previously mentioned Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin serves as a perfect example of this institutional volatility. Colvin establishes Hamsterdam (mispronunciation of Amsterdam), a "free zone" where drug dealers are allowed to operate freely within the allocated area. As an

attempt to reduce street-level drug violence and focus resources on more significant criminal enterprises, Hamsterdam succeeded in reduction of violence and increase in community engagement but is ultimately shut down due to political pressures and concerns about optics. Upon hearing that his experiment is shut down, Colvin states

*"We're pretending we've got the drug problem beat in the Western?"*

displaying the racist tendency of the system to turn the blind eye to the community that desperately needs help. As long as the interests were aligning with the political narratives of people in power, the project was left untouched. As soon as it became an optics problem and served its purpose in the press, community pleas for help were ignored again.

## 4.2 The Legal System and The Racial Bias

Maurice 'Maury' Levy : *You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off...*

Omar : *Just like you, man.*

Maurice 'Maury' Levy : *...the culture of drugs. Excuse me? What?*

Omar : *I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?*

The American legal system, while founded on principles of justice, equality, and the rule of law, has historically been and continues to be a site of racial bias and systemic discrimination. CRT posits that racism is not an aberration but a normative aspect of American society, and the legal system is no exception (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). *The Wire* offers a compelling exploration not only of the systemic failures in the intersection of race and law, but offers explanation of the consequences that such a system brings. Bodie Broadus serves as a poignant example of this. As early as in season 1, Bodie is already arrested along with other members of the Barksdale organization during a drug bust. He is immediately offered a plea deal, He is quickly offered a plea deal, a common practice in the U.S. legal system that disproportionately affects minority communities (Bibas, 2012). The plea deal serves the

interests of the prosecutors, who can secure a quick conviction, but it leaves individuals like Bodie with a criminal record that severely limits future opportunities for employment and social mobility. This reflects Michelle Alexander's argument in "The New Jim Crow" (2010) that mass incarceration serves as a new form of racial control, trapping African Americans in a cycle of poverty and criminality.

Bodie's character arc also highlights the system's failure to rehabilitate. After his release, he returns to the drug trade, partly because the system has not equipped him with the skills, education, or opportunities to lead a different life. As Travis and associates (2014) note, this reflects the broader failure of the American legal system to rehabilitate offenders, particularly those from marginalized communities and instead perpetuates an all too familiar cycle of recidivism. School-to-prison pipeline must be mentioned again in this context, a concept well explored by Nell Bernstein in "Burning Down the House" (2014), as it is a manifestation of systemic racism, criminalizing young Black individuals such as Boadie at a young age, ultimately sealing their destiny, forcing them to a trajectory that often leads to incarceration.

### **4.3 Education and Systemic Disparities**

*"No one wins. One side just loses more slowly."* - Prez (Roland Pryzbylewski)

Education has often been held as the great equalizer, but it has historically been and continues to be a site of systemic disparities in the United States. Therefore the promise of equal opportunity through education remains elusive for many, particularly for marginalized communities. CRT underscores the ways in which racial hierarchies and systemic racism permeate educational institutions, leading to disparate outcomes based on race (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Schools in urban areas are subjected to institutionalized racism on a state level, even before delving into specific cases. As Kozol (1991) states, urban schools often suffer from underfunding, overcrowding, and a lack of qualified teachers, contributing to poor educational outcomes.

In its fourth season, the show focuses on the educational system, specifically on Edward J. Tilghman Middle School, as a byproduct of a failing system that is deeply affected by broader systemic issues such as poverty, crime, and administrative neglect. In this setting, we



follow Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski, a former police officer turned math teacher, as he uncovers the pitfalls of the educational system, and more importantly, its victims. School in the show follows similar practices as the other facets of government explored earlier: focus is not on transferring vital knowledge to the students, but on "teaching the test", meaning students are forced to learn in a specific way just to pass the standardized evaluation, as the teachers and administrators are under immense pressure to improve test scores. In a sense, teachers are forced to "juke the stats" in the same way police officers are. This reflects real-world scandals where schools have cheated on standardized tests under the pressure to meet federal or state benchmarks (Ravitch, 2010). This emphasizes the effects standardized tests are shown to have. They also narrow the curriculum, forcing teachers like Prez to focus solely on test-related material and neglect broader educational goals. This aligns with academic critics that argue standardized testing can limit educational creativity and reduce learning to a series of rote exercises (Au, 2007). Additionally, students in such a marginalized area may benefit from shifting to individual educational needs, as research suggests high-stakes testing can exacerbate educational inequalities (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). The show illustrates positives which can come from specialized attention to the most marginalized through the "corner kid" class, in which Bunny Colvin focuses on teaching life skills and social norms that the students have not learned due to their challenging life circumstances. The class covers topics like conflict resolution, the economics of drug dealing and the social hierarchies that exist both inside and outside the classroom. Through equating educational topics to their equivalents in the real world of Baltimore, Colvin somewhat manages to engage his students in a way that the traditional educational system has failed to do. However, the right for an adequate education should be a systematic norm, not a particular teacher's effort.

#### **4.4 Politics, corruption and racial disparities**

*"We used to make shit in this country, build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy's pocket."* - Frank Sobotka

Politics, at its core, is the process through which power and resources are distributed in a society, which makes it a fertile breeding ground for structural inequalities when factors such as corruption and racial disparities are involved. According to CRT, the political realm is one of the core tenants of the existing racial hierarchy. Political scene in "The Wire" is explored

with depth, as characters such as previously mentioned Clay Davis have shown how cunning governing heads can be, especially when it comes to exploiting marginalized communities, whether for votes, or money, as was the case with Stringer Bell. However, during the third season, a new player enters the arena: Tommy Carcetti, portrayed by Aidan Gillen. Carcetti's rise from a city councilman to the mayor's office and eventually the governor's mansion, provides an insight into the broader challenges and compromises inherent in the political process. Carcetti's initial idealism, marked by his desire to reform the police department and address systemic issues, is gradually substituted with political pragmatism and ambition. As he remarks,

*"No one ever won an election by promising less"*

Carcetti is a white politician in a predominantly African American city, and this racial context is a significant factor in both his political ambitions and the challenges he faces. His mayoral campaign was filled with racial undertones as he was running against then-mayor Clarence Royce, who is a black man. Carcetti is keenly aware that his race could be a disadvantage in the election, given the city's demographics and the historical context of white politicians often being seen as less aligned with the needs of the city's majority Black population. However, he also tries to turn this into an advantage by positioning himself as a candidate who can bring a fresh perspective and new solutions to longstanding problems.

However, even though Carcetti enters the political game with good intentions, as he seeks the support of influential Black leaders and makes promises to address issues that disproportionately affect the Black community, the power he wields changes him. His further decision making shifts as the show goes along and sees him indulge more and more into self preservation, as his decisions to allocate resources are often influenced by what will make him look good in the short term or set him up for a run at higher office, rather than what will bring about long-term systemic change. Lopez (2014) notes this phenomenon is very prevalent in today's "dog whistle" politics, where politicians use coded language and promises to appeal to or marginalize certain communities. Carcetti exposes the racial bias of the system by leveraging very real and urgent needs of marginalized communities to gain political support but then struggles to make meaningful changes that would actually improve the lives of those he promised to help.

## 5 W.E.B Du Bois and „The Wire“

With the socio-economic and structural framework set, this thesis will now focus on the specific task of examining racial factors of American modern society depicted. This task is impossible without using preexisting notions of established authors, and the first framework to be used will be the work of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, henceforth W.E.B Du Bois. Du Bois was born 23 February 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He claimed that he was raised in a community that was comparatively accepting and integrated. Du Bois pursued graduate studies at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, Germany, after which he became the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University. Later he took on roles as a professor in history, sociology, and economics at Atlanta University. He was one of the main figures responsible for the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Du Bois' claim to prominence came through his involvement in the Niagara movement, which was a group of African-American civil rights activists fighting for equal rights for blacks. He chiefly explored racism in his work, as he protested against lynching, Jim Crow laws, and discrimination in education and employment. Du Bois was an influential writer. Perhaps his most notable work is "The Souls of Black Folk," which holds a significant position in the of African-American writings. Additionally, in 1935, he penned "Black Reconstruction in America," which went against the common belief of the time that blamed African Americans for the shortcomings of the Reconstruction period. Taking inspiration from Frederick Douglass, Du Bois introduced many to the concept of the 'color line,' highlighting the disparities present in the American 'separate but equal' doctrine.

The main Du Bois's concept which will be used in further analysis in this thesis is "double consciousness", which first appeared in the aforementioned "The Souls of Black Folk," published in 1903. The concept encapsulates the profound internal conflict present in all African-Americans, as they have to balance the dual nature of their identity: the tension of being both African and American. Du Bois states that the struggle present in African-Americans is rooted in the duality of their identity and the challenges of navigating a society dominated by white norms and values. This implies that black individuals have to reconcile their African heritage, which is a rich mixture of cultures, traditions and histories with their current American socio-cultural environment. Even though Black Americans' participation in the society that they are born into is their birthright, often they are viewed through a lens of racial prejudice and discrimination. Du Bois described this omnipresent tension as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others". This illustrates why duality is so

present among Black population: African-Americans are constantly aware of the way in which and how they are perceived by the dominant white society, which results in a separation of dual identity, or the sense of two-ness.

This duality presents a myriad of challenges. On one hand, it is natural for one to take pride in their culture, specifically in this case in the African roots and the contributions of African ancestors. On the other, there is everlasting pressure to assimilate in American society, specifically to assimilate through adoption of values, customs and aspirations. However, the challenge in the latter are the systemic barriers erected by racial prejudice. This often leads to an internal conflict, where Black individuals felt torn between these two worlds, neither of which they could fully embrace without sacrificing some aspect of the other. This double consciousness is present in everyday experiences. For example, the simple act of walking into a store, attending school or seeking employment was fraught with the awareness of one's racial identity and the perceptions and biases associated with it. The consequences of such heightened consciousness is not just a passive acknowledgment of it, but it influences behaviors, aspirations and self-worth. Navigating a society, primarily one which is predominantly white, can prove challenging with this dual identity. Primarily, the constant awareness of one's racial identity can be overwhelming, as the current society is the one where whiteness is often the default and the norm, therefore Black individuals are frequently reminded of their "otherness," whether through microaggressions, overt racism, or systemic discrimination. This heightened racial consciousness is woven through every aspect of life, influencing everything between professional aspirations to personal relationships.

In addition, the pressure to assimilate in another form is a significant challenge for citizens with ethnic backgrounds. In order to fit in a predominantly white society, Black individuals often feel the need to suppress or modify aspects of their cultural identity. The ways in which this can manifest are varied. For example, the speech patterns change, "code-switching" to even altering physical appearance in order to align with Eurocentric standards of beauty. Although such adaptations may be convenient, especially in some contexts, the resulting tension between authenticity and acceptance may lead to pronounced internal conflicts. Furthermore, the duality of identity also means constantly battling stereotypes. Most of the portrayal of Black people in media, popular culture and literature historically resorts to objectification of harmful racial stereotypes, portraying individuals through narrow lenses. In order to navigate white dominated society, African-Americans must advocate for their

individuality by constantly challenging and debunking these stereotypes, in order to escape being boxed in preconceived notions. However, the constant battle balancing this duality comes with an emotional and psychological toll, as the constant need to validate one's worth, the drive to prove oneself in professional and personal spheres and finally the need to directly address racism by confronting it and challenging it can be exhausting. Such strenuous tasks put upon Black individuals which just try to coexist can lead to feelings of alienation, or more specifically, it can make African American citizens feel like outsiders in their own country.

However, Du Bois notes positive sides to said duality, as he finds duality a source of strength, not just challenge and adversity. Black culture is a primary example of resilience towards forced indoctrination to a dominant culture, specifically through its music, literature, art, and history. The very act of navigating a predominantly white society has indirectly brought ethnic communities closer together, creating movements of empowerment, solidarity, and advocacy. From The Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement and finally the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, the discussion and definition of Black dual identity is far from being over, as Black individuals continue to redefine what it means to be African and American at the same time.

With that being said, the next part of the thesis will focus on specific characters in “The Wire” and their dual identities, whether it be to illustrate the struggles of self-perception, societal hierarchy and preconceived notions, or to illustrate defiance to the system at play and the need to suppress one of their identities.

### **5.1 Stringer Bell: A Man without a Country**

*“You know the difference between me and you? I bleed red and you bleed green. I look at you these days, String, you know what I see? I see a man without a country. Not hard enough for this right here and maybe, just maybe, not smart enough for them out there.”* - Avon Barksdale to Stringer Bell

Russell “Stringer” Bell, portrayed by Idris Elba, is the perfect example of the battle between dual identities, and perhaps even the general duality many marginalized citizens are faced with; the tension between street life and legitimate ambition. Stringer’s character arc is a tale of a man torn between his role as a formidable drug lord and his aspirations as a budding

businessman. His strengths as a strategist are displayed both as a drug trade kingpin, but also as an ambitious student in community college business classes and real estate investments, highlighting his quest for legitimacy (Alvarez, 2004). As Penfold-Mounce notes (2010), Bell's journey is a sort of catalyst for the broader theme of the series, which is the intricate dance between one's past and the pursuit of a better future. To further elaborate, Stringer's story in "The Wire " is an exploration of identity and ambition, ultimately created by the desire to transcend barriers instilled from birth. As were introduced to Stringer, his drug dealing prowess is displayed immediately. He's strategic, calculating, and understands the intricacies of the street game. His partnership with Avon Barksdale, the kingpin of the West Baltimore drug trade, showcases a dynamic where Stringer often serves as the brains to Avon's brawn. On one side, he is readily available to his lieutenants and involved in the day-to-day operations, but on the other is also the visionary always looking for ways to expand, innovate, and reduce risks. His introduction of Robert's Rules of Order to the meetings of drug lieutenants is a testament to his unique approach to the drug business, blending street tactics with boardroom strategies.

However, behind the stature of a man presented as a fear-inducing towering figure, whether it be due to character itself or Elba's appearance and portrayal, lies a man yearning for legitimacy. Stringer's aspirations extend beyond the corners of West Baltimore. As mentioned before, he enrolls in a community college business class, absorbing lessons on economic principles, which he then tries to apply to the drug trade. His ventures into the legitimate business world, particularly his investments in real estate, are driven by a desire to leave a legacy that goes beyond the drug game. Russell strives to shift his prowess into a world where success isn't measured by street reputation but by legitimate accomplishments. Yet, this road towards legitimacy proves to be as challenging as the drug trade. Stringer soon discovered that the world of business is treacherous with its own set of rules and pitfalls. Even though the players are different in appearance and approach, the foes Stringer faces in courtrooms and business meetings are just as ruthless. Unfortunately for Bell, the skills that made him a force on the street do not translate particularly well in meeting rooms, which leads to betrayal that leave him blindsided, financial losses, and in the end, his downfall.

Stringer's internal conflict is essentially a synopsis of one of the major themes in the show; the challenge of escaping one's past and the incredible pull individuals habitus has. Stringers dual identities are always at odds with frustration boiling due to the fact that his desire for legitimacy clashes with the brutal realities of the drug trade, especially as his business

aspirations are continually undermined by street loyalties and vendettas. This duality is best represented in the print shop scene in season 1, where Bell scolds one of his employees, both in his legitimate and illegitimate ventures:

*"I'm talking about business. Y'all n\*\*s are running this like it's still the f\*ing terrace,"*

Bell tries to explain his frustration in mismanagement of a legitimate business through street logic he knows so well. For Stringer, the print shop is not just a business venture; it is a first step towards emancipation from street life. Even though at this stage the shop is only used as a means to conceal the illegal trade, Bell will further push on in his quest towards legitimacy, especially through enrolling in a community college business class. His eagerness to apply legitimate economic practices into drug trade is evident through his attempts to introduce principles like “product elasticity” to his street operations, as he concludes,

*"We got to think beyond those corners,"*

emphasizing the need to treat the drug trade as a legitimate business. Stringer is a student, eager to absorb the tenets of mainstream economics and business, no matter how deeply he’s entrenched in the drug trade, a world governed by its own set of rules and hierarchies. This balancing act, no matter how impressive on one hand, is met with resistance and skepticism from both sides. His real-world applications of academic principles in the classroom, no matter how accurate, are often met with raised eyebrows. On the other hand, examples of usage of economic jargon like in the prior quote from the show are often met with confusion, and at times, derision from big players. As Penfold-Mounce (2010) notes, Stringer's position is highly unique, as while he struggles to manage two separate worlds and identities. By doing this, he becomes somewhat of an outsider in both of them. This is noted also by his partner in crime, Avon Barksdale, who notes:

*“You know the difference between me and you? I bleed red and you bleed green. I look at you these days, String, you know what I see? I see a man without a country. Not hard enough for this right here and maybe, just maybe, not smart enough for them out there.”*

This quote comes from a turning point in the show, as Stringer finds out Senator Clay Davis got the better of him. While trying to bridge the gap between the streets and the boardroom, Bell comes in contact with the senator. While Stringer is a mastermind in the drug

trade, his venture into the world of legitimate business and politics reveals vulnerabilities that are expertly exploited by those more versed in this realm. As Avon notes:

*"They saw your ghetto ass from a mile away."*

Stringer's dealings with Senator Davis are a prime example of his struggles in navigating unfamiliar territory. Enticed by the prospect of expanding his business empire and gaining political influence, Stringer becomes embroiled in a relationship with Davis, a seasoned political operator known for his cunning and guile. Davis immediately recognises Bell's inexperience in the political world and exploits his vulnerability and gullibility by promising lucrative real estate deals and political favors, provided that Bell supplies him with drug money. The dynamic between the two is a dance of power and manipulation, with Davis consistently staying a step ahead, capitalizing on Stringer's ambition and his lack of familiarity with the political landscape.

Bell's dual identities here are clear: a black man born into poverty, raised in the slums of Baltimore, whose natural ability and prowess earn him the title of a drug kingpin. However, as he reaches out towards fulfillment of his version of the American dream, he is burned by those more experienced in a world he barely knows, a world that plays him for a fool. Stringer Bell's journey is one fraught with ambition, identity struggles and the challenges of navigating two vastly different worlds. His counterpart is Avon, a man who rivals Bell's drug dealing prowess, but is never punished for reaching out for more, as he is well aware of his position in society:

*"You know the difference between me and you?... You're just a gangster, I suppose. But me, B? I'm just a soldier."*

While Avon is content with his role and identity in the drug trade, Stringer is caught in a liminal space, trying to transcend his origins while not fully being accepted in the world he aspires to join. Therefore, Avon is right in calling him *"a man without a country"*.

## **5.2 Bodie Broadus: Code of the Street**

*"This game is rigged, man. We like them little bitches on the chessboard."* - Bodie Broadus



Boadie Broadus, played by J.D Williams, is a recurring character throughout all five seasons of the show. Introduced in the first season, he is a representation of a young corner boy, and as such serves as a powerful representation of the challenges faced by many young Black individuals in urban environments. Although Bodie's story does not involve the highs and lows which many characters in the show go through, Bodie's narrative is punctuated by moments of introspection, defiance and resignation. His story offers a lens through which complexities of growing up in a marginalized community can be observed, as he is constantly at odds between systemic determinants and his own individual aspirations.

While presenting Bodie's story, it is impossible to omit something Anderson (1999) calls "code of the street". Anderson states that the code is a set of informal rules governing interpersonal behavior, especially violence, as a response to a profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and a feeling of despair and hopelessness. For many, like Bodie, adherence to this code becomes a means of survival, even as it often prevents opportunities for upward mobility (Anderson, 1999). These socio-economic circumstances are what shapes individuals like Boadie. Wilson (1987) documents the said circumstances faced by Black individuals in urban settings, and they include the impact loss of industry had on the economy, the following joblessness and social dislocation as an end product. For many young Black men, the illicit drug trade, as depicted in "The Wire," becomes one of the few available avenues for economic advancement, even as it carries significant risks (Wilson, 1987).

What defines Boadie as a significant character is his ability to identify his socio-economic surroundings. As he reflects on his place in the world with Poot, he states his internal conflict,

*"This game is rigged, man. We like them little bitches on the chessboard"*

This analogy underscores the feeling of powerlessness and predestination that many in their situation feel. Likening their lives to pawns in a game of chess, with its hierarchies and predetermined moves, serves as a metaphor for the socio-economic structures that limit their agency and potential.

However, Boadie still stays loyal to the lifestyle he's ever known, telling McNulty in a conversation,

*"I been doing this a long time. I ain't never said nothing to no cop"*

This declaration underscores his loyalty to the streets, a loyalty born not just out of choice but also out of a lack of alternatives. Bodie has known only streets his whole life, and they serve both as his refuge and his prison at the same time, in one hand offering a sense of belonging and support, however flawed it may be, while it limits his potential on the other. Boadie expresses this dilemma, as he questions the worth of the support system provided to him,

*"I feel old. I been out there since I was 13. I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never did some shit that I wasn't told to do. I been straight up. But what come back? You'd think if I get jammed up on some shit they'd be like, 'A'ight, yeah. Bodie been there. Bodie hang tough. We got his paid lawyer. We got the bail.' They want me to stand with them, right? But where the fuck they at when they supposed to stand with us?"*

Bodie is a martyr of his own circumstances, which push him to do actions he later regrets. He is a young man torn between loyalty to the streets and a yearning for something more, perhaps in similar fashion to Bell, a recognition of his worth and aspirations. As Staples (1987) notes, many Black youths in urban settings continue to harbor dreams and aspirations as a way of coping, often seeking to reconcile their immediate realities with a vision of a better future. Similar to Bell, Boadie tries to reconcile his two identities: one which is his immediate reality, born into the ruins of Baltimore as a Black man, aware of the situation he is in. However, his yearning for something more represents his counterpart, a way to cope and a desire to escape the shackles of reality of the game he is entrenched in.

### **5.3 Omar Little: A Man Must Have a Code**

*"You come at the king, you best not miss"* - Omar Little

Omar Devone Little, portrayed by Michael K. Williams, is safe to say one of the more unique characters portrayed on television, specifically considering the context of the show he appears in. With his signature whistle and trench coat, Omar is a complex figure who operates by a strict moral code. He refrains from using profanity, doesn't harm innocent civilians and attends church with his grandmother. Yet, he's also a formidable force in the streets, robbing drug dealers and navigating the violent world of the Baltimore drug trade.

As was stated numerous times, W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" describes the internal conflict experienced by Black individuals in America, torn between their African heritage and the American socio-cultural environment (Du Bois, 1903). For Omar, this double consciousness manifests in his navigation of both his sexuality and his role in the community. On one hand, he embodies a concept of "black hypermasculinity", a concept well researched in academia, especially in character analysis such as this one. Omar is fearless, often violent when necessary, shows no remorse and commands respect. However, he is openly gay, which divides him from typical hypermasculine heroes, as this embrace of his sexuality challenges heteronormative expectations of Black masculinity. Omar's sexuality stands as a testament to the depth and layeredness of his character, as he navigates the hyper-masculine world of Baltimore's streets, where reputation and perceived strength are paramount. In these circumstances, his sexuality may be a focal point of vulnerability, however, in Omar's case, his sexuality becomes a testament to his strength, resilience, and defiance of societal norms.

As it was stated before, the streets of Baltimore are arenas filled with power dynamics constantly shifting and in play and in this context masculinity is equated with dominance and control. Omar's existence in such an environment becomes a revolutionary act, a constant thorn in the side to dealers he robs. He does not shy away from public displays of affection, as the scenes like the ones he shares tender moments with his partner Brandon or his later relationships, are juxtaposed against the backdrop of violence and power struggles, offering a stark contrast (Collins, 2004). This open embrace of sexuality speaks volumes about Omar's character, who is ready to face the consequences in a world where deviation from the norm can be dangerous. Similarly, it is refreshing to see a challenge to the stereotypical portrayal of gay men, especially Black gay men, as weak or effeminate.

Returning to Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, many scholars throughout the 21st century such as Flores and Roman (2009) and Nahum Welang (2018) present a new layer to consciousness including another intersecting identity, whether it be sexuality or gender, calling the concept triple consciousness. Omar certainly deserves examination through this framework, as he is constantly navigating the duality of his identity as a Black man in America and as a gay man in a predominantly heteronormative environment. Therefore, Omar's character suggests a form of triple consciousness where he must reconcile his racial identity, his masculinity, and his sexuality. This is evident as much throughout the series, the character is denounced even by the community he is a part of. Many times Omar is labeled as a "faggot"

by associates in Barksdale association. Even though the slur is used to angrily denounce an opponent who is constantly throwing wrenches into work of Barksdale's operation, the mere willingness to use his sexuality against him is enough to conclude that Omar is an outsider in an outsider community.

Yet, Omar is not rattled by harsh words, nor does he acknowledge digs at his sexuality. His character stands tall, as he adheres to another defining aspect of his character: his unique sense of morality and adherence to a personal code. This code, while not always aligning with societal norms or laws, is unwavering and influences many of Omar's actions and decisions throughout the series. Omar's distinct moral compass, set against the backdrop of Baltimore's drug trade, is a testament to his internal struggle. While he operates outside the law, robbing drug dealers with audacity, he also possesses a set of principles he refuses to betray. This is evident through one of the most recognizable quotes from the show,

*"A man got to have a code".*

This quote goes hand in hand with another one of Omar's quips, basically representing his catchphrase throughout the show,

*"It's all in the game"*

exposing Omar's understanding of the systemic forces at play. To Omar, the streets are a game with its own set of rules and players. Staples (1987) suggests that this viewpoint, the one where marginalised habitus is recognised as a separate entity from governing bodies such as cities and states is a coping mechanism for many Black individuals in urban settings, a way to navigate the socio-economic challenges and systemic injustices they face daily.

Nevertheless, Omar's code presents interesting insight into the life of a man pushed away systemically and societally. Omar is respected in the community, often asked for help by those struggling economically. However, he is also feared, as many of the scenes in the show begin by child lookouts calling "*Omar coming*" followed by running away and hiding. Evidently, Omar is a man aware and content with his position in the show's world. By denouncing any ethics and rules but his own, as he has no problem breaking the law, but also code of the streets, as he testifies in court without fear for his life, he is a man who in many ways escaped dealing with multiple consciousnesses. He adheres to no-one, whether that be the police, drug kingpins or society for that matter, shown through his open homosexuality.

Omar is a representation of the force of resilience, an agent of chaos on one hand, but a fulfilled individual with a clear intent, goals and aspirations on the other. He is a catalyst for many, showing that in a society that is marginalized as divides, perhaps the most important set of rules and expectations should be the ones he set upon on our selves. After all, a man must have a code.

## 6 Frantz Fanon and „The Wire“

Frantz Fanon is a Martinican psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary. Fanon has left a deep mark on postcolonial studies and critical race theory. His writings, particularly "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) and "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), delve deeply into the psychological and sociological impacts of colonization on the colonized, which is way his framework is particularly applicable to "The Wire".

As is previously stated, at heart of Fanon's research is the exploration of the effect that psychological trauma inflicted by colonizers had on the colonized. He posits that colonization is not just a physical act but also a deeply psychological one, where the colonized are made to feel inferior, internalizing the beliefs and values of the colonizer (Fanon, 1952). This internalized inferiority manifests in various ways according to Fanon, from self-loathing to the desire to emulate the colonizer, leading to a fractured self-identity. One of Fanon's most influential concepts is that of the "White Gaze". According to Fanon, Black individuals are constantly aware of the way they are perceived by the white majority, forcing them to constantly view themselves through colonizers eyes, a concept similar in its origin to the double consciousness. This gaze is filled with racial prejudices and stereotypes, therefore it forces Black individuals to constantly perform, to wear a "mask," and to suppress their authentic selves. The results of such gaze can be burdening, leading to a perpetual state of tension and self-consciousness. In "The Wire," this gaze is palpable, as characters navigate a world where they are constantly judged, stereotyped and marginalized, not just by the white majority but also by institutions that perpetuate these biases.

In "The Wretched of the Earth," Fanon delves into the concept of violence as a cathartic and necessary response to the dehumanization of colonization (Fanon, 1961). According to him, the colonized view violent resistance as a path to liberation, as they are have been consistently

subjected to it systemically, both physically and psychologically. This violence is not just an act of rebellion but also a means of reclaiming lost dignity and identity. Even though “The Wire” is set in modern times, with many shifts happening from the times Fanon wrote about, the theme of violence as a response to systemic oppression is still evident. Characters resort to violence, not just as a means of survival but also as a way to assert agency in a world that constantly seeks to dehumanize and marginalize them.

### 6.1 D’Angelo Barksdale: A rejection of violence

*"It's like you born with a glass ceiling. Other people, they got the glass floors. Sky's the limit for them. But for you, for me, man? We only going so high."* - D'Angelo Barksdale

D'Angelo Barksdale, portrayed by Larry Gilliard Jr., is a central figure in the Barksdale drug empire. Born and raised in tumultuous Baltimore, D'Angelo is thrown into crime at a young age. As the nephew of Avon Barksdale, the head of one of Baltimore's most powerful drug-dealing organizations, D'Angelo's path seemed predictable. From a young age, he was groomed to be a part of the family business, expecting him to take the spot as the head of the table in the future. However, as the story of D'Angelo unravels, it is revealed to us viewers that D'Angelo is a character filled with depth, moral dilemmas and introspection, often at odds with the violent world he's enmeshed in.

D'Angelo is faced with constant internal conflict, as he yearns for authenticity, whether it be from his uncle or peers, but at the same time he struggles with the oppressive forces that define him from a young age. D'Angelo is not just expected to take over the drug business, but to uphold the merciless legacy built by his uncle. However, even though the series plays tricks on viewers in displaying D'Angelo as a hardened criminal in the first few episodes, it soon becomes clear that D'Angelo is not comfortable with the violence that surrounds him. Even though D'Angelo claims he is hardened by the violence around him, this proves to be false as it is later found out that he carries remorse for actions he is directly responsible for and even for the ones he was only involved in. Such is the case for the murder of Pooh Blanchard, where D'Angelo kept bragging about killing of a rival drug dealer, which later proved to be a case of self-defense, or the case of murder of Deidre Kresson, Avon's ex girlfriend, for which D'Angelo took claim even though he served just a distraction. Nevertheless, both of these cases weigh heavily on D'Angelo's coincidence. Applying Fanon's (1961) theory, for D'Angelo

violence is not a path to liberation but a chain that binds him, a manifestation of the systemic forces that dictate his life. Those forces come in the form of a pressure from his family and peers to commit to a life of violence which does not suit D'Angelo, who proves to be disgusted in the acts of violence by the end of the show. However, this comes at a price, as D'Angelo's remorse is seen as a liability by Stringer Bell, who orders for him to be killed during his incarceration, which D'Angelo ended up in by taking the blame for the crimes of his family. The cycle of crime ultimately takes D'Angelo as a toll, denying him the opportunity for the rejection of violence. However, the focus is on the overarching structure, forcing D'Angelo into the life of crime and murder, eventually ending his life by trying to break the cycle. Even though the execution came from the people close to him, they are forced to play the same game as him and would be punished in the same way, as the systemic pressure forces their hand and sentences them for a life of crime.

Also, it is important to note D'Angelo's introspective side. As he recognised the system of violence and refused to be a part of it, D'Angelo was also aware of the world outside the drug trade and his relation to it. One of the most telling scenes is when D'Angelo dines at an upscale restaurant, visibly out of place and hyper-aware of the white patrons' gaze:

*"It's like them little toy boats, you know in a glass? And you just shake 'em up? I feel like I don't fit in"*

His discomfort is palpable, not because he lacks the financial means to dine there, but because he feels the weight of societal judgment, the external lens through which he's viewed. D'Angelo did not fit in the world that birthed him, but also in the world outside of it. As the series progresses, D'Angelo's internal conflict intensifies. His desire to break free from the violent world of the drug trade and the weight of family expectations becomes more pronounced. This is evident in his interactions with other characters, such as his girlfriend Donette and his mother Brianna, where he expresses a desire for a "clean" life, away from the drug trade. His eventual decision to distance himself from the Barksdale organization, even considering testifying against them, underscores his rejection of the violent world he's a part of. However, the consequences of his birthright do not escape him, and he is ultimately punished for refusing to play the game.

## 6.2 Reginald "Bubbles" Cousins: A Life on the Margins

*"Just a little bit of dignity."* – Bubbles

Reginald, better known by his street name "Bubbles," portrayed by Andre Royo is a pivotal character in the show, displaying one of the most extreme examples of marginalization: poor Black substance abusers. Alexander (2010) notes in "The New Jim Crow," that the war on drugs disproportionately targeted Black communities, leading to cycles of incarceration, addiction, and societal exclusion. No example is better than Bubbles, a heroin addict and police informant. Even though Bubbles' character is one of the most pity-inducing portrayals of the marginalized, he contrarily showcases moments of resilience, humor, and hope more than most of the other cast. His life is a relentless battle against addiction, trapped in the crossfire between the will to escape substances and the world that revolves around them.

The story of Bubbles revolves around his attempts to distance himself from the world that made him into what he is. However, his current state and circumstances force him into a constant loop of getting clean and relapsing. Particularly telling is a scene in which he tries to make money by selling t-shirts in an upscale Baltimore, where he is looked down upon with piercing (White) gaze by the bypassers, personifying the societal judgment he endures. As hooks (1992) elaborates in "Black Looks: Race and Representation," these interactions are emblematic of the broader societal gaze that often marginalizes and stereotypes Black individuals. After being rejected by the world outside of his own, he is trapped in a system where he is economically impotent, the only way he has to make funds is to indulge in the drug world and constantly subjugate himself to temptation. Bubbles' relationship with the police, social workers, and the drug trade underscores the systemic forces at play in his life. While his informant role offers some protection, it also exposes him to dangers and further alienates him from his community. His attempts at rehabilitation and societal reintegration, though filled with challenges, echo his yearning for a life free from addiction. Bubbles prevails in his fictional story, but the reality is much more grim for modern day Black Americans.

## 6.3 Michael Lee: A Youth Shaped by Circumstance

*"You look at me like I asked for this. Like I wanted this. I was just trying to hang on, you know?"* - Michael Lee



Michael Lee, portrayed by Tristan Wilds, is a character who appears in shows later run. A young man growing up in the heart of West Baltimore, Michael's life is a similar testament to the challenges faced by Black youth in urban America to Bodie and D'Angelo, although explored through a slightly different way. At the forefront of Michael's story, he is characterized by familial challenges, particularly his responsibility towards his younger brother, Bug, and the trauma associated with his stepfather who abused him when he was younger. These early experiences shape his mistrust towards adults, especially men, and push him closer to the streets. His situation is applicable to Fanon's (1961) findings in "The Wretched of the Earth," where he states that the oppressed often internalize their oppression, leading to a cycle of violence and mistrust. Michael's eventual involvement with Marlo Stanfield's crew and his transformation into a "soldier" for the organization can be seen as a manifestation of this internalized oppression. This sentiment echoes the disillusionment and sense of betrayal many young Black individuals feel, as the system is designed against them and the ones close to them, offering no social safety net but the one on the street.

Although Michael has direct contact to the world outside West Baltimore, his experiences at school and with institutions like the boxing gym where he enrolls offer glimpses into the scars left in his psyche. As Giroux (2009) notes, urban youth, particularly Black males, are often perceived as threats, their identities shaped by a society that views them through a lens of criminality and fear. Therefore Michael approaches every situation carefully, being reclusive and resigned, and flees from connections and situations in which he feels threatened. An example of this is the earlier mentioned boxing gym, where Michael's initial reluctance to trust Cutty, the gym owner, underscores his wariness of adult figures and institutions. Michael also displays this reservation in school and even in interaction with a new figure in West Baltimore's drug game, Marlo Stanfield. However, Michael displays flashes of bright future by being a responsible de facto parent to Bug, and even shows promise in education, only for it all to be stripped away by his father's emergence. His father's return from jail forces Michael into the drug game, as he now has responsibility not only to care for Bug, but also defend him and himself from his resentful father. The phenomenon of absentee fathers is a grim reality of not just *The Wire*, but general America, as issues such as mass incarceration and unemployment cause stress on familial relations (Western, 2006), Michael therefore tries to find a surrogate father through Cutty and later Marlo, who are both byproducts of the same system, ensuring the endurance of the cycle of toxic masculinity and criminality (Connell, 1995). Michael's situation is similar to many others in *The Wire's* Baltimore, where circumstances force a promising young man to the

only viable solution for economic independence. However, despite these circumstances, Michael exhibits moments of agency, whether in his decision to protect his brother from their abusive stepfather or his eventual choice to distance himself from the drug trade. This is highly related to Fanon's exploration of the quest for authenticity and agency in the face of systemic oppression (Fanon, 1952).

However, no matter how strong Michaels' will to escape the world that made him is, he still does not manage to escape the cyclical nature of violence, as in his final moments of the show, Michael becomes the reincarnation of Omar Little. The image of him walking with a shotgun in hand through the streets like Omar once did underscores that despite individual choices and agency, larger systemic forces often dictate the trajectories of those growing up in such environments. This cyclical nature of violence, where one generation replaces the previous one, only to face similar challenges and make similar choices, resonates deeply with Fanon's theories on colonial oppression.

## **7 Conclusion**

The exploration of racism in America is a complex endeavor, as racial issues are deeply entrenched in the nation's history, culture and social structure. This thesis goal was to dissect this intricate issue through the lens of HBO's "The Wire," a series that masterfully encapsulates the complexities of race, power, and systemic inequalities in the urban landscape of Baltimore. By the use of the works presented by scholars W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and the tenets of Critical Race Theory and neoliberalism critique the foundational framework, portrayal of characters and institutions within the show were delved into, drawing parallels with the past and current broader American socio-cultural reality.

The Wires influence on entertainment as well as profound commentary on the state of race relations in America cannot be understated. The show's intricate narratives, character arcs and socio-political commentaries all resonate deeply with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, Fanon's theories on the psychological impacts of colonization, neoliberal critique of the shifting economy and the CRT's emphasis on the systemic nature of racism. The show displays every character and storyline with uncanny accuracy to the true Baltimore, reflecting the challenges, aspirations, and struggles of countless individuals in the pursuit of

happiness through the terrains of racialized landscapes in urban America. It is clear that *The Wire* is more than a television show; it is a rich critical ethnography of a living, breathing Baltimore, as offering notes of societal critiques, character studies, and theoretical explorations. *The Wire*'s existence stands as a testament to the enduring challenges of racism in America; however, it does not just provide viewers with a story, but also with ways through which people from all walks of life can understand and empathize with characters in a battle with the realities of a racially divided society. This is why the show's influence is not waning off, especially at current times of racial tensions, as calls for justice reverberate across America and beyond, the show offers a window into the reality of those calling for help. The enduring relevance and cult status of the show lie in the ability to transcend fiction to present raw, present reality, which is permanently burned into viewers memory. A testament to the show's accuracy in describing social reality is the fact that many colleges offer courses on *The Wire* even today, more than 20 years after airing of the first episode.

While set in Baltimore, *The Wire* is the story of America. From the school-to-prison pipeline, political corruption, and the drug epidemic to the nuances of individual struggles with identity, morality, and systemic oppression, the show captures the multifaceted nature of racial disparities in America. The range of its characters, from young corner boys to seasoned police officers, from ambitious politicians to struggling teachers, represent a palette of Americans navigating a society challenging them every day. However, what separates *The Wire* is not the description of those challenges, but the willingness to explore the cause of their existence and in some cases, willingness to show how to overcome them. Its interdisciplinary approach, blending elements of sociology, politics, economics, and cultural studies, positions "*The Wire*" as a pivotal work in the canon of television shows that have significantly impacted cultural discourse. In essence, the show serves as a microcosm of America, reflecting its beauty, challenges, aspirations, and contradictions.

The interdisciplinary approach adopted in this thesis, drawing from the theoretical frameworks of W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, neoliberal critique and Critical Race Theory, underscores the convoluted nature of racial issues in America. By leaning onto these established theories, deeper analysis of characters and systems was attempted, focusing on character and system determinants in relation to society that created or perpetuated them. A quadruple approach proved to be valuable in this context; firstly it allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. While Du Bois's concept of double

consciousness provides insights into the internal struggles of Black individuals navigating a predominantly white society, Fanon's exploration of the psychological impacts of colonization offers a broader perspective on the systemic and historical dimensions of racial oppression. Meanwhile, neoliberal critique with its depiction of shifting economy and Critical Race Theory, with its emphasis on the structural nature of racism, anchor these individual and historical narratives within the broader socio-political context. Through these four theories, a holistic approach was attempted, addressing not only characters' responses to the a racial adversity, but also the way in which the system perpetuates cyclical nature of racism. This interdisciplinary approach had a goal to foster a richer, more layered analysis, drawing on sociology, psychology, history and legal studies. By the way of this approach, not only is academic rigor of the thesis enhanced, but also readers are offered a more nuanced viewpoint onto complexities of race in America.

Firstly, America as a nation was contextualized, pronouncing its complex racial history, focusing more on the modern day megalopolises and their struggle in the wake of globalization. Facets of modern day city government were explored, focusing on the pillars such as healthcare and housing, all while alluding to their flaws and inherent racial factors. The War on Drugs was also mentioned as a deeply racially marked movement which left Black community scarred. The focus was then shifted to Baltimore, applying all of these factors onto the city itself. Through a general overview of the neoliberal policies in America and their effects, the shift was focused on the impoverished African-American class, and Marlo Stanfield as the representation of the dangers of neoliberal economy. Then, CRT was applied in the analysis of Baltimore's structural systems, whether it be law enforcement, education, political or judicial sector. After that, character analysis was approached, focusing firstly on Du Bois concept of double consciousness and applying it to three pivotal characters: Russell "Stringer" Bell, Omar Little and Bodie Broadus. Finally, characters of D'Angelo Barksdale, Bubbles and Michael Lee were briefly explored in regard to the effects of colonization and white gaze, both concepts presented by Fanon. In all of the analyses, traces of racial disparity were clear and on display, punctuated by nuanced portrayals and solidity of all of the frameworks.

Although the exploration undertaken in this thesis may be comprehensive, it only scratches the surface of the vast reservoir of narratives and themes embedded within "The Wire". As with any profound work of art, the show offers a plethora of avenues for further research and analysis. One potential area of exploration could be a deeper dive into the female

characters of the series, such as Snoop, Kima, and Beadie, examining their roles and challenges within the patriarchal structures of both the street and institutional settings. An approach through feminist theory or intersectionality may provide interesting analysis, especially in the case of Kima Greggs as a black queer woman. Additionally, although this thesis used frameworks of Du Bois, Fanon, and CRT, "The Wire" is ripe for analysis through other theoretical lenses, whether it be postcolonial theory, perhaps on the historical injustice manifestations or urban studies, on the spatial dynamics of power, race, and resistance in the city of Baltimore.

Whatever the case may be, findings in this thesis are particularly potent considering the current wake of socio-political issues in America. With movements such as Black Lives Matters shedding light on systematic racism and police brutality, The Wire's story is reignited with fresh vigor. The show serves as a commentary on challenges that plague urban America, which are omnipresent and seemingly never changing. However, as discourse around race continues and develops, it is important to take time to reflect on works such as The Wire which tackle intricate subjects like race with such care, connecting faces with harrowing stories which sound too harsh to be true, but ultimately very likely are. That is The Wire's biggest strength: the call to invoke empathy, dialogue and be the positive change we want to see in the world. After all,

*"...Ain't no shame in holding on to grief... as long as you make room for other things too."* –  
Bubbles

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**The Wire's America: An Exploration of Race, Power, and Systemic Inequity: *Summary and Key Words***

The issue of race still remains one of the most prevalent topics in American existence. From the remnants of colonial past to the more recent systemic inequalities highlighted by the Black Lives Matter Movement, racism has left undeniable marks on the American psyche and has infiltrated every facet of American existence from housing, employment, education and the criminal justice system. Representation of race in the media is therefore imperative as the media today serves a more powerful cause than it ever has; not only is it a form of entertainment, but a tool used for shaping perceptions, narratives and ultimately discourses within society. It is within this context that “The Wire” emerges. “The Wire”, through its raw and unfiltered portrayal of the racial dynamics of the 2000s Baltimore, can serve as a blueprint based on which societal landscape of ethnic America can be mapped. That is precisely the goal of this thesis. Firstly, historical context was established; through the neoliberal past of America, economic failure of industrial cities has been mapped, with attention drawn to Baltimore through a systematic dismantlement of its failing educational, healthcare and judicial systems. Then the focus was shifted on the show and its faithful portrayal of the said failing systems. Through neoliberal critique, the class situation of impoverished African-Americans was examined; CRT provided useful analysis of the show's portrayal of the decline of the systematic social nets; Fanon's and DuBois' concepts of white gaze and double consciousness were used in order to analyze characters at a micro level, establishing them as victims of a failing and inherently racist system.

Key words: race, America, The Wire, critical race theory, neoliberalism, double consciousness, white gaze

**Žicina Amerika: Pregled rase, moći i sustavne nejednakosti: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Pitanje rase i dalje ostaje jedna od najrelevantnijih tema svakodnevne američke egzistencije. Od ostataka kolonijalne prošlosti do novijih sustavnih nejednakosti koje ističe pokret Black Lives Matter, rasizam je ostavio neporecive tragove na američku zbilju i infiltrirao se u svaki aspekt američkog postojanja počevši od stanovanja, zaposlenja, obrazovanja i kaznenopravnog sustava. Pitanje reprezentacije rase u medijima stoga postaje ključno, pošto mediji danas imaju bitniju ulogu nego ikada; ne služe samo kao oblik zabave, već i alat koji se koristi za oblikovanje percepcija, narativa i konačno diskursa unutar društva. U tom kontekstu nastaje "Žica". "Žica", kroz svoj sirovi i nefiltrirani prikaz rasne dinamike Baltimorea 2000-ih, može poslužiti kao nacrt na temelju kojeg se može mapirati društveni krajolik etničke Amerike. Upravo je to cilj ovog diplomskog rada. Prvo, uspostavljen je povijesni kontekst; kroz neoliberalnu prošlost Amerike mapiran je ekonomski neuspjeh industrijskih gradova, pri čemu je pozornost privučena na Baltimore kroz sustavno propitkivanje propalog obrazovnog, zdravstvenog i pravosudnog sustava. Zatim je fokus prebačen na seriju i njen vjeran prikaz navedenih neispravnih sustava. Kroz neoliberalnu kritiku ispitana je klasna situacija osiromašenih Afroamerikanaca; CRT se iskoristio kao koristan teorijski okvir za analizu prikaza propadanja mreža socijalne sigurnosti prikazanih u seriji; Fanonovi i DuBoisovi koncepti bijelog pogleda i dvostruke svijesti korišteni su za analizu likova na mikrorazini, utvrđujući ih kao žrtve propadajućeg i inherentno rasističkog sustava.

Ključne riječi: rasa, Amerika, Žica, kritička teorija rase, neoliberalizam, dvostruka svijest, bijeli pogled