Race, as a key marker of difference, helps individuals navigate contemporary life, and static notions of identity are often grounded on racial bodies connected to fixed thoughts of Blackness and Whiteness. Popular media representations, serving as sites of contestation regarding the social construction of race, play a key role in shaping, communicating, and understanding racial identities. Often, these representations simultaneously support and disrupt a problematic racial ideology built upon a naturalized Black/White binary. Anyone who has watched an episode of *The Wire* knows that questions of identity are central to its narratives. Twenty five years after Newcomb and Hirsch described TV as a ‘central cultural medium’ filled with conflicting meanings, *The Wire* provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider the social and political relevance of TV.

Media tend to focus on individual problems that render complex social and political issues invisible, erase power inequalities, and deny survival strategies and distinctive lifeways resulting from experiences.\(^1\) Nonetheless, societies do examine themselves through art and TV presents a site for discussion as it raises questions regarding societies deepest dilemmas.\(^2\) In response, *The Wire* contests racial normatives and refuses to manufacture simple solutions to complicated policy issues within the time frame of a single episode or season. Instead, it presented complex individuals struggling with the inherent tensions of good and bad and rejecting simple racial categorizations. Rather than the ‘easy triumph of justice’, it offers a mix of urban sociology, [and] fiercely argued politics...through an examination of the pressures and policies that govern everyone’s lives...from dispossessed to those doing the dispossessing...outcasts to the corporations and institutions indifferent to those cast out by economic realities.\(^3\)

Even as *The Wire* made viewers work hard to follow its intricate plotlines, it was recognized as ‘one of the few places in TV willing to argue passionately about the world outside the boundaries of the small screen.’\(^4\) *Television Week* named it one of the best shows on TV and it even earned a prestigious Peabody Award.\(^5\) In addition, with a ‘large and largely African American cast’, *The Wire* continued in the vein of previous programming that ‘broke a mold of racial uniformity.’\(^6\) Color is no longer invisible but racial representations are presented in the context of class and culture to create parallels between worlds and identities commonly presented as dichotomous.

In the 1980s, *Hill Street Blues* acknowledged that ‘race and class tear this society apart, that behaving decently under these conditions is an everyday trial, and that there are no blindingly obvious solutions for the accumulated miseries.’\(^7\) *The Wire* offers a similar analysis through tragic heroes and principled deviants who illustrate the tension between structure and agency. For five seasons *The Wire* used gripping portrayals of complex social issues to interrogate the daily interactions of disconnected communities in a society
wrestling with racial identity. The focus of each season shifted from drugs to corruption in city government to a failing public education system, but an underlying theme concerned with notions of the racial self remained evident. Combining complex characters with a serial storyline, *The Wire* challenged assumptions about who and what we are while commenting on fundamental social and political issues. Too often complex aspects of individuality are discarded for judgments based on perceptions tied to race. Because nearly every character played with stereotypes, each episode of *The Wire* demanded reconsideration of assumptions about authentic racial identities. This underlying theme is signified by Omar’s belief, ‘a man’s gotta have a code’ and prompts a focus on individuality as opposed to socially imposed labels. Whether it is McNulty’s infidelity, Bunk’s alcohol abuse, Freamon’s misguided approach to securing murder convictions, Sgt. Carver cop putting a troubled kid back on the street because social services will fail him, or Kima, an intelligent and dedicated homicide detective struggling to fulfill her duties as a parent *The Wire* explored the realities of postindustrial America. It also re-introduces the ‘old American hero…the self-remade man.’ in Colonel Cedric Daniels who has evolved from a corrupt cop to a man defined by loyalty, honesty, and duty. In combination, these characters create an awareness that all ‘people suffer and the institutions authorized to redress that suffering fail in their stated purposes.’

Television has constantly struggled over meanings and representations of race as it presents and produces a racial order, but it can no longer be burdened by the eternal search for authentic representations or accurate reflections. In early television history, blacks played subservient roles and blacks and whites occupied separate and unequal worlds. In the world of TV, discrimination, domination and struggle have been continuously displaced by a menacing Black underclass disproportionately represented in news accounts where ‘blacks dominate the visual representations that evoke images of crime, drugs, and social problems.’ Minorities remain ‘severely underrepresented on TV programming and when they do appear, their level of power and social status is significantly lower that their white counterparts.’ (Voorhees, 418)). When TV does venture inside the separate and unfamiliar world of black America, viewers are provided the comforting reminders of whiteness and an ideology of white supremacy yet denied access to the social competence and civic responsibility of Black Americans.

In addition, media often ‘shift conversations of inequality away from structured social processes to matters of individual choice.’ For decades, TV consisted of ‘authentic’ representations of life in poor urban communities that reinforced a normative white middle class, or enlightened approaches to cultural difference privileging white middle class subject positions to create racial oneness. The end result was a media landscape constructing a self/other and black/white binary grounded in restrictive scripts marking ‘whiteness as civilized, rational, ordered, disciplined, and morally superior and leaves people of color undisciplined, unrefined, primitive, inappropriately sexual, emotional, and unstable.’ These discourses create a ‘carefully constructed chasm between [white and black].’ These racial codes also create a dichotomy of deficient/gifted individuals and create obstructions to understanding that those
trapped in underclass have same qualities but lack options and opportunities to realize them due to unemployment, industrial relocation, ineffective social policies, power inequalities, and racism.\textsuperscript{21}

It took \textit{The Cosby Show} for a ‘previously unexplored territory of diversity within blackness’ to emerge.\textsuperscript{22} But where \textit{Cosby} failed to comment on economic and social disparities, \textit{The Wire} considers these issues and offers a prime example of how TV can challenge a hegemonic social and racial order built upon separation by moving beyond constructed dichotomies and revealing the intersection and interdependence of class, race, and gender. Bodroghkozy\textsuperscript{23} explains how TV functions as a symptomatic text at times trying to avoid racist representations only to come up with more binary opposition.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The Wire} has overcome the limitation of questions concerning authentic, positive, and negative, with a commitment to social realism. When shows like \textit{Julia}, \textit{Good Times}, \textit{The Jeffersons}, and even \textit{The Cosby Show} are ‘critiqued for not telling it like it is’ they become a struggle over how to represent reality.\textsuperscript{25} Responding to these criticisms, \textit{The Wire} offers a blend of the contested meanings of race, and recognizes that racial experience is not singular. Black is no longer code for a violence, poverty, crime, deviance, and drug abuse. While such representations are present in TV and reality, \textit{The Wire’s} appreciation for the influence of social context on identity helps to ‘unhinge black and white from previous definitions that rely on racial codes.’\textsuperscript{26}

The characters and issues found in \textit{The Wire} apply \textit{Hill Street Blues’} use of ‘multilayered realms of law and lawlessness…[that] demonstrate how we are all subject to similar kinds of institutional pressures and tensions…’\textsuperscript{27} Whether comparing Stringer Bell\textsuperscript{28} and Avon, McNulty and Daniels, Prez and Bunk, or Michael and Senator Davis, \textit{The Wire} blurred lines attempting to connect one’s code to a racially marked character. Is a Senator more beneficial to his community than an 8\textsuperscript{th} grade corner boy raising his brother? Is Avon Barksdale’s gangster lifestyle more authentic than Stringer Bell’s educational aspirations? What does the audience think as Cutty - a recent parolee - embraces his troubled past in an attempt to create a future for himself and his impoverished community, yet Major Colvin uses his stature in the police department to create an authorized drug sanctuary. TV can no longer rely on simple answers to these questions.

Elected officials and truants understand an economy based on points on the package just as those in Town Hall and those on the corner understand the benefits of cooperation and competition. In the end, these narratives of survival ensure ‘various combatants are not portrayed as selfless defenders of the good or brutal psychopaths or hopeless losers but rather complicated individuals ensnared in and driven by larger social forces…’\textsuperscript{29} For example in season two, the ‘same conditions of despair and criminal activity that envelop the city’s most hopeless neighbor hoods [and] black drug organizations are mirrored by white counterparts…’\textsuperscript{30} Frank Sobotka is the guy everyone turns to when they need work or help. As work on the once profitable docks disappears Sobotka finances his efforts and good intentions by letting shipping containers with illegal cargo slip into the port undetected by authorities. At the same time, unable to pay their bills and make ends meet,
Sobotka discovers that his son and nephew have been doing some freelance work stealing shipments of cameras.

As race codes of identity become naturalized, necessary and universal, essentialist notions of accuracy focus on contesting negative stereotypes with positive ones. Refusing to participate in this futile search for positivity and distortion, *The Wire* emphasizes the impossibility of separate and distinct identities and replaces them with an understanding that identity is culturally constructed and relational. *The Wire’s* challenge to extant racialized codes is clearly articulated in Omar’s belief that every man’s gotta have a code which provides an entry point to understand how the characters in *The Wire* upend historical representations of black and white and a media history requiring individuals be situated into a black/white dichotomy. Instead of relying on essentialized identities and a single narrative, *The Wire* offers ‘depth to the categories of identities that become specific, fragmented, and contradictory and constructed through interactions.’ This supports Gray’s argument that TV ‘allows for leaks, fractures, tensions, and contradictions…’ It also redirects the question, what happens when a man breaks his code?

**Conclusion**

TV should not bee seen as a ‘progression from stereotypes to truth but a struggle to constantly articulate the meanings of people’s identities and the way they live those cultural categories.’ Constructed racial identities are central to social organization. Race provides meaning, assigns positions and operates as an explanatory concept defining and maintaining difference. Popular media representations, as symptomatic texts, require further analysis regarding their response to a social reality containing fluid and unstable identities posing challenges to traditional boundaries creating social cleavages. But pinpointing media’s role in this process remains elusive as texts maintain stable identities, challenge claims of authentic racial identities, and even forge new identities. Nonetheless, these conflicting and often competing representations are grounded on racial bodies understood as ‘a primary readable text’ connected to fixed notions of Blackness and Whiteness. As a result, invented - yet entrenched - racial identities make it nearly impossible to look past perceptions of difference an attempts to see ‘each other as one in the same.’ This process of sacrificing individual identity for the collective reinforces constructed racial boundaries. Questions concerning popular media representations of racial identities cannot overlook the potential to reinscribe the logic of the system they hope to dismantle, but they must also, embrace the ‘evolution of ideas about race in America… marked by nuance, complexity…a fluidity between cultures.’

*The Wire’s* narrative pays close attention to the details of daily life, but it does not make it easy to navigate this landscape. The Baltimore vernacular of characters like Spider and Snoop reminds viewers of social partitions, but the intriguing respect between Bunk and Omar or McNulty and Bodie demonstrates the flaws in our understanding of difference. Ultimately, the intersection of two supposedly distinct communities often defined by race is exposed and investigated. Mayor Carcetti wins the election using similar
tactics as hustlers on the corner. A convicted criminal and his law enforcing nemesis find common ground as they work to save youth from following the same dead end. On the other hand, Omar - staying true to his code - returns from a life of luxury to avenge the death of a friend, and Kima rocks her child to sleep using the tried and true technique of numerous parents across the country - even if the words change drastically. *Goodnight Moon, Goodnight Stars, Goodnight, po-pos, Goodnight fiends, Goodnight hoppers, Goodnight hustlers, Goodnight Scammers, Goodnight to everybody, Goodnight to one and all.*

Over the course of five seasons, *The Wire* highlighted the complexities of identity and race, and placed ‘other’ America at center stage to compel privileged/default America to examine the consequences of misguided and shortsighted ‘codes.’ Throughout, struggles to articulate racial identities marked by nuance and similarity as opposed to difference were presented, and TV once again contained assumptions about who and what we are, commented on ideological issues, and offered insight to social dilemmas. As the media landscape rapidly evolves and TV tries to situate itself, *The Wire* demonstrates this medium’s relevance to important conversations concerning the social and political consequences of entrenched racial borders.

Notes

4. Rose, 90
5. Rose, 97
7. Gitlin, 275
8. One of Baltimore’s most notorious stick-up artists, yet uncomfortable with profanity, Omar is careful to distinguish between players and citizens. He holds Sundays sacred, choosing not to work and even escorting the woman who raised him to church once a month. My character sketches were modified from those found at [http://www.hbo.com/thewire/cast/](http://www.hbo.com/thewire/cast/)
9. A good hard case, women, a failed marriage, two young boys, drunkenness, philandering, and insubordination. This is the life of Jimmy McNulty. But he is good police - driven by a propensity for solving cases, even as his personal life crumbled around him.
10. Gitlin, 311
11. A career-conscious police officer, Lt. Daniels holds a law degree and was once rapidly climbing the ranks of the Baltimore Police Department. His marriage to a politically ambitious and well-connected wife was strained due to a corruption scandal that occurred during his early days on the police force. Daniels found a new romance with A.S.A. Rhonda Pearlman, and with Mayor Carcetti now backing Daniels’ ascent through the department, the pair appear on the verge of becoming a power couple. [→]

12. Gitlin, 313 [→]

13. Gray, 1995 [←]

14. Gray, 1995 [←]


16. Gray, 1995, 287 [←]

17. Gray, 1989, 377) This occurs by displacing the social with the personal and the complex with dramatic. ((Gray, 1989, 382 [←]

18. Gray, 1995 [←]


20. Shugart, 118 [←]

21. Gray, 1989, 384 [←]

22. Gray, 1995, 291 [←]


24. Bodroghkozy, 145 [←]

25. Bodroghkozy, 150 [←]

26. Bodroghkozy, 153 [←]

27. Rose, 85 [←]

28. Ranking number two in one of Baltimore’s most successful drug operations, Bell is a product of the projects he now operates in. A master of organization with a penchant for economic theory, Bell came close to turning the corner and establishing himself as a legitimate real estate developer. His efforts to reform the violence and gangsterism of the drug trade backfired, resulting in his death. [←]

29. Gitlin, 85 [←]

30. Rose, 86 [←]


32. Grossberg, 220 [←]
33. Grossberg, 230
34. Gray, 2000, 300
35. Grossberg, 233
41. Wiegman
43. Newcomb and Hirsch

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