"A Man Must Have a Code": Good Po-Lice and Representations of Masculinity in HBO's *The Wire*

The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008) debuted two decades ago and it has never seemed more relevant. The numerous global socio-cultural-political shifts to far-right ideologies have only strengthened its cries for immediate drastic change in the name of progress, particularly for the working-class. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, ignited by the shooting of African American teen Trayvon Martin in 2013 by George Zimmermann (who was later acquitted of all charges), was fueled further in 2020 when police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd. The outrage led to protests and calls for police reform (resulting in the slogan "Defund the Police"), all of which illustrate the need for further discourse on 21st century policing methods.

Sheldon F. Greenberg notes that genuine discussion on improving the police service is often overshadowed by "generalized accusations, political rhetoric, clamor for change, and media hype" (2017, p.2). The complexity of police reform requires examination in wider socio-cultural-political frameworks that are continuously hampered by neoliberal policies that seek to embolden the individual in the name of the capitalist free market, resulting in further class divide. Policies developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by conservative leaders Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (later adopted worldwide) led to further pressure on the working-class, reducing opportunities to prevail in the new neoliberal world. The "War on Drugs" initiated by the Richard Nixon administration in 1971 has only mutated and been bolstered by his successors. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, or the "Clinton Crime Bill", allocated $16 billion to numerous criminal justice programs (Everett 2013, p.417). The outcomes of the Act had wide and varied results in terms of reducing crime. However, one verifiable outcome is the increase of mass incarcerations, particularly for people of color. This has further detriments as people of color are impeded in acquiring any "wealth, status, and power" (Martin 2015, p.127). Additionally, reduced life expectancy has been an outcome of the so-called war. Therefore, discussions of any police reform require both macro and micro lenses to review any and all institutes that are the beneficiaries and perpetuators of increasing class divide.

As a conduit for many of these frustrations, *The Wire* remains among the most important North American television series ever made. This raises the first question: why? What makes it distinctive? Why does it, in my opinion, have higher status than the groundbreaking *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2006)? A brief response is its subversion of television codes and conventions. David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, states in Rafael Alvarez's *The Wire: Truth*

Be Told: “Swear to God, it was never a cop show” (2009, p.1). Cop shows have been ubiquitous throughout network television history, particularly with an array of gritty dramas in the 1990s, including *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2004), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999) based on Simon’s 1991 non-fiction novel *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, and *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990-2010) together with spin-offs. As HBO received critical gravitas with hits such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), they were reluctant to mirror free-to-air network television shows, meaning that they had little use for a cop drama, a genre that, according to Vincenzo Bavaro, “re-inscribes social tensions and resolves cultural anxieties by containing them into a strictly repetitive format, that aims at reassuring the viewer on the good use of the State’s violence over its subject” (2018, p.71). However, Simon was able to convince HBO that it was not simply about the police or the drug dealers they were determined to apprehend, “It was about [Baltimore]” (2009, p.1). The title itself refers to the mechanism of telephonic surveillance used by law enforcement throughout the series but also “provides a key metaphor for the different worlds the protagonists live in, which are kept together by this overarching dirty business” (Schröder & Mendes 2018, p.48). When the series began, it received critical acclaim but never attained a large audience. Instead, it became a cult phenomenon that has continued to this day.

At its core, *The Wire* is an examination of neoliberalism and its transformation of “older configurations of the self, society, culture, aesthetics, and the relationships between them” (Cooper 2019, p.265). Each of the series’ five seasons introduced a new facet of Baltimore grappling with severe ramifications of neoliberalist structures, with Season One focusing on street-level drug dealers; Season Two exploring the death of laborers at the docks; Season Three observing local politics; Season Four interrogating the Bush-era education system; finally, Season Five deconstructing print media in the 21st Century. Its serialized structure mirrored that of a novel, where each episode is built on a continuous narrative, and events “are either independent moments illustrating characters but lacking larger arc importance […] or contribute to the slow accumulation of the central plotlines that run throughout a given season” (Mittell 2015, p.29). The series required strict attention from its audience to comprehend its multiple storylines and vast array of characters that intersected across the city, including police officers, drug dealers, dock workers, politicians and journalists. *The Wire*’s primary strength with these various characters was to depict them as neither protagonists or antagonists but present them with complex and contradictory characteristics, operating within a grey moral compass.

In terms of its visual aesthetics, the series' sparseness and deglamorized style further distinguished it from its peers. In essence, *The Wire*'s social realism had never been depicted at this scale or level that reflects urban life in America (Marshall & Potter 2010, p.12). Though the show expanded its scope in each season, the recurrent location throughout, or rather its nexus, was the street, where its core themes and perspectives "intersect and/or converge on the proverbial corners of the inner-city experience" (Peterson 2010, p.108). With consideration of these intersections, this essay will focus on the representation of masculinity within the series, examining two characters: Detective James "Jimmy" McNulty and drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield. More specifically, it will be contended that these characters challenge concepts of stereotypical masculinity, particularly as crime drama is "possibly the most masculine of all television genres" (Bavaro 2018, p.71). At times, the characters' actions reflect certain stereotypical masculine traits, yet they also challenge problematic forms of masculinity. Partly, this will be explained as a response to their operation within their respective institutions – the police force and the drug trade – both of which are predominately controlled by men. This will be discussed through the notion of "performativity" whereby these characters adopt masculine traits in order to function within these institutions. The racial differences between these characters should be noted – McNulty a white Irish American; Stanfield black American - however, the primary interest for this essay is to examine the characters as binary, cis males and explore the commonalities/dissimilarities between them in terms of their gender.

Defining Gender in *The Wire*

Harriet Bradley notes that gender is "not something fixed, but something that varies according to time, place and culture" and "refers to aspects of our lives that are all too real" (2007, p.3-4). Societal, cultural and political attitudes toward gender are in constant flux and it is increasingly more difficult to discern a true definition of what is considered "masculine" or "feminine." This essay will incorporate Bradley's view of gender, specifically that it is "not something fixed." The primary concern for this argument is the performativity of gender within the environments the characters inhabit. Performativity, as addressed in Judith Butler's seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990), is "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (p.xv). Additionally, Butler illustrates that acts, gestures, enactments are all performative "in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p.185). Each of the aforementioned characters have

sustained routines throughout the series which display their performative masculinity, whether it's McNulty's constant arrogance and philandering, or Stanfield's blood lust and desire for absolute power. Their "masculine" modes of expression, meaning how they behave and present themselves, directly impact on how they perform in their mutual professions, becomes increasingly more complex as their respective narratives unfold.

Simon and frequent collaborator (and former Baltimore police detective) Ed Burns incorporate stereotypical masculine traits to illustrate their perpetuation in the institutes of law enforcement and drug trade but later subvert and counter our expectations. What Simon and Burns establish is a degree or scale of masculinity among police officers and drug dealers. Many are racist and homophobic, some less so. Others are prone to violence, while many are committed to a level of pacifism and intuition. In terms of stereotypical traits, these can be best understood from Ester Palerm Marí and Frances Thomson-Salo's edited collection *Masculinity and Femininity Today* (2013), stating that recognizable components include:

assertiveness, strength, potency, the achievement of wishes and ambitions, and competitive cravings [….] exhibitionism and arrogance; the masculine attributes are then considered more of an instrument of aggression than of love, and imply recklessness, misogyny, and an excessive need to demonstrate one's own abilities. (p.xiv-xv)

While these traits are contestable, and certainly not necessarily gender specific, McNulty and Stanfield continuously exhibit much of these elements. Additionally, Todd W. Reeser comments that easily ascribed characteristics of masculinity are: '"muscular," "strong," "hard," "brave," and "in control"' and that we know "it is the opposite of femininity. We can also make a list of adjectives that do not describe masculinity, such as 'weak,' 'soft,' and 'emotional'" (2010, p.12). However, McNulty and Stanfield often contradict these concepts of masculinity. McNulty is often depicted as "arrogant" and "reckless" but has periods of intense emotional release and selflessness throughout the series. Stanfield certainly displays similar arrogance and ambition, with more than an aptitude of extreme violence, but has a deep insecurity that undermines his authority.

Due to their vocational environments, we can view certain behavior as "hegemonic masculinity". Developed in the early 1980s by Kessler et al when examining social inequality in Australian high schools, hegemonic masculinity has seen numerous permutations and applications across a variety of disciplines. Enhanced further by R.W. Connell (2005), the concept blends gender theory, Gramsci's notions of hegemony, and Freudian analysis as a method of analyzing and reviewing how gender structures operate in specific environments,

situations, and contexts. In essence, the concept can be employed to better understand, and complicate, patriarchal methods that embolden males, subjugate females, and establish a complicit masculinity from others who benefit from specific behaviors (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, p.832). Again, both the drug trade and police force are predominately depicted as being male-controlled environments.

The prominent female characters in each institution - Det. Kima Greggs in the police force and Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson working for Stanfield – are still outnumbered by the number of males both as peers and superiors. This gender inequality has been addressed by Simon in his lecture for the Guardian's Observer Ideas Festival (2014), stating that during his tenure as a police reporter within the homicide unit it was "an intensely male environment" as was the drug trade. The primary defense on the lack of female representation centers on the creator's aim for authenticity. This is debatable within the realms of television/media studies in terms of addressing character depiction and the pursuit of equal gender representation on screen. More alarming was the idea that Simon was going to kill off Greggs at Season One's end. This was met with protest by Sonja Sohn (who portrayed Greggs), the cast, and even HBO President Carolyn Strauss who all viewed Greggs as a pivotal character (Abrams 2018, p.30). Simon relented and realized the capacity of the character, especially as a voice of reason throughout the series. Nicholas Chare recognizes that:

A television drama, however, need not merely reflect and reproduce ideology, but also possesses the potential to rework and subvert it. *The Wire* sadly does not take this opportunity in the way it represents gender and policing. Careful listening to The Wire reveals that women's voices are muted in it. They are mainly trapped in secondary roles, rendered inaudible, silenced. (2011, p.30)

The series' lack of female representation is criticized (Vint 2013, p.96) and despite Simon's protests that this is authentic, he and his fellow writers are still working within a dramatic, fictionalized medium with the capacity to increase the number of complex female characters on the show without any cost to the writing.

Jimmy McNulty – Good Police?

While there is no central character in ensemble cast of *The Wire*, McNulty is the figure we follow into the labyrinthine world of 21st century neoliberal law enforcement. The character is, essentially, an avatar of Simon and Burns' rage against institutional behavior that ensures "inequality is legitimized by making clear that the poor and the socially immobile are to blame for their plight, having failed to work hard enough to achieve the desired material gains" (Walker & Roberts 2018, p.1). Simon worked for many years a crime reporter for the

Baltimore Sun and had an instant rapport with working cops (Martin 2013, p.116). The unpatronizing view of the working-class in *The Wire* stems from Simon's socialist-leaning politics (Simon 2013; 2014), but he also avoids a romanticized perspective. The grim reality for those working on the street as drug dealers, families on benefits, and even the police share the detrimental effects of a system that promotes inequality, and where the individual can prosper at the expense of another's well-being.

McNulty is far from a conventional protagonist, and throughout the series audiences may be conflicted in their sympathies toward him. He is dismissive of authority, obsessed with the job, a philanderer, excels at self-sabotage, has a short temper, abuses alcohol, but is, ultimately, what is considered "good po-lice" (Goodman 2005). McNulty's ego is his primary motivation throughout the series and he even develops a catchphrase - "What the fuck did I do?" - that highlights his lack of agency regarding responsibility for actions and indiscretions. Amanda Lotz has identified that often in a male-centered television series, there is an emphasis on characterization and "their narratives explain and meditate on the men and their actions so that viewers can understand or assess their misdeeds and contradictions" (2014, p.56). McNulty's various contradictions, namely his efforts of conducting good police work in a neoliberal system that limits this capacity, is contrasted with his lesser qualities of alcoholism, pursuit of sex and self-interest (though this is a trait neoliberals encourage). These qualities emerge as McNulty is "always so angry at the way he is situated in reality, so he becomes an unstoppable source of trouble" (Kim 2013, p.199), predominately with his bosses as he constantly tries to prove his superiority.

Iterated throughout the series is the distinguishing characteristic of "good po-lice" or "natural po-lice" when compared to the "humps" who only care about overtime pay than any real impact on the community or even doing their job beyond the minimum. McNulty, William "Bunk" Moreland (McNulty's frequent Homicide partner, as well as enabler of womanizing and drinking), and later Det. Lester Freamon are all considered the best detectives, or "good po-lice" due to their aptitude for solving murders, chasing the money and paper trails of drug dealers and politicians, and ability to have "soft eyes": the capacity to look deeper into a crime scene than fellow officers. If these are the caveats of being "good po-lice" then their opposites possess the very detrimental characteristics of law enforcement that must be addressed.

Constantly, we are shown the police's worst impulses, as represented in Seasons One to Three by partners Det. Thomas "Herc" Hauk and Det. Ellis Carver. For instance, their consistent persecution and beating of teenage drug dealer Preston "Bodie" Broadus in Season

One illustrates a level of brutality that does little but reinforce negative perceptions and relations with the police. This viciousness is also representative of hegemonic masculinity, though even Greggs is not immune to beating a suspect (Season One, "The Buys"). Using brute strength, and especially when small groups of male police officers are the enactors of violence, demonstrate a problematic notion of "acceptable" excessive force given any circumstance, even the most trivial perceived infractions. James F. Albrecht notes this as a "just desserts" concept in which "no true harm has been done to society through these actions, since criminals deserve to be punished" (2017, p.5). Yet, these tactics only further isolate communities from co-operating with police. Many permutations of this situation appear as the series continues, with one of the worst perpetrators Officer Edward Walker who continually harasses and even breaks the fingers of a young corner boy in Season Four ("Misgivings"). Carver's capacity to understand how his actions have wider consequences reform him as an officer. However, Herc continually utilizes the primal "bust heads" and "rip-and-run" tactics that increase dubious crime statistics that bolster careers for management. While the former eventually becomes "good po-lice", the latter never learns from his brutish mistakes and is eventually fired for "conduct unbecoming an officer" (Season Four, "Final Grades"). In contrast, McNulty and Bunk are never depicted beating criminals.

Their methods are instinctual, not physical. Yet, their worst impulses – drinking and philandering – create a paradox to their integrity. Though Bunk occasionally works a shift hungover, he manages to separate his personal life from the job. McNulty, on the other hand, is obsessed with being police and asserting his self-perceived superiority over his peers at the expense of any relationship; therefore, his personal and professional lives are consistently intertwined.

"Fuck the bosses!": McNulty's Policing

McNulty demonstrates his willingness to conduct good police work in the pilot ("The Target"). In a key scene that highlights many of his (worst) characteristics, McNulty attends a trial for D'Angelo Barksdale, nephew and employee of drug kingpin Avon Barksdale. Also present is Barksdale's right-hand man Russell "Stringer" Bell. McNulty watches D'Angelo's lawyer, Maurice Levy, dismantle the case by having a witness recant their statement. McNulty is asked to see the Judge, Daniel Phelan, in his chambers. Phelan wants to know how this case collapsed, and McNulty reveals that it is part of a bigger problem with multiple murders linked to the Barksdale organization, but no one is investigating. Knowing that McNulty was not the lead officer on D'Angelo's case, Phelan probes as to why he appeared

in court: “Why do you care?” McNulty smirks and responds with, “Who said I did?” This scene illustrates his ego, cockiness and willingness to circumvent the chain of command. However, it also illustrates his knowledge of the street, the key drug crews and his interest in holding those responsible for the murders accountable.

This is the first of many incidents of insubordination in the series as McNulty undermines his career-minded bosses (McMillan 2010, p.54). McNulty’s interaction with Phelan relies heavily on his ability to perform as the rogue heroic cop, even though his actions will undoubtedly have major consequences. McNulty’s egotistical performativity takes a different turn when it is confronted by his superior, Major William Rawls. Rawls, one of the most overt alpha males in the series has learned about McNulty’s back-channeling. With his two middle fingers directed at McNulty, Rawls’ aggressive manner unravels his subordinate’s suave, cocky demeanor, putting him in his place. McNulty slumps and avoids eye contact, his control and intensity completely gone – in contrast to the preceding scene. However, without this insubordination the Barksdale investigation would have never been approved, nor the formation of what will later become known as the Major Crimes Unit (MCU) which conducts the primary investigations throughout the series. In essence, his perception of himself as “good po-lice” is a catalyst for the remainder of the series.

Over the course of the series, McNulty’s obsession with police work becomes excessive, and like many of the drug addicts depicted, McNulty cannot help this addiction. Jonathan Nichols-Pethick makes salient points, noting that the obsessive cop is a recurring characteristic in crime dramas, one that stems from:

> either a distanced and paternal professionalism […] which is always successful and in which guilt is absolute, or as heroic willingness to risk life and livelihood in pursuit of justice – even if it means working outside the boundaries of the institutionalized justice system where police procedure can turn into vigilantism. (2012, p.8)

While McNulty is often professional, he never risks his life in pursuit of justice. However, Nichols-Pethick’s final point about working outside the boundaries of the “institutionalized justice system” becomes prescient for McNulty in the series’ final season as he becomes a somewhat vigilante in his pursuit of Stanfield. In Season Two, McNulty, banished to the marine unit for his insubordination, becomes disillusioned with the job. When his ex-wife refuses to take him back, he hits rock bottom, adrift with nothing to focus his natural investigative talents on. In a genuine moment of vulnerability with Bunk (“Duck and Cover”), McNulty shakily admits that he is no good at living a steady life and must do proper

police work, meaning rejoining MCU. This gives him a sense of purpose but reignites his traits of ambition, arrogance, alcoholism, and philandering.

Despite burning many bridges, McNulty's addiction to the job does reveals a genuine care about justice. Extending the feelings revealed in the aforementioned Season Two scene, an exchange with Freamon further highlights McNulty's empty personal life and what he values overall, regardless of the cost (Season Three, "Slapstick"):

> LESTER: The job will not save you, Jimmy. It won't make you whole, it won't fill your ass up.
>
> MCNULTY: I dunno, a good case—
>
> LESTER: Ends. They all end. The handcuffs go click and it's over. The next morning, it's just you in your room with yourself.
>
> MCNULTY: Until the next case.
>
> LESTER: Boy, you need something else outside of this here.

These words of wisdom have an impact on McNulty, and he starts to realize the job will not fulfil the void in his life in a meaningful way. McNulty becomes more reflective on his actions and behavior, reaching out to Beadie Russell, a port cop who worked with the MCU in Season Two, and enters into a more stable relationship with her.

Walking the Beat: Community Cop

During the Season Three closing montage, we see a brief scene of McNulty back in uniform walking a beat. His contentment and seemingly good rapport with citizens bring a smile to his face, something that we have rarely seen. The beat occupies a precarious area for officers. As iterated by McNulty's former commander, maverick Major Bunny Colvin - who decides to challenge the War on Drugs by sanctioning a drug zone unimpeded by the police in Season Three – a cop on the beat that knows the community is a better officer. Providing Carver some frank advice on policing, Colvin notes:

Before we went and took a wrong turn and start up here on these war games, a cop walked a beat. And he learned that post. And if there were things that happened up on that post, whether they be a rape or robbery or shooting, he had people out there helping him, feeding him information. (Season Three, "Reformation")

The beat is, therefore, an officer's central avenue of developing and building trust with citizens. Greenberg concurs, stating that a police agency on the beat, one which "builds and sustains a foundation of trust is able to rally the community, change rapidly, achieve results, and overcome mistakes, negative events, and external criticism" (2017, p.419), is crucial to maintain good relations. Colvin's speech resonates with Carver and this triggers his

transformation from “bad po-lice” to “good po-lice”. Colvin’s illegal sanctioning of an open drug market will later draw comparison with McNulty’s unlawful actions in Season Five. For McNulty, the beat serves a different, more personal purpose. During Season Four, he drastically reduces his drinking, even remaining sober around his colleagues (“Corner Boys”). McNulty is a paradox with regard to his actions. By removing himself from the MCU, his effectiveness as a police officer substantially changes. On a macro level, the MCU targets kingpins in an effort to collapse entire organizations that will have wide and varied repercussions throughout the city; on a micro level, beat cops monitor and patrol smaller pockets of the city and build foundational relationships that can then feed into macro units. Eventually, McNulty will feel a tension within himself as to what approach (macro or micro) is best suited for his talents.

In “Corner Boys”, he is asked to reconsider his current position and become more “useful” police in the MCU. McNulty refuses, at peace with his quieter life. With this change in behavior, it creates a new set of routines, gestures, acts and so on that establishes a different kind of performativity. Bunk is apprehensive about this performativity (“Home Rooms”), but McNulty assures him it is genuine. However, he begins showing an interest in the MCU when Stanfield’s violent murders are discovered (“Final Grades”). McNulty develops a collegial relationship with Bodie, now working for Stanfield. After McNulty senses that Bodie can no longer tolerate the new regime, he encourages Bodie to testify against Stanfield. The scene finds the characters finding a genuine mutual respect (Bell 2011, p.544). His relationship with Bodie is short lived as Stanfield orders his murder. McNulty, enraged and laden with guilt, returns to MCU to pursue Stanfield.

Season Five presents McNulty at his worst, bringing out his most stereotypical masculine characteristics. When the MCU is forced to close down its investigation into the Stanfield organization due to budget cuts, McNulty relapses, resumes drinking and philandering. He finally snaps at the institutional betrayal, stemming from Mayor Thomas Carcetti’s political ambitions and refusal to take federal money that will support the police’s budget. This results in a fraught conversation with Bunk (“Not for Attribution”):

> MCNULTY: Fuck the fucking numbers, already. The fuckin’ numbers destroyed this fuckin’ department. Landsman and his clearance rate can suck a hairy asshole.
>
> BUNK: Marlo ain’t worth it, man, nobody is.
>
> MCNULTY: Marlo’s an asshole! He does not get to win; we get to win! This case doesn’t go away just because the bosses can’t find the money to pay for it. These are fuckin’ murders! Ghetto murders, but still! I came back out of the Western to work

this case because they said it would be worked. I came back out on a promise, and they're going to keep that promise, whether they know it or not.

This tirade is a culmination of McNulty's views of police work, centering himself as the primary "victim" due to institutional betrayal. There is a genuine desire to see Stanfield arrested in the name of justice, but it stems primarily from his wounded ego. In response to this perceived slight, McNulty begins to fabricate the existence of a serial killer that preys on the homeless in an effort to get the funds to stop Stanfield, and "we watch as he experiments with various narrative strategies to hook his bosses on his whopper of a tale" (Mittell 2015, p.330). Crossing this line betrays the notion of "good po-lice" and it impacts not only his friendship with Bunk but also his relationship with Beadie.

Like Colvin, McNulty becomes a vigilante within the police force, and later with the assistance of Freamon, goes to extreme measures, even as far as kidnapping a homeless man to get the approval for a wiretap ("The Dickensian Aspect"). McNulty's return to self-destructive behavior represents the extreme nature of masculinity. Although we have seen McNulty continuously step out of the chain of command, he has never betrayed the legality of his work. The "ends justify the means" mentality becomes more problematic as the lie grows and he eventually gets what he wants and becomes an unofficial boss, sharing the increased funds among his colleagues. However, the ramifications of his actions eventually plague him and during a visit to the FBI to get a profile on the "serial killer" ("Clarifications"), the Profiler aptly summarizes McNulty's personality:

> FBI PROFILER: He is likely not a college graduate, but nonetheless feels superior to those with advanced education. He has a problem with authority, and a deep-seated resentment of those whom he feels have impeded his progress professionally. The subject has problems with lasting relationships and is possibly a high-functioning alcoholic.

This close description daunts McNulty, and he begins to realize just how self-destructive he has truly become. In the same episode, McNulty presents a confession to Beadie, or at least the closest he is capable of:

> McNULTY: There is no serial killer. There are no murders – I made it all up. They-they-they were shutting us down, they were just… It's hard to explain. I don't even know where the anger comes from, I don't know how to make it stop… They fuckin' task me, they do… We took the money from the bullshit investigation, routed it to Lester. Now he has the cake to take down Stanfield. And now that I've done all of

this, and I watched myself do it, I can't even stand it. Lester says he's close. Time will pass and I'll be able to shut this thing down.

BEADIE: If you don't go to jail… You had no fuckin' right!

MCNULTY: I know.

BEADIE: This is my life too!

MCNULTY: You start to tell the story, you think you're the hero and when you get done talkin', you…

It is here where we should reflect on McNulty's perception of being "tasked." Perhaps we could consider this a poor attempt at justifying years of anger at the institution of the police force as well as his recent actions of fabricating the serial killer. McNulty's identity, and by extension his masculinity, is intertwined with his profession. Additionally, adopting the performance of a self-proclaimed hero – the heroic rogue cop – is one of his biggest transgressions that has enormous consequences beyond his pursuit of justice. However, via this emotional exchange, and realization of his selfish actions, he spends the remainder of the series trying to salvage both his relationship with Beadie and his friendships. The confession demonstrates that his "moral clarity, even belated, is a redeeming trait" (McAleer 2013, p.65). When his superiors learn the truth of the "serial killer" and as the lie is so big that even Mayor Carcetti has managed to build his governor campaign on homelessness, they cannot simply fire him without drawing public attention. In the last episode ("-30-") McNulty chooses to resign from the police force. The comprehension of his actions enables a reversion to some of the better qualities of his character, namely his moral compass.

McNulty's conclusion at the end of the series relays the complexity of his character and masculinity, which, at times, is in response to the system in which he operates. His combative approach to internal politics, while fascinating to watch, results in very little change in terms of the police system addressing its problematic structures. However, his influence lingers on in some of his (former) colleagues – Greggs and Leander Sydnor - to maintain the fight against the injustices of unwise decision-making from senior leadership.

"My name is my name!" - Marlo Stanfield

Stanfield shares many traits with McNulty. While the latter's self-destruction contrasts the former's disciplined life, they both share a mutual obsession with their respective vocations. Indeed, it is their addiction to the law enforcement/drug trade game that illustrates much of their commonalities. At first, the aspiring drug kingpin appears to be the most stereotypical/one-dimensional incarnation of masculinity in the series. Introduced in Season Three ("Time after Time"), Stanfield displays a cold demeanor, more so than rival Barksdale.

Stanfield is distant, strictly business and employs a laconic expression, whereas Barksdale has an allegiance to his family, and shares an informality with his lieutenants that could be considered close-friendships beyond the employer-employee paradigm.

In an interview with Will Harris of the AV Club, Jamie Hector (who portrays Stanfield) explains that his character "wastes absolutely nothing, not even words" (2015). Stanfield is economical in every sense and his ultimate goal is to attain, according to Simon, "Totalitarian power. The desire that only dares to speak its name when a human being is sated with money and fame" (Havrilesky 2008). This drive for power sustains his character throughout the series, violating and ignoring certain "codes" of the street. Hector developed his own backstory for the character, as he explains to Abrams:

[…] Marlo's mother was very promiscuous, and she had relations with different men back to back every night. He would see this and walk in on it, which forced him to actually stay outside more as he had a chance to. In staying outside more, hanging around with the older folks, he developed that old soul, that old wisdom of the streets and power and leadership. (2018, p.248)

Stanfield is unencumbered capitalism incarnate, and the coldness he displays is perhaps a reflection of, again, Simon's rage against neoliberalism as Stanfield profits at the expense of others. Unlike others, such as Omar Little, the stick-up artist who plagues drug dealers by robbing them, Stanfield has no code and will do whatever is necessary to achieve complete control. Little lives by a code whereby he only preys upon those in the drug game. Stanfield, in his pursuit of power, moves beyond the game which has deadly consequences for citizens. Season Three witnesses the decline of "community" on the drug-ridden streets (Bell 2011, p.530). Stanfield demonstrates his fearfulness by escalating a war with the Barksdale organization. During the war, Stanfield reveals his cunning and ruthless streak when he murders a young woman, Devonne, sent by Barksdale to lure him into a trap ("Moral Midgetry"). Initially, Stanfield is attracted to Devonne, who he finds staring at him in a nightclub. Again, unlike others in the drug trade, Stanfield is disciplined and when Devonne asks him if he wants to drink or dance, he declines both as he does neither. They later have dispassionate sex in Stanfield's car, his laconic behavior never alters and remains in control at all times. When Stanfield finds out Devonne was sent by Barksdale, he brutally shoots her in the breasts and the mouth ("Reformation"). His cold and calculating misogynistic actions reveal much about his aggressive masculinity, reinforcing his primary ambition: totalitarian control of the streets at the cost of human life.

While the downfall of the Barksdale organization was due to internal betrayal, Stanfield nevertheless strives to win at all costs, setting his sights on taking over the entirety of Baltimore's drug trade. In Season Four, he learns how to evade the law and strengthens his organization. The attainment of the drug kingpin crown is not enough to satisfy his ego, and therefore he develops a fierce reputation authorizing numerous murders. However, rather than draw attention to his organization, Stanfield and his crew begin storing the bodies in abandoned row houses. Stanfield effectively becomes a "serial killer" as McNulty perceives him to be, but his status "prevent[s] him from appearing as one" (La Berge 2010, p.552). There are numerous drug-related slayings depicted in *The Wire*, yet they are not categorized as serial killings, but as consequences of being involved in the drug trade. One brutal case occurs when Stanfield pockets lollipops in a corner store in sight of the security guard, goading him into a confrontation outside ("Refugees"). Unfortunately for the security guard "he knows *what* Stanfield is but not *who* he is" (Bell 2011, p.541). Stanfield then orders the security guard's murder. The "pursuit of status" drives Stanfield, where his name must strike fear into the drug trade (and beyond) at all costs. In Season Five, Stanfield takes control of the entire drug trade within the city ("Transitions"). In one swift stroke, he increases the price of drugs to the rival dealers, securing the primary import of narcotics, cementing his status as the chief kingpin in Baltimore. However, after goading Little out of retirement, his status begins to fracture. Little actively challenges Stanfield's masculinity as he takes to the streets, robbing his dealers, decrying that Stanfield "is not a man for this town, ya dig?!" ("Clarifications"). Word starts to spread of Little calling Stanfield out, smearing his standing in the streets. When Stanfield and his chief lieutenants are apprehended based on the illegal wiretap setup by Freamon and McNulty, Stanfield finally learns that his name, and reputation, have been undermined by Little ("Late Editions"):

STANFIELD: My name was on the street? When we bounce from this shit here, y'all going to go down on them corners and let the people know: Word did not get back to me. Let them know Stanfield step to any motherfucker -- Omar, Barksdale, whoever. My name is my name!

This uncharacteristic outburst reveals a deep insecurity within Stanfield's personality. His hypermasculine values that established him as the kingpin – winning, emotional control, dominance, self-reliance, pursuit of status – are revealed to be performative, as unveiled by Little's smear campaign on the street. This is cemented in Stanfield's final scene of the series ("-30-"), having returned to the corners he once ruled. Two dealers, mythologizing Little's death in extravagant ways, are unaware of who Stanfield is when he approaches, even when

he asks. After wrestling one who pulls a knife, they run off, leaving Stanfield alone on the street with no crew or empire. Little has the final word, and justice, of stripping Stanfield of his masculinity and legacy during his time as Baltimore's kingpin.

Conclusion

Both characters discussed in this essay demonstrate the complexity of masculinity in *The Wire*. They are affected by their respective institutions which produces specific routines and performative behavior. McNulty's anger at the neoliberal law enforcement structures fuels his efforts to prove his superiority. His risk-taking results in continuous self-destruction throughout the series that has consequences on others. Even though he strives for and values good police work, making the job the prime element in his life perpetuates a self-destructive routine. His philandering places him in the realm of stereotypical masculine behavior as well as the pursuit of status in which he always has to be right, especially to undermine his superiors. However, McNulty also contradicts these characteristics. He values his friendships for most of the series, though his behavior in the final season puts these in jeopardy. He cares about the cases he is assigned, even though it results in insubordination. His relationship with Beadie finally puts him on the path to stability. Changing his performativity directly impacts the way he polices. By reverting to the role of a beat officer, he enters into the world of direct community policing. When he succumbs to his worst impulses in the final season, he crosses a moral (and legal) line that finally prompts much self-realization about the type of "man" he has become. McNulty's epiphany about himself via his "confession" to Beadie at least forces him to become more reflective and selfless. There is hope for the character at the series' conclusion when he returns home rather than have another night of drinking with his ex-colleagues.

Stanfield, while seemingly a one-dimensional character, reveals further contradictions in masculinity. Stanfield swiftly dominates the entirety of Baltimore's drug trade by enacting extreme masculine, dominating traits in pursuit of totalitarian power. His determination to win by any means necessary is reflected in his use of violence and disregard for community (or drug trade) codes. However, this is fractured by Little who slowly destroys the reputation Stanfield has built during his tenure as drug kingpin. His name is what, effectively, he lives for. By the series' conclusion, Stanfield evades capture, but he is left without his organization, street corners, and even his reputation. In effect, Stanfield is only left with his fractured masculinity.

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