

Talking through *The Wire*: “A man’s gotta have a code”

Todd Fraley
East Carolina University

Ideas concerning racial identities help individuals navigate contemporary life, and static notions of identity are often grounded on racial bodies connected to fixed thoughts of Blackness and Whiteness. Media, serving as a site of contestation regarding the construction of these identities, can simultaneously support and disrupt a problematic racial order 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 and the potential to offer insight to social dilemmas, *The Wire* provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider the social and political relevance of TV to a racially fragmented viewing public existing in a changing media environment.

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. Because nearly every character revealed the intricacies of the human condition by playing with stereotypes, each episode of *The Wire* demanded reconsideration of assumptions about authentic racial identities.

Too often complex aspects of individuality are discarded for judgments based on perceptions tied to race. Omar's belief, "a man's gotta have a code", coupled with his distinction between players and citizens prompts a focus on individuality as opposed to socially imposed labels. Whether comparing Stringer Bell and Avon, McNulty and Daniels, Prez and Bunk, or Michael and Senator Davis, *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 8th grade corner boy raising his brother? Is Avon Barksdale's gangster lifestyle more authentic than Stringer Bell's educational aspirations? What are we to think as Cutty attempts to create a future for himself, while Daniels and McNulty continue to struggle with their pasts? Did racial considerations initially impact casting of Bunny or Freamon? TV can no longer rely on simple answers to these questions.

The Wire contests racial normatives, and it also refuses to manufacture simple solutions to complicated policy issues within the time frame of a single episode or season. Today, this approach to politics is all but absent in entertainment TV, but *The Wire's* narrative pays close attention to the details of daily life. Ultimately, the intersection of two supposedly distinct communities often defined by race is exposed and investigated. And 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. Mayor Carcetti wins the election using the same tactics as hustlers on the corner- points on the package, and Marlo rejects opportunities to network with the power players of Baltimore. On the other hand, Omar returns to avenge the death of a friend, and Kima rocks her adopted son to sleep using the tried and true

technique of numerous parents across the country. *Goodnight Moon, Goodnight Stars, Goodnight, po-pos, Goodnight fiends, Goodnight hoppers, Goodnight hustlers, Goodnight Scammers, Goodnight to everybody, Goodnight to one and all.*

The Wire highlights these complex and misunderstood circumstances, and places “other” America at center stage as privileged/default America stands right next to it examining the consequences of misguided and shortsighted “codes.” Throughout, struggles to articulate racial identities marked by nuance and similarity as opposed to difference are presented.