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'This is our city': Realism and the sentimentality of place in David Simon's *The Wire*

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon theories of aesthetic realism, this article argues that The Wire *develops a tension between the kind of representative typicality characteristic of realism and the exchangeability of labourers and goods in a capitalist system. By developing this tension,* The Wire *offers a nuanced critique of the ways in which capitalism renders individuals and geographical places as interchangeable placeholders, like pawns in a game of chess.* The Wire*'s use of realism retains the individualism of person and place, even as these figures represent something more than themselves in the fictional space of the show. I conclude by arguing that* The Wire*'s realism is mingled with an affective sentimentality associated with the idea of Baltimore.*

KEYWORDS

realism
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In the third season of *The Wire* (2004), Jimmy McNulty asks Theresa D'Agostino to go on an old-fashioned date after a series of late-night hook-ups. They are an odd pair: McNulty is a college dropout and renegade cop, D'Agostino a wealthy political strategist from an elite Baltimore neighbourhood now living in Washington, DC. When D'Agostino brings up the most recent presidential election, McNulty stumbles over the candidates' names – 'Bush and what's his name' – and admits that he failed to vote. He then offers a theory for his disengagement:

> Bush seemed way over his head, I know, but he wasn't going to win Maryland anyhow. Besides, these guys, it doesn't matter who you got. None of them has a clue what's really going on. I mean, where I'm working everyday, the only way these guys are going to find West Baltimore is if, I don't know, Air Force One crashes into Monroe Street on its way back to Andrews. It just never connects.
>
> ('Slapstick', 2004)

McNulty's refusal to participate in what he perceives to be the fiction of electoral representation implicitly contrasts it with the aesthetic realism offered by *The Wire*. The presidential candidates are ill equipped to represent the full electorate when they are so out of touch with the local everyday. Caroline Levine has argued that *The Wire*, even more so than other long-lived realist television dramas, formally operates on a series of replacements and subrogations: 'As soon as characters die, get fired, or go to jail, others replace them – in the police bureaucracy, the drug trade, and even the family' (2015: 140). McNulty partly confirms Levine's reading and extends this exchangeability even to the president of the United States. Yet he also partly complicates Levine by ascribing heightened specificity to the local. McNulty does not speak of Baltimore, but of Monroe Street, a name legible mainly to Baltimore viewers and that signifies the heart of West Baltimore. The irony here is that McNulty partially up-ends the representational norms of realism. Aesthetic realism de-emphasizes what theorist Georg Lukács calls 'world-historical figures' in favour of commonplace individuals (McKeon in Lukács 1920, 2000: 246). In his account of the realist novel, which also speaks to the conventions of serial television, historical actors become minor characters because of their unique specificity, whereas novelistic characters function as types that negotiate between individualism and a typicality that suggests the larger movement of society. In contrast, McNulty bases his critique of national politics in the interchangeability of 'world-historical figures', like the American president. McNulty's implicit account of political and aesthetic representation critiques the American political system because of its failure to link the individual to the larger social whole. McNulty faults 'these guys' for their inability not just to recognize Monroe Street but also to 'connect' Monroe Street to Andrews Air Force Base and to see that the crime and poverty of Monroe Street is endemic to American capitalism. For McNulty, realistic representation dwells not just in the knowledge of the local but the ability to see it as part of a larger network that forms a social totality. In this article, I draw upon theories of aesthetic realism to argue that *The Wire* distinguishes between realist typicality and other modes of substitution and exchangeability associated with capitalism.

This account both complicates and partly rejects recent accounts of *The Wire*'s relationship to the capitalist system it openly critiques. In his article, 'Way down in the hole' (2012), David Lerner has argued that David Simon treats Baltimore as an exchangeable site that can substitute for any other American city. For Lerner, Simon and *The Wire* are complicit in the very system they critique. Because Simon takes advantage of Hollywood tax credits, Lerner argues, 'the show itself is situated in an entrenched position within the political economy of Baltimore' (Lerner 2012: 214) and 'must also be challenged for its disingenuous attempts to assert some kind of critical distance' (Lerner 2012: 218). In this sense, then, *The Wire* participates in and replicates the same capitalist values it pretends to disown. Fredric Jameson has argued that the name 'Baltimore' does not matter in the world of *The Wire*: 'the regional is

always implicitly comparative' insofar as cities like Baltimore are pitted up against the small town or the suburb. In *The Wire*, 'Baltimore is the corners – it is the police headquarters, occasionally the courts and city hall – and this is why the very name of Baltimore is irrelevant (except for local patriotism and the TV viewers)' (Jameson 2010: 369). This article draws on theories of realism, including those expounded by Jameson himself, to argue for a more developed relationship to realist typicality in *The Wire*. In particular, I argue for a tension between the kind of representative typicality characteristic of realism and the exchangeability of labourers and goods in a capitalist system. By developing this tension, *The Wire* offers a nuanced critique of the ways in which capitalism renders individuals and geographical places as interchangeable placeholders, like pawns in a game of chess. *The Wire*'s use of realism retains the individualism of person and place, even as these figures represent something more than themselves in the fictional space of the show. I conclude by arguing that *The Wire's* realism is mingled with an affective sentimentality associated with the idea of Baltimore. The show holds onto a sentimental mode deeply tied to the local as a means to resist the hegemonic influence of global capitalism.

REALISM AND *THE WIRE*

Residents of New York and Los Angeles are used to seeing their cities on television and in the movies, their cities' uniqueness signified by lingering shots of familiar skylines. But Baltimore has become increasingly appealing to Hollywood not because it is Baltimore but because it can be rendered anonymous. For Baltimore to be of interest to a national and global market, its value dwells in its exchangeability with other places, its ability to look like and substitute for other cities. Sarah Matheson has called a similar phenomenon in Toronto the 'aesthetics of placelessness' (Matheson 2005: 2). She writes,

> the discourse of the 'world class', with its emphasis on the global flow of capital and the power of big business, offers a view of Toronto that looks above and beyond its borders. […] It is a perspective that appears to disconnect us from experiencing the city's streets and neighborhoods in the manner characteristic of pedestrian culture.
>
> (Matheson 2005: 128)

Indeed, Baltimore has played its southern neighbour, Washington, DC, in *The House of Cards* (2013–2015) and was played by Toronto in the film musical, *Hair Spray* (2007). *The Wire* gives viewers a depiction of Baltimore *as* Baltimore, but Lerner questions the very realism of *The Wire* and argues that its local authenticity does not offer a coherent city for the viewer to know. For Lerner, the accumulation of local detail may appear to offer local authenticity but actually alienates the viewer from the city and the city from itself: 'In this way these latter seasons depict Baltimore as an incoherent text; the accumulation of local specificities does not equate to global understanding' (Lerner 2012: 220). As a result, he claims that the 'juxtaposition of hyper-realistic detail' and unlikely narrative arcs, like the creation of a legalized drug zone called 'Hamsterdam', cannot be understood in terms of 'traditional realism' (Lerner 2012: 220).

Lerner mischaracterizes and simplifies what he calls 'traditional realism' when he understands *The Wire*'s use of local details as a means to alienate viewers and characters. Realism relies upon not just realistic details but

also a rendering of these details as new and strange for readers. However, in much of *Wire* criticism, accounts of *The Wire* reduce aesthetic realism to mimetic depictions of reality. Since its debut, *The Wire* has been commonly compared to Charles Dickens and other nineteenth-century realist novelists. For instance, Mark Bowden of *The Atlantic* understands *The Wire* in relationship to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853).

In light of the quickness with which viewers have drawn parallels between *The Wire* and nineteenth-century realism, I want to reflect more carefully on what this means for our understanding of the television show's realism. In *The Realistic Imagination* (1981), George Levine partly defines realism in terms of its 'efforts to make the ordinary significant' through a process of defamiliarizing the mundane and everyday (1981: 621). His example is Charles Dickens's sketch, 'The Parish', and its first line: 'How much is conveyed in those two short words – "The Parish!"' For the nineteenth-century reader, the parish would have been a commonplace institution associated with the 1834 Poor Law, which reduced the costs of supporting the poor by housing them in workhouses. However, in his sketch, Dickens does not merely 'copy' the parish but asks readers to re-examine an institution that they think they already know. Levine explains,

> The particular, under the pressure of intense and original seeing, gives back the intensities normally associated with larger scale, traditional forms. […] [B]y looking intensely at doorknobs, and walls, and old clothes, and cabmen, Dickens uses his *Sketches* to bring together the particular and the conventional, the ordinary and the extreme.
>
> (1981: 13)

Dickens's project is not simply mimetic but also relies upon a process of alienation that challenges readers to view the parish in a new way as a means to foster social critique.

The Wire's focus on Baltimore and its particularities functions in this tradition, but it differs from Dickens in the obvious but important sense that contemporary Baltimore is not nineteenth-century London. Dickens's realism relies upon readers' familiarity with London and its mundane everyday. *The Wire*, however, deals with a second-tier city, one that once had a promising future but now has been passed by in favour of other cities, like New York or Washington, DC. For many viewers, *The Wire* is their first encounter with Baltimore, which means that the show is representing a commonplace that is unfamiliar for much of its viewing audience. Here I want to suggest that *The Wire*'s realism particularly speaks to viewers who think they are familiar with Baltimore and asks them to re-examine Baltimore in a way that complicates and fills out their knowledge of the city. Although Lerner may feel alienated from the geography of the real city, those familiar with Baltimore experience this alienation in a way that reworks their relationship to the real city outside their doors. It invites them to see their own everyday experience within the framework of a larger city.

The show uses specific localities to reference a larger sense of connection between parts of the whole, providing spatial markers and situating most action in real locations. This specificity is not simply for the appearance of reality (as Lerner seems to suggest) but also speaks to a viewer's mental map of lived space and traces fictional Baltimore onto the real city. As Hua Hsu argues, '*The Wire* is an attempt to recover these "geographies of exclusion"

by remapping Baltimore along unacknowledged, unofficial circuits' (2010: 513). One such example occurs during the third season with the depiction of Stringer Bell's drug front, Copy Cat Copies. The special investigation unit sets up a camera just outside of Stringer Bell's copy business, but the viewing audience initially has no sense of its location in the city. We see the business mostly through the eye of the surveillance camera, isolated from its urban context. However, in the second to last episode, Stringer walks away from Copy Cat Copies and the camera pans out. We see a building labelled Broadway Market in the background. Suddenly, anyone with even a superficial knowledge of the city realizes that this drug front is located in one of the wealthiest and trendiest neighbourhoods in Baltimore: Fells Point. This visual cue changes the meaning of Stringer Bell's business: He is no longer in West Baltimore but in south-eastern Baltimore. The juxtaposition highlights the interconnections within the city, the extent to which *The Wire* is not just about West Baltimore but also about the city as a whole. This sign challenges viewers' notions of a city fully divided by race and income levels and demonstrates the implications of the West Baltimore drug trade for the larger city.

Indeed, scholars and journalists have touted *The Wire*'s ability to represent more fully the problems of Baltimore than journalism or even ethnography can. In her article, 'Ethnographic imaginary: The genesis and genius of *The Wire*' (2011), Linda Williams attributes David Simon's move from journalism to fictional television as a fulfilment of his 'ethnographic imaginary': 'The vivid and concrete interlocking stories are what fiction affords, what ethnography aspires to, and what newspaper journalism can only rarely achieve' (Williams 2011: 215). She then traces the origins of *The Wire* in Simon's early reporting, finding traces of *The Wire*'s recurring character Reginald 'Bubbles' Cousins, a heroin addict and valuable informant for the police. For Williams, Bubbles plays the role of a Dickensian underclass character, like Jo in *Bleak House*, who connects the different worlds of fictional Baltimore. As a result, *The Wire* lays claim to a greater level of truth because its fictionality enables it to go beyond a single editorial voice, a single subjectivity, and convey more through juxtaposition. This is similar to the kind of truth claims offered by the nineteenth-century realist novel. George Eliot characterized *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) as a web, and Charles Dickens wrote of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865), 'the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom' (Dickens 2004: 798). In this sense, *The Wire* shifts between detached and situated perspectives as a means to offer a more contextualized vision of the city.

I think an account of *The Wire* needs to distinguish between the typicality developed by realism and market-oriented substitution and exchangeability. Matheson's 'aesthetics of placelessness' diverges from the category of the 'typical' essential to aesthetic realism. As discussed earlier in this article, realism such as the kind celebrated by Lukács relies upon 'typical characters' that 'concentrate within themselves the prime historical determinants of an age' (Shaw 1999: 12). This understanding of typicality differs from the contemporary treatment of Baltimore as an exchangeable site in the world marketplace. Caroline Levine has argued that *The Wire* formally relies upon a series of substitutions and replacements as a means to explore the effect of modern capitalism on individual integrity, demonstrating how a drug-dealing middleman like Bodie Broadus easily replaces D'Angelo Barksdale on the corner, like pawns in the game of chess, an actual metaphor used by D'Angelo in *The Wire*'s first season to teach his mentees Bodie and Wallace their position in the Barksdale

drug empire. In this sense, the capitalist logic of the drug trade and other large systems treats lower-level actors as interchangeable figures. As Paul Allen Anderson has argued, D'Angelo 'encourages Wallace and Bodie to recognize themselves as pawns on a chessboard and also to imagine the perspective of the unnamed player who uses them and the other pieces on the game against another play'. Anderson then extends his discussion to the 'alien' impersonal social power of capitalism (Anderson 2010: 381). He adds,

> Transcending any given king, this independent power keeps the game in play with a fresh supply of laborers and managers to play the roles of kings, pawns, and others. The rare pawn who rises to become a queen underscores an ideology of equal opportunity among those with minimal social power.
>
> (Anderson 2010: 382)

Anderson's account shows how deeply the individual characters have come to envision their self-worth in capitalist terms. However, *The Wire*'s realism responds to capitalist exchangeability through realist typicality; both characters are 'typical' in the sense that they suggest something more than themselves but are also not simply subject to substitution. Lukács argues that the novel imagines human character as a complex amalgam of the oscillations between the individual and the categorical or typical. Thus, what would be tautology in drama is essential in the novel's treatment and development of the typical. He writes,

> The relation of the uniquely individual to the typical is treated in a slacker, looser and more complex fashion in the novel. While the dramatic character must be directly and immediately typical, without of course losing his individuality, the typical quality of a character in a novel is very often only a tendency which asserts itself gradually, which emerges to the surface only by degrees out of the whole, out of the complex interaction of human beings, human relations, institutions, things, etc.
>
> (Lukács 2000: 237)

For Lukács, traditional drama requires a character's typicality to be more immediate and present because of its compressed form, whereas the novel allows for a more repetitious, capacious and gradual development of a character's larger significance. Although *The Wire* is television, its form functions less like Lukács's drama and more like the novel. In works like *Our Mutual Friend*, *Middlemarch* and *The Wire*, a character's importance emerges gradually in relationship to a larger social network.

The Wire's realist development of typicality becomes notable in its contrast to the form of the newspaper in the fifth season. The television show allows characters to represent something more through a gradual examination of their relationship to larger social forces. In contrast, the *Baltimore Sun* overlooks the importance of what Lukács calls the 'complex interaction of human beings, human relations, institutions, things, etc.', by favouring stories that can have meaning independent of any social and local context. Indeed, *The Wire* gradually develops characters across the sprawling mass of its five seasons and thereby cultivates 'an intimacy between the audience and the characters on screen, particularly when they are stretched out across seasons. The relationship is affirmed each time we recognize a scene or a character as

an echo of something that has already happened' (Hsu 2010: 522). For Hsu, this connection emerges precisely through repetition.

BALTIMORE AND ITS NEWSPAPER

The Wire particularly develops its relationship to realism in the fifth season, which features the decline of local print journalism. In this season, the representational questions previously latent in the show become paramount, as *The Wire* self-reflexively considers its role in depicting social reality. As Leigh Clare La Berge has argued, 'In season 5, realism is transformed from a mode into an object as Simon and Burns turn their attention to the production of realism itself in its serial form' (2010: 548). By setting up the *Baltimore Sun* as its foil, *The Wire* tells us a lot about its imagined relationship to real Baltimore. Its depiction of the *Sun* conveys nostalgia for an imagined journalistic past that functioned independently of financial interests and offered a communal linkage between readers. In contrast, the contemporary *Sun* is governed by the financial needs and national outlook of the Tribune Company, a Chicago-based organization. Through this tension between an imagined past and present *Sun*, *The Wire* theorizes its own relationship to Baltimore and its community. The show portrays the imagined golden age of the *Sun* in a way reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's account of the 'imagined community', formed partially through the shared morning ceremony of newspaper reading (Anderson 1983, 2006: 35). In Anderson's account, the newspaper reader knows that countless others are simultaneously reading the same newspaper and thereby derives a sense of membership in a larger community. This relationship to the newspaper has been lost in *The Wire*, but it is gestured to nostalgically as a practice of the past.

This becomes evident when *Baltimore Sun* reporter Roger Twigg and city editor Gus Haynes go for a drink after Twigg is forced to accept a buyout. Gus sentimentally recalls why he originally entered the newspaper business, and he describes the newspaper in the Andersonian ceremony of daily readership. He remembers his father's religious reading of the *Sun* every morning before he went to work; no one could interrupt his father during that daily ceremony. Gus explains, 'I remember watching him, thinking, what the *hell* is so important about that damn paper? I want to be a part of *that*. I want to be a newspaperman' ('Not for Attribution' 2008). In his telling, Gus explicitly reminds Twigg that his father worked at Armscorp, an arms manufacturer in Baltimore, emphasizing his family's rootedness in the city. Gus originates in Baltimore, not in Philadelphia or Kansas City like his colleagues. This story situates Gus within an idea of Baltimore across time, what Anderson calls 'a single community moving steadily down (or up) history' (Anderson 2006: 26). The difference is that, for Gus, the community constructed is not just America but also Baltimore. The *Sun* is not *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, but a newspaper targeted at a local, rooted readership.

In contrast, the fifth season depicts a newspaper increasingly under national and global demands and unable to meet the needs of its local readership. The depiction also emphasizes the constructedness of news and the extent to which it is shaped by both external pressures and the demands of a daily press. As Niklas Luhmann has argued, the idea of daily news is a paradoxical idea. He writes, 'If it is the idea of surprise, of something new, interesting and newsworthy which we associate with news, then it would seem much more sensible not to report it in the same format every day, but to wait

for something to happen and then to publicize it' (Luhmann 2000: 25). This pressure to create newsworthy events is magnified with the changing profile of the *Sun*. Reporters like Gus Haynes, Alma Gutierrez and Roger Twigg remain focused on local news that will be of interest predominantly to those within Baltimore. Twigg has a network of informants throughout the city and is able to contextualize and situate any event within the diverse and complicated workings of Baltimore politics. Gus and Twigg see events within the larger city and emphasize an understanding of their contexts and nuances. In contrast, executive editor James Whiting and managing editor Thomas Klebanow come from Philadelphia and represent the financial interests of the Tribune Company; reporter Scott Templeton has travelled across the country, moving up the newspaper hierarchy, and he even wears his Kansas City shirt when interviewing the homeless in Baltimore. For these figures, dislocated from regional feeling and context, news is no longer selected based on a local readership but is targeted towards the Pulitzer Prize committee and to *The Washington Post* – to places beyond Baltimore. This kind of news requires the effacement of Baltimore and the emphasis on stories that will appeal to readers in a national marketplace.

Editors Whiting and Klebanow are more interested in stories that would appeal to a national market than in plumbing the realism and social efficacy of their reporters' work. This season depicts this approach as a result of a market-driven theory of journalism, and it positions Gus, Twigg and Alma as remnants of an older system that privileges context and investigation. This contrast suggests the newspaper's increasing role as a node in a larger national, global and journalistic network, reflective of Baltimore's peripheral position in relationship to New York or Washington, DC. Indeed, Scott Templeton complains that Baltimore is a bad news town, and Alma quietly disagrees. The difference between Templeton and Alma is their sense of what news means. Templeton means that Baltimore does not yield stories of national profile that would make good 'clips' when he applies to *The Washington Post*. He imagines the city as a series of fragmented clips that stand on their own.

This becomes particularly evident in an early disagreement between Gus, Templeton and Klebanow about how to approach their coverage of the Baltimore city school system. Gus wants a systemic approach that takes into account not only the school system but also other hardships encountered by Baltimore students, proposing something that sounds a lot like the fourth season of *The Wire*, which focused on the city schools. Klebanow, however, insists, 'We want to depict the Dickensian lives of city children and then show clearly and concisely where the school system has failed them' ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008).

> Gus: But then we're just as irrelevant to these kids as the schools are. It's like you're up on a corner of a roof and you're showing some people how a couple of shingles came loose and meanwhile a hurricane wrecked the rest of the damn house.
> Scott: You don't need a lot of context to examine what goes on in one classroom.
> Gus: I think you need a lot of context to seriously examine anything.
> ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008)

The editor sides with Templeton: 'We need to limit the scope, not get bogged down in details. […] I want to look at the tangible, where the problem and

solution can be measured clearly. […] What is this series about in a sentence? What's the budget line?' ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008). This exchange reflects the self-reflexivity characteristic of the entire fifth season, as Gus and Klebanow argue about what constitutes socially responsible practices of realist representation. Gus imagines the story capaciously allowing for the formlessness of the school systems' reality, whereas Klebanow wants to force the school system into the preconceived form of the budget line. Klebanow desires a clearly defined angle that does not require the readership to develop contextualized knowledge. The irony is, of course, that Klebanow is the one who references Dickens and reminds the viewer of the backdrop of nineteenth-century realism. For Klebanow, Dickens invokes a sentimental treatment of impoverished children; he envisions cinematic images of Dickensian orphans like *Oliver Twist*. And yet Gus's approach to representation more closely resembles Dickens's novels, particularly his late works with which *The Wire* is often compared. Klebanow's position emerges from a misreading not only of the city school system but also of Dickens, as he overlooks the social network in which Dickens's suffering children are placed. This misreading offers us insight into Klebanow's approach to representation. He imagines stories read out of their regional context and out of the pages of the *Sun*, pitched as a single story isolated from its original placement and forced to the misrepresentative form of the budget line.

The central plot of Season Five is McNulty's fictional serial killer, whom he invents to receive more funding for his real project to catch drug lord Marlo Stanfield as a result of the financial realities of the police department. The irony is, of course, that Marlo is a serial killer, but he is not the kind of serial killer that attracts the attention of the contemporary media. McNulty's effort to obtain the *Sun*'s coverage draws attention to what counts as news in a world no longer characterized by the Andersonian newspaper ceremony. In the process of appealing to the *Sun*, McNulty slowly learns over time what works as a budget line. Initially, he gives Alma very little information – simply that there are a series of homeless killings. However, his stories are continually buried within the newspaper, showing that the homeless simply do not count as news. It is not until Scott Templeton presses further that McNulty finds the proper formula. He tells them that the bodies had teeth marks, suggesting that the killer had a sexual motive. McNulty's serial killer story fits within a formula irrespective to locality and place, one that resembles television shows like *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–2015) or *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2015). As McNulty says, 'There's a serial killer in Baltimore. He preys on the weakest among us. He needs to be caught' ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008). His formulaic description underlines the constructedness of the plot line and imitates the kind of simplistic appeal required by Klebanow's measurement of value: the budget line. In her excellent analysis of the fifth season, Leigh Claire La Berge argues that the serial killer plot shows that representation and realism itself is for sale. She distinguishes between the genres associated with two kinds of killing: violence committed in the interest of accumulation and capitalism produces realism, whereas violence committed in the act of gratification or desire produces melodrama. The newspaper is not interested when the deaths result from social inequality and injustice, but as soon as the murder results from sexual gratification it interests the top editors. *The Wire* aligns the *Sun* with entertainment like *SVU*. However, I see the pressures placed on McNulty emanating not from the demands of realism but from a journalism that values the kind of story that can be summarized in one sentence.

At this point, the newspaper abandons its school story because Klebanow says, 'I don't see the school project yielding the same kind of impact as our attention to homelessness can' ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008). Klebanow here measures impact not by the newspaper's potential to effect social change but by its sensational appeal to a broader readership. He is motivated by the marketplace, not by an attention to realist representation, and he adds that they should focus on the nature of homelessness itself. This removes homelessness from the local and structural qualities that create it and instead focuses on the general condition of homelessness. Indeed, Gus critiques what comes out of Scott's reporting: 'It sounds like he's been staying with the homeless for weeks. … The rest of the stuff he's acting like he's taking his life into his hands. … This is our fucking city, this ain't Beirut' ('Unconfirmed Reports' 2008). On one level, Gus is domesticating the local and highlighting the exaggeration of the dangers under Interstate 83, the elevated highway under which Baltimore homeless seek shelter. Indeed, he identifies the melodramatic quality of Templeton's reporting, criticizing its 'purple passages'. This dramatic coverage might be appropriate to a distant city in turmoil but not right for the mundane hardship of homeless life in Baltimore. He is also making a claim about the differences between local and international news. His 'our' personalizes Baltimore but also excludes people like Templeton, Klebanow, and by extension the national viewership of *The Wire*. It requires nearness and intimacy between the representer and the city.

A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

Some critics have argued that *The Wire* unwittingly buys into the framework of a global capitalism that renders spaces and people exchangeable. What I want to suggest is that the realism of *The Wire* interrogates and breaks down these ideas and problematizes the idea of a global network by its focus on Baltimore. Theorists Frederic Jameson and Alex Woloch have argued that novelistic realism brings minor characters to the forefront, and in *The Wire's* television realism we see the minor city Baltimore become a central character and a holding place for a host of minor characters. Embedded within critiques of the global capitalist system, *The Wire* offers counteracting moments of sentimental attachment to the local that is reflective of the kind of attachment yielded to novelistic characters. In particular, *The Wire* uses the sentimental mode as a means to counteract the increasing logic of global capitalism and the flow of money.

In an early attempt to theorize realism, nineteenth-century novelist George Eliot associates aesthetic realism with the development of a reader's affective relationship to other people. She argues for the novel's representation of flawed characters as a means to cultivate readers' ability to feel for and sympathize with people in everyday life. In doing so, she imagines the affective role that realist fiction can play in our lived experience. Instead of encouraging readers to sympathize with and admire perfection, the representation of flawed characters can enhance readers' ability to feel for real people outside the pages of fiction. She writes,

> There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men,

> especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy.
>
> (Eliot 1859, 2008: 197)

Eliot's aesthetic realism, and the feeling it engenders, allows for a more sympathetic relationship to places and people that are more immediate and familiar.

The Wire functions in this tradition by cultivating viewers' sympathy for highly flawed characters and the flawed city of Baltimore itself. In the context of nineteenth-century artistic practice, Eliot's account of realism responds to the common practice of representing people as they should be rather than as they are. In contrast, *The Wire* offers the sentimental mode as a means of counteracting hegemonic views of society filtered through a capitalist ideology that treats capitalism as a kind morality. Through encouraging viewers to feel for this deeply flawed city, *The Wire* challenges viewers to repopulate the city with new meanings divergent from capitalist logic.

In doing so, *The Wire* reflects on the extent that financial and capitalist interests have shaped the city and offers a competing way of envisioning value in Baltimore. On one level, the television show reflects geographer David Harvey's accounts of economic redevelopment in Baltimore. In his essay, 'A view from Federal Hill' (1991), Harvey argues that the Baltimore skyline depicts the power of financial interests in shaping the city. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Baltimore transformed from an industrial city into a 'tourist mecca' in which it became dominated by corporations and business interests outside democratic control; sites of downtown redevelopment, such as the Charles Center and the Inner Harbor, only mask the city's problems. Harvey writes, 'the Inner Harbor may function simply as a harbor – a transaction point for money flowing from and to the rest of the world' (1991: 240). These development efforts may have improved the image of the city, but they offer only a sophisticated mask, a spectacle, behind which we find a city very different. Harvey's point is complicated and reiterated in several scenes in *The Wire*, but this show offers a countervailing sentimental attachment to the spaces of Baltimore.

The opening of the third season depicts the destruction of the Franklin Terrace Towers, based on the real Lexington Terrace, high-rise low-income public housing torn down and replaced by low- and moderate-priced housing in downtown Baltimore. The scene juxtaposes the Mayor's public ceremony against a conversation between drug dealers Bodie and Malik 'Poot' Carr about what the Towers' destruction means for them. Poot expresses a sentimental connection to the site: 'I'm kinda sad. Them towers be home to me. […] I mean I seen some shit happened up in those towers that still make me smile' ('Time after time' 2004). Poot's expression of fondness is then followed by the mayor's public pronouncement that the towers 'sadly came to represent some of this city's most entrenched problems'. For the mayor, the towers are in tension with the 'new Baltimore' image he seeks to promote, suggestive of Harvey's critique of downtown reform as mere spectacle. Tearing them down is a symbolic and representative act that is being put forward as though it is a real solution. He treats representation as simply a surface image with little relationship to the real. The camera turns back to Poot, who adds, 'I'm talking about people, memories and

shit. […] I caught my first pussy up in there' ('Time after time' 2004). Poot offers a competing vision of the Towers in their representation of his own everyday. Bodie, however, thinks in terms similar to the mayor: he mocks Poot's personal fondness for the towers and says a plaque should be set up commemorating Poot's sexual experience and attracting tourists: 'We could be taking pictures and shit, souvenirs of your dick'. Poot commemorates the Towers because of his own private experience; Bodie mocks this sentiment by situating it in a capitalist framework of values. This scene undermines the mayor's revitalizing message, offering a contradictory reading of the 'new Baltimore'. The end of the scene suggests the emptiness of the mayor's promises: as the towers are brought down, the dust from the explosion spreads throughout the city and chokes the lungs of the very people celebrating their collapse. The ceremony is a symbolic victory, but the spreading dust cloud suggests that the removal of the Towers is only a surface solution. And yet this scene is not entirely a pessimistic one: Poot's sentimental attachment to the towers is far more important than Bodie realizes. It sets up sentimental attachment as a value that counteracts and works against a globalizing and homogenizing power. Poot's fondness for the Towers comes from its representation of something beyond the capitalist system that structures both institutions and drug dealing in Baltimore.

In the fifth season, Mayor Tommy Carcetti participates in an uncanny repetition of this scene, when he celebrates a new development revitalizing a waterfront area. With the decayed ports in the background, Mayor Carcetti celebrates New Westport as part of a series of urban improvements beginning with Charles Center, followed by Harborplace and then Inner Harbor East. Carcetti even frames it in terms of 'claiming' new territory, as he revitalizes 'another great waterfront of our city' ('The Dickensian Aspect' 2008). Carcetti's position here reminds us of Harvey's arguments about Charles Center and the Inner Harbor, setting up the port as merely another 'transaction point' in the global marketplace, allowing money to flow in and out to the rest of the world. In the midst of the ceremony, Nick Sobotka, a dockworker from the second season, interrupts the ribbon-cutting ceremony and shouts, 'Fuck you for tearing down the port of Baltimore and selling it to some yuppie asshole from Washington' ('The Dickensian Aspect' 2008). This scene emphasizes the effacement of local geography by outside investment and the loss of a sense of local sentiment as the waterfront in Baltimore increasingly resembles every other waterfront. The port is no longer the 'port of Baltimore' but another exchangeable site in a global network. Nick and Poot alike assert the value of locally grounded sentiment as a bulwark against mindless pursuit of progress, and the realist form of *The Wire* allows their voices to have some resonance. However pervasive the influence of global capitalism in *The Wire*, it still holds onto values that escape capitalism's logic. In the final season, many characters insist their motives are not about the money, including McNulty, Omar and Bubbles. Whereas most forms of representation seem to be for sale, Bubbles refuses the offer of money for his interview with the *Sun*. As Bubbles says to reporter Mike Fletcher, 'It's not about that. Just write it like it feels' ('Took' 2008).

Fredric Jameson has recently argued that novelistic realism is only opposed to forms like romance and melodrama 'because it carries it within itself and must somehow dissolve it in order to become its antithesis' (Jameson 2013: 139). He calls the realist novel an 'omnibus' form because it is constructed from heterogeneous materials and its serial form seeks to break up the continuity

of narrative. Realism contains the will towards multiple impulses and a variety of narrative paradigms. In this tradition, I see in *The Wire* a trace of sentimentality – which is not at odds with realism but rather enhances the emotional bond between reader/viewer and text/television drama – particularly yoked to a sense of place. According to Kristin J. Jacobson, *The Wire* operates in a peculiarly American tradition of sentimentality that can be traced back to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). I also want to suggest that *The Wire*'s sentimentality speaks to those familiar with the city and encourages them to see beyond the physical and imagined boundaries of their location in that city. Shirley Samuels has argued about sentimentality that it 'appears not so much a genre as an operation or a set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification to effect connections across gender, race, and class boundaries' (Samuels 1992: 6). Joanne Dobson too has suggested that the form is premised on an 'ethos that celebrates human connection' (Dobson 1997: 267). Rather than focusing exclusively on the individual and their adaptation to society, the sentimental mode imagines the 'self-in-relation' – 'family (not necessarily in the conventional biological sense), intimacy, community, and social responsibility are its primary relational modes' (Dobson 1997: 267). As such, sentimental fiction generally focuses not on the loss of individuality but on threats to affective bonds and functions in ways consistent with Eliot's and Lukács's accounts of realism.

In the scenes above, both Nick Sobotka and Poot frame their objections in terms of their affective bonds to the unique space of Baltimore. Far from being alienated by the local details, as Lerner suggests, they perceive these locations as deeply entwined with their own lived experience. Indeed, the entire television series ends on this sentimental note with McNulty's return to Baltimore on Interstate 95. Lerner has argued that, in this final scene, McNulty is leaving Baltimore because he has been forced into an early retirement, a departure that signifies *The Wire*'s underlying 'philosophy of alienation' (Matheson 2005: 222). But Lerner misapprehends this scene: McNulty is not leaving Baltimore but returning from Richmond, Virginia, after retrieving Larry, the homeless man whose image he used to craft a story around the fictional serial killer. During the drive back, McNulty stops his car on the side of the highway and gets out to look at the Baltimore skyline. The camera offers a lingering close-up of McNulty's face, followed by a montage that blends both real and fictional Baltimore. It begins with a glimpse into the future for many *Wire* characters, then moves on to images of the physical city itself and wraps up with an accelerated montage of anonymous faces that implicitly represent the real city of Baltimore because they are not characters in the fictional space of *The Wire*. The perspective in this final scene is interesting; the close-up of McNulty's face suggests we are gaining access to his own interiority, but the images move across time and space in a way that would not be accessible to an individual perspective. The montage itself plays with perspective as well, for we shift from localized images of the corner to Bubbles gaining the right to sit at his sister's dinner table, to the view from a helicopter. McNulty and the viewer do not see what David Harvey sees when they look at the Baltimore skyline: in this final montage, the city's financial interests are juxtaposed against a sense of connectedness and belonging. The show's final words are McNulty's: 'Larry, let's go home' ('-30-' 2008). Although nineteenth-century sentimentality is usually associated with the domestic, here the domestic is expanded to the city as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that *The Wire* sees a trace of hope in the sentimental value of the local, a form of affective attachment that is not incommensurate with aesthetic realism. Just as Eliot imagines novelistic realism to cultivate feeling for others in everyday life, *The Wire* demonstrates the social connectedness of parts to the whole of Baltimore. By way of conclusion, I want to reflect on this strain of sentimentality reflected more generally in the online response to the Baltimore 'uprising' triggered by Freddie Gray's death. After being arrested on 12 April 2015, for reasons still unclear, Gray fell into a coma from injuries incurred during the arrest and died on 19 April (Sherman, 19 April 2015). His questionable death as a result of 'rough riding' practices in inner-city America caused widespread protests and even some riots both in Baltimore and across the United States.[1] Local protests began on 18 April outside the western district police station while Gray was still in a coma (Fenton, 18 April 2015), followed by mass protests organized on 25 April in downtown Baltimore and clashes between protesters and police in northern Baltimore on 27 April (Stolberg, 27 April 2015).[2] Surrounding the public response to media images of riots and protests, sentimental attachments to Baltimore proliferated on Twitter, Facebook and more mainstream media. Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has sought to harness this local sentimentality in the OneBaltimore campaign, which 'will focus on the immediate, short-term needs of those communities affected by our recent unrest and violence, and seek to promote collaboration to focus on the systemic problems our city has faced for decades'. This campaign draws upon the hashtag #onebaltimore used by netizens expressing their sentimental attachment to the city. However, critics have accused the campaign of distracting the public from the real and divisive issues endemic in Baltimore. In his article, 'Burning in the melting pot: Debunking the illusions of #oneBaltimore' (2015), Dayvon Love, co-founder of Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle and member of the Baltimore United Coalition, argues that the campaign is a deflection: 'the idea of bringing people together is a convenient way to avoid the question of power'. Love sees Rawlings-Blake and her OneBaltimore initiative as part of larger systemic problems that substantiate racial and urban inequality. Love's critique holds Rawlings-Blake responsible for eschewing a realist representation of the city's problems in her desire to promote a certain image of Baltimore.

Rawlings-Blake's campaign reminds us that a sentimental attachment to the local is not inherently conducive to social change. In the celebration of One Baltimore in the face of what is clearly *not* one Baltimore, Rawlings-Blake and similar sentimentally-based claims undermine the real and divergent experiences that residents only a mile apart in Baltimore undergo. Substantive change becomes less likely when Twitter and other modes of social media sentimentally celebrate a 'One Baltimore' that does not reflect reality. The campaign parallels Harvey's accounts of Baltimore economic redevelopment, in which public perceptions of Baltimore are prioritized over substantive reform.

In contrast, a Facebook photography project called The Uncensored City captures the yoking of realism and sentimentality that I see in *The Wire*'s treatment of Baltimore. The Uncensored City describes its project in terms of a realism that works through juxtaposition: 'My photography attempts to document the real lives of real people living outside the reality of many of us' (2015). Many of the photographs rely upon the everyday quality of Baltimore poverty, framing scenes of Baltimore that are simultaneously familiar and alienating for

1. A 'rough ride' is an 'unsanctioned technique' in which police vans are driven roughly to cause injury to handcuffed and unbuckled detainees (Donovan, 23 April 2015).

2. On 27 April, residents, students and police clashed in northern Baltimore at Mondawmin Mall in northern Baltimore. Police confronted the crowd in riot gear and shields, and members of the crowd threw bottles and rocks at the officers and also looted a CVS drugstore. As a result of the violence, Maryland Governor Larry Hogen declared a state of emergency and called in the National Guard. Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake also instituted a curfew requiring all Baltimore residents to be off the streets between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. (Stolberg, 27 April 2015). According to reports from the *Sun*, the riots resulted from rumours on social media that there would be a 'purge', a reference to a 2013 film in which crime is made legal for one night. These rumours called for Baltimore students to gather at Mondawmin Mall at 3 p.m. and then move towards downtown Baltimore. Some witnesses, however, have argued that the police created the situation by shutting down the subway stop at Mondawmin Mall and forcing students to disembark from the buses taking them home. The police blockaded roads near the mall and the local high school and corralled students in the area. According to witnesses of the scene, many students were stranded in the area and had no way to go home (Brodey and McLaughlin, 28 April 2015).

middle-class viewers. For instance, a Facebook post from 4 May features two photographs taken at North and Fulton Avenues: the first one features storefront windows broken during the Freddie Gray uprising, and the second depicts the same windows five days later, now boarded up and fronted by a snowball stand, a Baltimore summer tradition. The caption reads: 'In #Baltimore, we can turn anything into a snowball stand' (The Uncensored City, 4 May 2015). Another pair of photographs shows two scenes of summer cookouts, one in the wealthy Guilford Park, Sherwood Gardens, and the other in front of a boarded up North Avenue rowhouse just 3.9 miles away. Both of these images highlight the ways in which realism works to alienate familiar scenes as a means to make us see afresh. This photographic juxtaposition shows that a view restricted to Guilford is not a fully representative depiction of the city.

One of the most shared images in the aftermath of the Baltimore uprising features a mural outside John Eager Howard Elementary School in Reservoir Hill. Although The Uncensored City posted its photograph of the mural on 28 April, there were various other renditions shared on social media as well. The mural features a basic rendering of the Baltimore city skyline under the words 'This city needs a hug' (The Uncensored City, 28 April 2015). In conversation with Harvey's financial and McNulty's affective Baltimore skyline, this mural reimagines the city skyline as demarcated not by the Transamerica Tower or the Bank of America building, but by a modest series of indistinguishable black buildings set apart by a church and its cross. Its representation is meant to elicit a sentimental response in the viewer in imagining our affective relationship to the city as a physical hug. Extending the kind of sentimental reworking that I see in *The Wire*, this mural remakes the space of the city in terms of what is meaningful to the artists' lived experience and is independent of any official discourse advocated by the mayor or other major institutions. Its popularity online during the aftermath of the Freddie Gray uprising suggests the potential of the kind of realist, affective relationship to the city cultivated through *The Wire*.

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