European Journal of American Culture
Volume 34 Number 3
 doi: 10.1386/ejac.34.3.161_1

IVAN STACY
Hong Kong Baptist University

What sort of novel is *The Wire*? Voice, dialogue and protest

ABSTRACT

This article responds to the numerous comparisons between The Wire *and realist or naturalist novels. It argues that* The Wire's *mimetic qualities depict many of the problems facing Baltimore and, by extension, neo-liberal America. However, it argues that the show does not just articulate complaints, but also proposes solutions, and that these solutions can be identified through two other concepts associated with the novel: polyphony and minor literature. The article uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to examine that way that different voices compete and interact in the series, but notes that, where the relationship between discourses remains conflictual, long-lasting or fundamental change remains unlikely. The article suggests that where more significant change does take place is through the creation of the collective voices associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of minor literature.*

KEYWORDS

voice
protest
dialogue
The Wire
polyphony
minor literature

1. INTRODUCTION

In Season 3 of *The Wire*, Major Howard Colvin announces the de facto decriminalization of drugs to his at-yet unwitting charges by holding up a brown paper bag and describing it as a 'great moment of civic compromise' ('All Due

Respect' 2004). But who actually speaks here? Do we take the line at face value, as the voice of a frustrated Colvin, making one last desperate throw of the dice to save his district? Is the character Colvin intended to represent a compound of the insights acquired by David Simon, Ed Burns and other contributors to *The Wire* over the years in Baltimore and in other American inner cities? Is it the distillation of a more nebulous 'street wisdom'? Or is it the actor Robert Wisdom acting as a mouthpiece for Simon's editorializing?

These questions echo those asked by Roland Barthes (1977: 142) of Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830), and which he states are impossible to answer because 'writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost'.[1]

I begin with these questions because *The Wire* is a voice of protest which decries the numerous problems with neo-liberal, post-industrial America. David Simon (2004: 8) has described it as an 'angry show', indicating his motivation in creating the series. He also provided some insight into his views on the type of action required to effect change when he advocated 'non-violent, mass civil disobedience' as a response to the Freddie Gray riots (Simon 2015).

Yet if Simon's stance on direct action is clear enough from this quotation, how *The Wire* functions as a form of protest is a more complex question. Bathes' comments indicate the difficulty of identifying the voice of a text, and raise the question of what voice it is that we hear when we watch *The Wire*. The series has been accused of being dystopian (see, e.g., Dreier and Atlas 2015), showing only the negative aspects of Baltimore, and offering no solutions to the problems shown. Yet if the show's realism depicts Baltimore's problems, it is in the related notions of polyphony and dialogue (polyphony being the presence of multiple voices in a text, dialogue their interaction) that positive potential exists. In this article, I argue that David Simon's call to collective action is mirrored in *The Wire*'s polyphonic nature: a multitude of voices from various backgrounds are brought into contact with each other, and the resulting conflicts and combinations drive this extraordinarily expansive drama. Where the relationship between discourses remains conflictual, though, long-lasting or meaningful change is unlikely. It is only when the contact between discourses is of a more collaborative nature, causing those who employ these discourses to reflect and adjust their own values, that the potential for deep-seated and positive change arises.

The Wire is not, of course, a novel, and as a television serial it possesses distinct qualities that differentiate it from the written word, and which I address in the final section of this article. Without equating the series to a novel, I do see literary approaches as a valuable means of analysing *The Wire*, particularly in identifying how dialogue enables the show to protest against the neo-liberal status quo without resorting to blunt editorializing. *The Wire* expresses its dissatisfaction with early twenty-first century America through its realism, and through the mimetic representation of Baltimore's dysfunctional systems and institutions. For this reason, realist and naturalist novels are a frequent point of reference in discussions of *The Wire*'s scope and attention to detail.[2] There is more to realism than mimesis, though, and there is more to the novel than realism, and in this article I use the concepts of polyphony and minor literature to identify the way in which *The Wire* suggests that positive change can be achieved.

Sustained discussions of *The Wire*'s realism are provided by Leigh Claire La Berge (2010) and Fredric Jameson (2010), particularly in terms of the way in

1. The full opening reads as follows:

   > In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. (Barthes 1977: 142)

2. Comparisons between *The Wire* and nineteenth century realism, particularly Dickens' work, are too often used as a shorthand to evoke the show's breadth and attention to detail. A number of commentators, particularly on the web, have criticized this tendency (see e.g. Scott 2011; Miller 2012), while Linda Williams (2014) provides a more in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences between *The Wire* and Dickens and Jason Mittell (2011) provides

which realism itself is not simply a mode of representation, but also becomes an object of consumption. Frank Kelleter (2014) takes a similar line, offering a convincing analysis of the way in which the show creates and moulds its own readers: not only does it seriality encourage continued viewing, as Jameson argues, but also affords the show's creators the time and opportunity to respond to the way that its viewers buy into a particular aesthetic.

If these arguments are of interest because they move discussion of realism beyond mimesis, Linda Williams' tracing of the genesis of *The Wire* back to Simon's work on the *Baltimore Sun* raises interesting questions about the nature of the voice present in the show. She describes Simon's frustrations at being unable to present the breadth and depth of context that he wished in his journalism (Williams 2011: 210, 215), frustrations which are, of course, central to the plot of Season 5. She argues that Simon's achievement in moving into fiction is that he created a 'multisited ethnographic imaginary' of a richness that actual ethnography can rarely achieve, the camera being able to move between sites and characters (Williams 2011: 215). His move into serial form therefore means that 'he no longer needs to pronounce in an editorial voice on the dysfunctions of any one system', having found 'a way to let one site be the commentary on the other' (Williams 2011: 224). In making this argument, Williams introduces the notion of dialogue (in this case, dialogue between the multiple sites of Simon's ethnographic imaginary) and reconciles it with the show's journalistic qualities.

In expanding discussion of the *The Wire*'s novelistic qualities beyond mimesis and realism, I attempt to move beyond the show's complaints to identify where it proposes solutions to the problems that it depicts. My starting point for this argument is Bradley D. Hays' article, 'Jurispathic Baltimore? Law and Nomoi in *The Wire*'. Examining the relationship between the law and the communities represented in *The Wire*, he draws on Robert Cover's concept of the 'nomos', a normative world of rules and proscriptions created as much by narrative and discourse as much as it is by legislation and its enforcement (Cover 1982: 4–5), and concludes by arguing that 'interactions and conflict between the law and nomoi create opportunities for dialogue between competing normative systems' (Hays 2013: 3).

Hays' optimism stems from his belief that 'as state and community confront the norms and commitments of the other, they gain perspective on their own norms and see alternative visions of society' (2013: 7); such observations culminate in his advocating for a 'dialogue-minded' state (2013: 13–14). In the first section of this article I examine the nature of dialogue by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, developed through his readings of Dostoevsky, to *The Wire*. Bakhtin argues that the novel is unique in its ability to combine multiple voices. In contrast to the monologic novel, which 'always and ultimately contains at heart a single accent' (1984: 25), the polyphonic novel employs 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses' (1984: 6). For Bakhtin, polyphony is a liberating force, the means by the which the 'joyful relativity' (1984: 107) of the carnivalesque is unlocked, with the carnivalization of dialogue meaning that 'everything is shown in a moment of unfinalised transition' (1984: 167): in the novel, hegemonic discourses are never allowed to rest in their positions of power, and are always subverted by other voices.

I examine such subversions in two courtroom scenes, the trial of the Barksdale enforcer Marquis 'Bird' Hilton in Season 2, and that of Senator Clay Davis in Season 5. These scenes provide fertile ground for a discussion

a useful analysis of the differences between the novel and television drama. Comparisons between *The Wire* and the novel are not limited to Dickens: for Walter Benn Michaels (2009: n.p.), it is 'like a reinvention of Zola or Dreiser'; Amnol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson liken it to Dickens, but also evoke Ben Okri and even Italo Calvino (2011: 166).

of polyphony for the reason that it is in the environment of the trial that a collision of voices, and hence the voices of competing values and systems, can be heard. Moreover, in these trials, the winners and losers of these collisions, and the success or failure of linguistic subversions, can be definitively seen.

There is a striking similarity between the definition of the novel, as offered by Bakhtin, who claims that the latter is 'a diversity of social speech types… and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized' (Bakhtin 1981: 257), and the definition of the trial offered by Robert P. Burns (2009: 1), who argues that it is 'a consciously structured hybrid of languages and practices'. Burns argues that this hybrid construction is democratic in nature, being capable of creating 'a fair contest among real values' (2009: 35) and of ensuring that 'there will not be One Big Story told by the state' (2009: 23). Bakhtin is similarly optimistic about the potential of polyphony as a force that can hold power to account, particularly in its potential to create carnivalesque environments that are characterized by mock crowning and de-crownings (1984: 124) and by a suspension of norms that allows 'free and familiar contact' between people from all social strata (1984: 122–23).

However, the trials of Hilton and Davis are also interesting because their outcomes are decided by successful acts of perjury: in the first case, Omar Little falsely claims to have seen Hilton shoot and kill a state's witness ('All Prologue' 2003a), and in the second case, Davis lies his way out of an apparently convincing corruption case ('Took' 2008). While Hilton's trial represents the triumph of an outsider (Little) over established discourses (represented by corrupt defence attorney Maury Levy), the fact that the trial is decided by a falsehood is troubling as it suggests the 'discipline of evidence' created by the format of the trial (Burns 2009: 29) is discarded due to Little's testimony tapping into the jurors' antipathy towards the constituency that they regard Levy as representing. These problems are masked to an extent by Little being painted in a sympathetic light throughout most of the series; however, they are thrown into sharp relief by Davis's acquittal, in which he and his defence attorney Bill Murphy cynically exploit the grievances of citizens who feel disenfranchised and helpless in front of the legal system.

These two cases suggest that, while polyphony is present in *The Wire*, the bringing together of a variety of social speech types is not, in itself, enough to overcome grievances that are deeply embedded and which are associated with clearly defined social identities. Part of the reason for this is that Bakhtin's conception of speech types is generally oppositional: in carnival, a king is 'de-crowned' by an underling; polyphony allows the language of those in power to be subverted or satirized by the languages of those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. In contrast to Bakhtin's model, *The Wire* is more optimistic when the relationship between speech types is less oppositional, and when different groups are able to appropriate and adapt languages to achieve a degree of accord rather than discord.

For this reason, in the second section in this article, I turn to what Deleuze and Guattari have termed 'minor literature' as a means of analysing the collective construction of voices in *The Wire*. They developed their concept through an analysis of Kafka's fables, and there are some elements of the bureaucratic absurdities of, for example, *The Trial* and *The Castle* in *The Wire*. However, this is not to argue that *The Wire* is 'Kafkaesque': it does not employ Kafka's surrealism or abstractions, and causality is always concretely present in Simon's Baltimore. Rather, it is the aspects of Kafka that led Deleuze

and Guattari to develop the notion of minor literature that provide a more productive means of approaching *The Wire*. They explicitly state – albeit as an aside – that Kafka's situation as a German-speaking Jew in Prague 'can be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 17). However, while the centrality of African American characters and actors to *The Wire*, and hence of African American vernacular English, results in the presence of minor language, it is in the way that disenfranchised groups, regardless of race, appropriate and employ language collectively that the concept of minor literature offers a way of understanding how *The Wire* proposes solutions as well as articulating complaints.

Deleuze and Guattari identify three key features of minor literature. The first is that, in minor literature, 'language is affected by a high coefficient of deterritorialization' (2003: 16): for members of a minority, language is no longer tied to national territory or to the identity of the majority. The second is that everything in minor literature is political (2003: 17). Rather than social and political conditions acting as a background against which the major protagonists work out their individual conflicts, action in minor literature is always connected to the whole, an idea central to *The Wire* and articulated in Lester Freamon's dictum 'all the pieces matter' ('The Wire' 2002). Third, rather than literature being the expression of an individual 'master', minor literature is a collective enunciation. Because 'the political domain has contaminated every statement', the political links each voice to the voices of others. As such, 'there isn't a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 18).

In the section on minor literature, I discuss two examples of minority groups arriving at successful examples of collective enunciation. In both cases, their 'minority' is not a matter of ethnicity – although this is, of course, a factor – but rather one of social exclusion. The drug trafficking organizations have placed themselves outside of the mainstream of Baltimore society through their willingness to exist and act outside the law on a continuous basis. However, Russel 'Stringer' Bell's initiative in setting up the New Day Co-op, with a view to reducing inter-gang violence and increasing profits, is one example of how the creation of a collective voice can begin to change the values and norms of a nomos ('Straight and True' 2004). Similarly, the pedagogical experiment conducted by the academic David Parenti in Season 4 ('Corner Boys' 2006; 'Know Your Place' 2006) shows how a troubled population – the minority of children identified as 'corner boys' and hence separated from the rest of the pupils – can also be induced to collectively create a sense of identity, and in doing so to reflect upon and change the fundamental values by which they live. Both the New Day Co-op and Parenti's experiment are short-lived, with competing vested interests – in the form of Marlo Stanfield's organization and national educational policy respectively – working to rapidly undo these positive changes. The demise of both projects is part of the general pessimism of *The Wire*; however, in these episodes, the series does at least move beyond complaint to proposing how change might take place.

1. POLYPHONY

Hays' focus on the relationship between communities, and particularly 'the street' and the law, is apt because it is in these dialogues that most is at stake, and in which the relative power of competing nomoi – and the discourses that

they employ – is revealed. In this section I discuss the way in which the nomoi of the street and the law work in dialogue with each other in two trial scenes, those of Hilton (also discussed by Hays) and Davis. The conflictual relationship between the street and the law is most clearly revealed in Season 2 when Omar Little's perjury secures Hilton's conviction. As Little gives his perjurious testimony, Stringer Bell and Detective Jimmy McNulty hold a whispered conversation at the back of the courtroom, in which Bell reveals that he is fully aware of Little's perjury, stating: 'word on the street is Omar ain't nowhere near them rises when the shit pop. Street said the little cocksucker was on the eastside sticking up some Ashland Avenue niggers'. McNulty makes no attempt to contradict Bell's insinuation, and implicitly acknowledges its truth, stating 'that's the word on the street, huh? Trouble is, String, we ain't on the street. We're in a court of law' ('All Prologue' 2003a).

This exchange between Bell and McNulty establishes an opposition between the street and the courtroom. However, where we might expect language and the rules of the court to hold sway over that of the street, and to be oriented towards establishing the truth, the conversation suggests that the reverse is true, or at the least that the two spaces are subject to very different rules and truths. Alasdair McMillan (2009: 52) contrasts *The Wire* with earlier police procedurals in which, he argues, 'the legal system was portrayed as a well-oiled machine in the service of justice'. In contrast, *The Wire* suggests that, even when a case is brought to trial, there is no guarantee that justice will be served.[3]

What is surprising about Hilton's trial, though, is the way in which the language of the street, as manifest in Little's testimony, trumps the language of the law, as manifest in defence attorney Maury Levy's cross examination. Little's refusal to adopt the conventions of the nomos of the law begins before the trial in 2.05 ('Undertow'), with a scene in which McNulty, equipped with a court voucher for $150, takes him to a clothes store with the aim of making him presentable in court; Little returns still wearing his bomber jacket but with a tie loosely slung around his neck. However, once Little's testimony begins in 2.06 ('All Prologue'), assistant state's attorney Ilene Nathan's concerns about 'putting that sociopath on that stand' ('Undertow' 2003b) quickly evaporate as his performance swings the trial decisively in favour of the prosecution.

The representation of the trial overwhelmingly focuses on Little's testimony, which is primarily defined by a clash of registers. Nathan and Levy repeatedly employ the formal register of the courtroom, only for Little to respond in the language of the street. The pattern begins with Little affirming his oath with the words 'surely do' ('All Prologue' 2003a) and continues throughout the trial: his responses are dictated by the rules of the courtroom and the structure of the trial – in this case his response is sufficient to affirm the oath – but use his own street vernacular in response to the formal or ritualistic registers of other protagonists. It is a strategy that succeeds in eliciting wry amusement from the jurors, and which skewers Levy's pomposity.

Although this tactic appears to be more a product of Little's ambivalence towards the court than a deliberate ploy, it proves to be particularly effective in blunting Levy's line of attack during his cross examination. Levy attempts to portray Little as an unreliable witness, undermining his credibility by reciting his criminal record. The list ends with attempted murder, a charge refuted by Little when he states that he simply 'shot the boy Mike-Mike in his hind parts'. At this point, the jury erupts into open laughter, leaving Little the clear winner of the verbal duel. The exchange is immediately followed by an

3. Few of the cases brought by the Baltimore Police Department ever reach the courtroom: while in some cases events intervene to deny the police the opportunity to prosecute their case (as occurs with Bell's death in Season 3), in most instances plea bargains and behind-the-scenes dealings settle the matter, as occurs with the case against the Stanfield organization in Season 5. The failure of many cases to ever reach trial mirrors the reality of the justice system: Robert P. Burns (2009: 2) notes that the number of federal cases brought to trial in the United States fell from 11.5 per cent in 1962 to a mere 1.8 per cent in 2002. He states that this pattern is repeated in non-federal cases.

exchange in which Levy accuses Little of being 'amoral' and 'a parasite', at which point Little cuts him off, stating 'just like you, man' before delivering the coup de grace: 'I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right?' ('All Prologue' 2003a).

There is certainly something of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in Hilton's trial, both in Little's use of language and in Levy's humiliation. Bakhtin describes three carnivalesque figures whose use of language acts to subvert powerful figures and the established discourses that they employ. The first is the fool, whose incomprehension 'makes strange the world of social conventionality'; the second is the rogue, whose role is 'gay deception'; and the third is the clown, who maliciously distorts high languages and twists them to his own ends (Bakhtin 1981: 404–05). Little's behaviour exhibits elements of the first two, the incomprehension of the fool evident in his mischievously literal interpretation of Nathan's instruction, relayed through McNulty, to take the stand in 'anything with a tie' ('Undertow' 2003b). Likewise, Little's refusal to employ the language of the court is a deliberate decision. The fact that he is far from ignorant of more 'elevated' forms of language is shown in an exchange with a police officer before the trial, when he is able to supply the answer to a crossword clue about classical mythology ('All Prologue' 2003a). Thus, Little's apparent incomprehension of the rules and conventions of the court is a deliberately adopted stance which has the effect, described by Bakhtin, of relativizing the elevated language of the court. In addition, his perjury can be seen as playing a similar role to the rogue's 'gay deception'. When Levy asks 'why should we believe your testimony?', Little's flippant 'that's up to y'all, really' ('All Prologue' 2003a) challenges the seriousness of the trial, and bring the 'joyful relativity' of the carnivalesque to the courtroom.

The sum effect of Little providing an alternative voice to the formal linguistic register of the courtroom is to render Levy's speech ridiculous. The reversal suffered by Levy is so comprehensive that it is reminiscent of the ritual mock decrowning identified by Bakhtin as a feature of medieval carnival (Bakhtin 1984: 124). However, where the ambivalence in the carnival ritual stems from the way that it expresses 'the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order' (Bakhtin 1984: 124, original emphasis), the ambivalence of Levy's defeat in Hilton's trial is itself ambivalent: Little 'wins', but does so through an outright falsehood. Moreover, this is not a playful ritual in which all involved are in on the joke and are party to the expectations surrounding the suspension of normal rules. While we are sympathetic to neither the smug Levy nor to the thoroughly vile Hilton, Levy's defeat in the trail condemns Hilton to a lengthy prison sentence resulting from the failure of judicial process.

Returning to the bigger picture, does the interaction between the language of the street and the courtroom act as a dialogic mechanism which 'can help draw disenfranchised communities back into the social fold' as Hays claims (2013: 11)? In this case, the answer is no: Little's testimony is not a re-engagement with the 'legitimate' language of the court, but a challenge to the power of that language and a successful subversion of the conventions of the court, motivated by a personal desire for revenge rather than any wider 'communal' concerns.

If Hilton's trial suggests that polyphony alone is not enough to challenge existing nomoi, the trial of Clay Davis in Season 5 reinforces the sense that simply bringing contrasting discourses into contact with each other will not necessarily cause a shift in the values that underpin those particular speech-types. The courtroom scene in 5.07 ('Took'), in which Davis is acquitted of

corruption despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, is also defined by an act of perjury and by a dialogic subversion of the language of the court. As Little's rejection of sartorial conventions marks him as an outsider from the trial's outset, so Davis also makes use of his entrance to establish himself, in this case duplicitously, as an anti-establishment figure. Brandishing a copy of *Prometheus Bound*, he describes the play as being about 'a simple man who was horrifically punished by the powers that be for the terrible crime of trying to bring light to the common people' ('Took' 2008). His use of 'Assilius' [*sic*] thus combines the authority of classical sources with a folksy, populist narrative. Davis's move is, of course, a deception: as a state senator, he is a fully fledged member of the establishment, and one who uses that position for personal gain. However, his appropriation of *Prometheus Bound* indicates the way in which his strategy for defeating the evidence presented against him works not through a legal refutation, but through a rhetorical appeal to the jury.

When the trial proper begins, it initially follows a predictable pattern, with Lester Freamon giving evidence on the routing of funds from supposedly charitable organizations into Davis's personal accounts, the only surprise at this point being that Davis's attorney, Bill Murphy, declines to cross-examine Freamon. It is only in the later stages of the trial that Murphy and Davis combine to deliver a rhetorical masterclass which circumvents the prosecution's legal case. Murphy remains in what appears to be a legal register, quizzing Davis on the financial transactions by repeating elements of Freamon's evidence, referring for example to 'eleven thousand to Westside Hoops, next day eleven thousand dollars drawn, then eleven thousand dollars deposited in your personal banking account' ('Took' 2008). Yet, despite employing a legal register, and hence having the appearance of being oriented towards objectively establishing the facts of the case, his questioning is in fact solely oriented towards providing Davis with a rhetorical platform whereby the senator can employ his own, emotive register to persuade the jury of his philanthropic intentions and thus bypass the empirical 'discipline of evidence' (Burns 2009: 29) upon which the trial relies.

Davis's entire defence is based not on discrediting or disproving Freamon's evidence, but rather on creating a moral framework in which the legal system is shown to be broken, irrelevant to the lives of those it is supposed to protect. In contrast to this dysfunctional system, Davis presents his actions as possessing moral legitimacy even if they may not be strictly in accordance with the law. In order to achieve this reversal, Davis represents his own 'turf' as being outside the scope of the law and operating according to a different logic: he describes it as a 'jungle', with 'everybody livin' hand to mouth, improvisin', hustlin''. Hitting his stride, he proceeds to employ impersonations of his supposedly helpless constituents: '*Senator Clay, I gots to bury my mother, bail out my son, buy a new shirt for a job interview, pay my child's asthma doctor* ... and excuse me if I didn't ask that old arthur-itis [*sic*] woman for a receipt' ('Took' 2008). It is a performance that wins both laughter and applause from those in the courtroom, and one which succeeds in portraying himself as someone who spends his time on the street and playing by its rules rather than by those of the court.

Bakhtin's (1984: 209) analysis of dialogic orientation of utterance in Dostoevsky shows how, even in the voice of a single character, the voices of others are implicitly present in the anticipation of a response. In the case of Davis, his rhetoric is clearly oriented towards an audience who believe the legal system not only to be flawed, but to be a hegemonic tool for a privileged

elite: whereas in Hilton's trial, Levy is the stooge for Little's performance, in Davis's trial, State's Attorney Bond is the target of Davis's rhetoric. Stating that 'I don't know how they do it out in Roland Park [a wealthy suburb of Baltimore] … but my world is strictly cash and carry' ('Took' 2008), Davis depicts Bond as the representative of the wealthy Baltimore establishment, while his own, informal, register of speech marks him as being one of the people. Thus, when Davis's whole testimony can be seen as an appeal to the constituency represented metonymically by the (probably fictional) 'old arthur-itis woman', and when he says of his (also likely fictional) efforts at wealth redistribution, 'excuse *me* if I didn't ask for a receipt', his appeal anticipates a response from the jurors, and one which approves of his willingness to act outside the law.

Although the cross examination of defendant's legal testimony focuses on the testimony of a single person, Davis is able to fully exploit the polyphonic potential of the trial, both through his interaction with Murphy as described above, and also through his ability to employ the clown's 'malicious distortion' of language, particularly in his parodying of his constituents. However, whereas Bakhtin envisages the clown's distortion of others' language to take elevated, hegemonic languages as its target, in this case Davis takes the language of his disempowered constituents, and appropriates and twists it to his own ends. The terrible irony of Davis's acquittal is that, while his defence depicts a broken system that the jury recognizes and responds to, it is he more than anyone in *The Wire* who exploits and profits from the dysfunctional local and federal institutions at the expense of those he purports to represent: Davis succeeds in subverting rhetorical strategies that are themselves subversive.

Both Burns and Hays are optimistic about the potential for dialogue present in the judicial trial. Burns, in offering his general definition of the trial as a 'consciously structured hybrid of languages and practices' suggests that different social speech-types are brought together, orchestrated by prosecution and defence within the larger structure of the trial, in order to create a 'value-free narrative' of events by which truth can be established (1999: 24; 2009: 30). However, the way that the two trials examined here show perjury triumphing over empirical truth suggests a crisis in the American legal system. This crisis is indicative of the depth of divisions in society as a whole because what happens in *The Wire* is that, when different speech-types are brought together, the grievances embedded in those social positions are so great that associated values are carried into the courtroom with them, and do battle with each other. Rather than two clearly defined sides enlisting various speech types in their narratives in the service of empirical truth, as envisaged by Burns, the two sides in the trial act as the mouthpieces for pre-defined social positions encapsulated by Davis's contrast between the 'Roland Park' and 'cash and carry' worlds.

Thus the prosecution and defence, rather than being the orchestrators of a genuinely dialogic exchange, become the media through the complaints of social groups are expressed. In the Hilton trial, Levy appears astonished that such larger issues might become manifest in the courtroom; Little himself does not appear to have any agenda larger than revenge against the Barksdale organization, but in the process of giving his testimony a broader critique of the system emerges naturally as a result of his insistence on resisting adopting the legal register used by Levy. In Season 5, both Davis and Murphy display a much greater awareness of how linguistic registers interact (this time it is Bond and Pearlman who are ingenuous) and tap into the social positions

associated with specific speech-types in order to sway the jury. To put these trials in the terms of Hays' argument, there is certainly interaction between the nomos of the street and that of the court in both cases, but the dialogue that he envisages does not actually take place between these two sets of values and discourses.

The Wire can be seen as a polyphonic drama, and these courtroom scenes show polyphony at work together with some of the aspects of the carnivalesque identified by Bakhtin. The outcomes of these cases suggest that polyphony can subvert established discourses and systems. However, these subversions are momentary, and where dialogue remains the expression of existing, pre-given, conflictual positions, it does not create lasting, positive change in *The Wire*. However, in the following section, I argue that where dialogue takes a less conflictual and more collective form, the potential for nomoi to change their norms and values more fundamentally does exist.

2. MINOR LITERATURE

Bakhtin's notion of polyphony draws on an implicitly oppositional relationship between social speech-types. The potential for long-lasting change to occur through such oppositions is limited by the implicitly temporary nature of transgression in Bakhtin's model of the carnivalesque. Roger Sales (1983: 169) describes carnival as 'Janus-faced' in that it is simultaneously a form a protest and way of disciplining and delimiting that protest. As a form of licensed transgression, there is an implied expectation of a return to the norms that have been only temporarily subverted. Thus, within such a paradigm, even if Little, acting the 'fool', is able to relativize and subvert Levy's official, legal register, the temporary nature of that subversion in fact acts to preserve the distinction between the two forms of discourse.

For this reason, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature to argue that *The Wire* suggests that longer-lasting and more deep-seated change is possible through collective, rather than conflictual, relationships. Deleuze and Guattari developed their concept of minor literature through an examination of Kafka's work, and while *The Wire* has more often been compared to social realism than it has to the surreal conceits of Kafka, the elusive nature of the law and the labyrinthine processes by which it must be approached do find some echoes in David Simon's depiction of Baltimore.[4] Andrew Moore (2015: 24) has noted the influence of Hannah Arendt's thinking on David Simon, and in particular her notion of bureaucracy as 'rule by nobody' can be applied to many of the show's protagonists who find themselves trapped in a double-bind of being at once subject to the law, but also unable to access the law to effect change.

Such double-binds give rise to episodes of absurdity in *The Wire*, which tend to be comic without necessarily being funny: as Milan Kundera (1988: 92) remarks, with Kafka, we have been taken 'into the guts of the joke, into the horror of the comic'. Bureaucratic absurdity can be seen in episodes such as Dennis 'Cutty' Wise's fruitless visit to the Abil Wolman Municipal Building to secure permits for his boxing gym ('Slapstick' 2004), an obstacle that is eventually easily overcome through the intervention of Delegate Watkins, or through FBI agent Fitzhugh's attribution of the name 'Ahmed' to Stringer Bell in order to expedite a wiretap ('Middle Ground' 2004). In a darker vein, Sargent Ellis Carver's unsuccessful attempts to secure accommodation for Randy Wagstaff outside the 'group homes' system ('Final Grades' 2006) also

4. Robert P. Burns evokes Kafka in order to articulate his concerns about American criminal justice. He sees the bureaucratization of society as creating a legal system with a paradoxical yet dysfunctional nature: the law is all-pervasive, yet at the same time is inaccessible to those who are subject to it. He worries that the decline of the trial will result in a lack of access to trial by jury, the storied 'good men and true' (Burns 2014: 22) with the law instead becoming 'an organism, a system, impervious to human action, possessing a necessity that will thwart any attempt at change' (Burns 2014: 33).

show how systems intended as benevolent begin to function according to their own logic.

Kafka's fiction is, however, more extreme than *The Wire* is in its evocation of totalitarianism. As Kundera (1988: 93) notes, in Kafka's world, and particularly in *The Trial*, totalitarian systems somehow impel the protagonists to seek their own offence in what he diagnoses as a trend of 'autoculpabilisation' (Kundera 1988: 91). In contrast, in *The Wire*, the protagonists strive to keep their heads above water, and Simon's 'postmodern institutions'[5] at least allow them to retain aspirations, although these may be limited to prospering within the amoral systems created and perpetuated by those institutions. Kundera argues that the bureaucratization of social activity is, however, a global trend, and whereas totalitarianism 'is a prosaic and material hyperbole of it', Kafka's novels 'are only an imaginary oneiric hyperbole of it' (1988: 93). The bureaucratization of Baltimore can, therefore, be seen as existing on the same continuum as that of the world that produced *The Trial*, and the intransigence of these system directly leads, at least in some cases, to the destruction of quality of life for the city's inhabitants.

While these echoes of Kafka are worthy of note, and while these bureaucratic systems are largely responsible for the suffering shown in *The Wire*, it is in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature that a key aspect of the show's mode of protest can be identified. In the previous section I have shown that polyphony, on its own, does not necessarily produce constructive dialogue between competing nomoi. Where the show suggests that meaningful change is possible is when nomoi begin to interact in ways that begin to change them. Changes to the norms and values of particular groups take place not in situations where nomoi are placed in opposition to each other, but where collective enunciation imbues a situation with the need to adopt and adapt the language, and hence the ideas, of another group.

The ending of Season 5 strikes a pessimistic note, because the series' concluding montage shows characters changing, only for their roles to be filled by other protagonists, suggesting that structure overpowers agency and the system grinds on. However, there are episodes in *The Wire* which at least suggest that the potential for change exists through collective action. This potential exists in the minor languages that are used throughout *The Wire*, and through which collective enunciations arise. Minor languages are not always employed deliberately as forms of protest, but rather as means of circumventing bureaucratic or systemic obstacles. For example, the codes used by the dealers throughout the series can be seen as minor languages, with minority defined by the dealers' status as members of criminal organizations, using English to circumvent the law. However, the way in which this marginal criminal group uses language becomes more ambivalent with the advent of the New Day Co-op, initiated by Bell with the aim of reducing gang violence by eliminating the need for turf wars. In this instance, Bell attempts to appropriate Robert's Rules of Order to introduce a code of conduct into negotiations between previously warring gangs and, more importantly, to change the mindset of both gang members and kingpins to one that values profit over the violent defence of territory.

However, the difficulties of arriving at a collective voice – and hence consensus – are shown by Bell's difficulties in implementing his reforms within his own organization. In the absence of the imprisoned Avon Barksdale, he attempts to introduce Robert's Rules as part of his efforts to shift his gang members from a territory-focused 'gangster' mentality to one in which they

5. I am referring here to Simon's much-quoted assertion that 'instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian force' (in Hornby 2007). Elsewhere in this issue, Stanley Corkin challenges critics' unquestioning acceptance of Simon's evocation of Greek tragedy as a way of describing *The Wire*'s project.

eschew violence in favour of product and hence profit. However, the tensions created by such a shift are revealed by a dissenting Poot who, still mixing the old language and mentality of the street with Bell's desired decorum, asks 'do the chair know we gonna look like some punk-ass bitches out there?' A furious Bell is unable to abide by his own rules, shouting down Poot despite Shamrock's attempts to enforce Robert's rules by noting that 'Poot did have the floor, man'. Bell's response that 'this nigger too ignorant to have the fuckin' floor' indicates the resistance that even Bell experiences in making this shift in attitude ('Time After Time' 2004).

Despite his own difficulties in adapting to this new, non-confrontational mindset, Bell nevertheless persists with his attempts to modify the language, and hence the stance, of the gang leaders, through his insistence on the use of Robert's Rules as part of his efforts to establish the New Day Co-op. Bell's experiment can be seen as a success in the outcome of the meeting. When the time comes for the kingpins to vote on joining the co-op, Bell asks those in favour to raise their hands, which those present in the room do, unanimously. As a gesture, the raising of hands performs the same role as a speech act (it acts as an 'I assent'). The discourse used in the meeting therefore has all the hallmarks of a minor language: everything in the meeting 'takes on a collective value' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 17), as even a dissenting voice would be required to engage with the new linguistic paradigm proposed by Bell, even if only to reject it. The language used is minor language, 'that which a minority constructs within a major language' as it wrests the official register of Robert's Rules away from its established territory, and employs it in a criminal enterprise, in conjunction with the language of the street. Finally, everything in this meeting is political: the alliance between Bell, Proposition Joe and others changes the nature of 'the game' in Baltimore, and while the co-op is not intended to impact the politics-writ-large of Baltimore (Bell and Proposition Joe would prefer for the drug trade to remain as inconspicuous as possible), inter-gang politics do, in fact, play a pivotal role in Democratic Party politics, and in influencing the policies of the Baltimore Police Department.

There are caveats to Bell's success, however. Proposition Joe's wry comment at the end of the meeting that 'for a cold-ass crew of gangsters y'all carried like republicans an' shit' ('Straight and True' 2004) supports Hays' assertion that 'as state and community confront the norms and expectations of the other, they gain perspective on their own norms and alternative visions of society' (Hays 2013: 7). There is, though, an uneasiness about the scene: while the consequences of the discussion are deadly serious, with millions of dollars and numerous lives at stake, Joe's humour creates a sense that the kingpins are playing, almost, at their new roles. Moreover, the continuing tensions between the old and new paradigms are forcefully revealed when Bell realizes that Shamrock is taking minutes during the first meeting of the New Day Co-op. An astonished Bell asks: 'nigger, is you takin' notes on a criminal fuckin' conspiracy?' before snatching and destroying the offending sheet of paper ('Straight and True' 2004). These examples of dialogue reveal the fragility of the new consensus. Thus, while Bell is able to change the value of the nomos of the game in a way that has the potential to be longer-lasting than the one-off victories over competing nomoi won by Little and Davis, the potential also exists for particular groups to revert to previous nomoi, and this is, in fact, precisely what happens when Marlo dismantles the co-op in Season 5.

Perhaps the most striking example of collective enunciation comes in Season 5 with the pedagogical experiment led by Dr David Parenti at Edward Tilghman Middle School. Assisted by Colvin and Ms Duquette, disruptive students are separated from their classes and educated separately. The successful intervention of Parenti's team unfolds over two episodes. It begins with the students self-identifying in their new group, prompted by Duquette, who ironically congratulates them on their segregation ('you beat the system') and pushes them to articulate an identity beyond Namond Brice's initial, simplistic statement that the group members are 'players' and 'corner boys' ('Corner Boys' 2006). Colvin takes over the session after his epiphany that the school system is 'giving them a fine education', not in the way envisaged by teachers or educators, but in providing a risk-free training ground for the skills that they will use on the street ('Corner Boys' 2006).

It is from this point on that the students in the segregated group begin to work collectively to articulate their own identity. When Colvin asks, 'what makes a good corner boy?' the question is greeted with a plethora of responses, and the animated discussion between the students, marked by some disagreements, works its way towards consensus. A defining moment is the point at which Colvin asks the students to justify the need to discipline a hypothetical underling who had been cheating on the count. His question 'why?' is immediately met with uproar, to which he responds by asking for 'one voice'. Brice, up to this point one of the more assertive and articulate members of the group, defers to another student, Darnell Tyson, who replies that 'there always people watching'; his statement is met with general assent from the group ('Corner Boys' 2006). The 'one voice' that Colvin calls for, and succeeds in eliciting, is that of a minor character in this scene, but one who acts as a medium for a collective voice and a consensus on 'corner boy' identity, values, and behaviour. Furthermore, the creation of this collective voice shows the beginnings of a process of reflection on the part of the students. Yet the difficulty of transforming momentary reflection into more profound change in a nomos is evident in a following episode, in which Brice's group are rewarded for their newfound teamwork skills.

In the class following Colvin's intervention, the students are placed in groups and are asked to assemble models of the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben without the help of instructions, and Brice's leadership and improvisation in hiding unused pieces of the model secure victory for his team. Colvin takes the winning group to an upscale restaurant, in which the students are immediately ill at ease. They listen in incomprehension as a waitress reels off the specials ('king salmon with sweetcorn, chanterelles and basil aioli … fresh Chesapeake Bay blue crab, roasted garlic, shallot cream and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms'), and are reduced to impotent silence when offered the opportunity to order drinks; Colvin steps in and orders four cokes ('Know Your Place' 2006). The self-confidence found in the classroom evaporates in a situation where the language and rules of the game are utterly alien; and in the space of one dinner, they do not have time to develop their own response by negotiating between their own language and values, and that of the restaurant, to create a minor language.

When the winning group returns to the classroom the following day, the three students are more successful in constructing a collective account of their experience. They are seen using the experience to show off, recounting snatches of dialogue, mimicking the waiting staff's respectful treatment of them in a partially invented reconstruction: '*Party of four, Mr. Colvin?*'; '*May I*

take your coat, Mr. Brice?' ('Know Your Place' 2006). Their lack self-confidence the previous evening is, of course, omitted from this performance and they instead transform the episode into a form of social capital through a collective recollection and enunciation of that experience. The students' appropriation of the episode the following day indicates that, where conflicting nomoi are thrown together, the result is generally discomfort or antipathy, and that, for a particular group to appropriate one form of language and merge it with their own, time and some form of motivation are required. Moreover, there is little reflection in this reconstruction: their performance does not question their own behaviour or values, but is oriented towards an audience, which still possesses the values of the nomos of the street, and in which there are 'always people watching'. As with Bell's reforms, fundamental change is possible, as shown by Brice's eventual reformation, but shifts in nomoi are always fragile and external pressure may cause reversion to previous values and behaviours.

Bell's attempts to reform the drug trade and Parenti's attempts to reform the school system are both, of course, cut off abruptly. However, they do indicate the potential for collective enunciation to begin to shift the norms of values of specific groups. Moreover, in addition to the content of the series showing the possibilities of a collective voice, the form of the show itself, and the processes involved in its production, mean that the whole of *The Wire* can be seen as a collective enunciation. Given that Linda Williams more or less directly traces the transition of Simon's 'paper bag for drugs' concept from his journalism to the episode in the *The Wire* cited at the outset of this article, it is tempting to see Colvin as a mouthpiece for Simon, and to see the show as a whole as a thinly disguised monologic editorial.[6] However, once this utterance enters the show, it takes on something of a different character. Barthes' idea (1977: 142) that the 'subject slips away' mirrors Deleuze and Guattari's assertion (2003: 18) that, in minor literature, 'there isn't a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation', and the nature of television drama, and the specific way in which *The Wire* was created and written, exaggerates the collective nature of language to a greater extent than the novel.

Although the nature of the voice of Balzac's castrato is ambiguous, Balzac remains unequivocally the writer of *Sarrasine*. In contrast, in television drama, the ambiguity of voice is amplified by the nature of the process of writing and filming, in which authority is disseminated by the process of taking the writer's (or writers') words and giving the responsibility for the utterance to actors. In addition, the team behind *The Wire* have attested to the 'democratic' nature of the show's writing room, which Nina K. Noble, the show's executive producer, describes as being 'run' by Simon, but in which 'he loves confrontation about the material' ('The Game is Real: *The Wire*' 2006b). If the writing process can therefore be seen as a collective product of a team of writers, the characters who speak these words also possess a hybrid identity constructed from a collection of experiences and perspectives. For example, Simon describes Avon Barksdale as a 'composite' of various real-life drug kingpins ('It's All Connected: *The Wire*' 2006a). The determination to achieve this collectivity is shown by the willingness to bring in non-professional actors with experience of the spheres of life being represented. These include Melvin Williams, Felicia 'Snoop' Pearson, who more or less plays herself, and former mayor Kurt Schmoke, playing a health commissioner who advocates for the extension of the Hamsterdam project in Season 3. These sources do not simply

6. There is a parallel between Simon and Dostoevsky in that the writing of both has its roots in journalism. Bakhtin (1984: 92) argues that 'Dostoevsky the artist always triumphs over Dostoevsky the journalist'; if elements from Simon's editorials still find their way into his serial dramas, the collective nature of the production process means that these cannot be considered monologic utterances.

provide input at the stage or conception or writing, but are part of the collective voice of the series.

David Simon (2004: 11) acknowledges that *The Wire* itself is part of the wider, neo-liberal economy that the show criticizes. Should we call this hypocrisy? Complicity? Or a clever appropriation of the system to bring it down from within? Any of those answers would pass a judgement that closes on *The Wire*'s relationship with its subject matter. We can, however, propose an alternative answer that is oriented not towards judgement and closure but which opens up possibilities for positive change: like its protagonists, *The Wire* is compelled to work from within a nomos with which it has little alternative but to engage – how else could a show of such scope have been made other than with corporate support? – but the collective construction of that show has contributed to reflection upon and a shift in the norms of realist production.

CONCLUSION

The opening episode of David Simon's post-Hurricane Katrina drama, *Treme*, shows the first 'second line' parade after the storm. It is as carnival should be: although the route of the parade is lightly delineated with police tape, it is a performance without footlights, with all and sundry joining the musicians as they move through the streets, and even a police car siren's *whoop* adding to the rhythm of the music at one point ('Do You Know What It Means?' 2010). Moreover, this is an example of a collective enunciation; indeed, where the line between performers and audience is erased, the performance cannot exist without collective participation. Notwithstanding the violence and brutality shown elsewhere in *Treme* (2009-13), and as Andrew Moore argues in his article in the second part of this double special issue, such collective enunciations may for a positive response, or alternative, to the neo-liberal status quo.

This positivity stands in stark contrast to the violent response in Baltimore to the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man, in police custody. In part, the riots appear to have been the symptom of a city in which trust between different elements of the community, specifically between police and citizens, has broken down: writing shortly after the riots, Simon claimed that 'every single person of color in Baltimore knows the police will lie' (in Keller 2015). The riots also indicate what may happen when no cohesive or collective voice of protest can be found. The *Baltimore Sun*'s report included a telling quotation from a local teacher who felt that the protests were 'about anger and frustration and [the rioters] not knowing how to express it' (Fenton and Green 2015). This teacher's comments suggests that, if there is no alternative voice to challenge a discourse viewed with suspicion, dissatisfaction may find a more violent outlet. The need to give voice to protest, and the way in which *The Wire* was a vehicle for that voice, was shown when a number of the cast, led by Sonja Sohn, returned to Baltimore in order to stage readings of Baltimore residents' testimonies of the Freddie Gray riots as a means of giving 'a platform to these folks who felt they were not being heard' (Yuhas 2015).

The Wire's Baltimore is a fragmented city in which it is difficult – or impossible – to find a space within which such a collective voice may construct itself. Locations in the city tend to be defined and delimited by the types of speech that are permissible: there is nothing like the second lines of *Treme* in *The Wire*, and the 'free and familiar contact' of Bakhtin's town square (1984: 123), in which carnival inversions and subversions occur, seems a universe away. Where there are echoes of the carnivalesque, these occur

only momentarily, through the opportunistic bringing together of oppositional speech-types and often through the absurdities thrown up by bureaucratic systems. The subversions achieved through such oppositions are, as I have argued, not always positive.

Yet, as I have also argued in this article, *The Wire* does succeed in creating a form a protest beyond its mimetic representation of Baltimore's problems. I have expanded on comparisons between *The Wire* and the realist novel, and have argued that other aspects of novelistic discourse, specifically polyphony and minor literature, may be usefully used to examine the way in which the series offers alternatives and solutions to the status quo. *The Wire* is a polyphonic drama, but where polyphony creates oppositional dialogue, the potential for significant or fundamental change in nomoi is limited. It is where dialogue takes on the nature not of a conflict, but of a collective adaptation to the voice of another, that fragile reasons for optimism can be found.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Stacy, I. (2015), 'What sort of novel is *The Wire*? Voice, dialogue and protest', *European Journal of American Culture*, 34: 3, pp. 161–178, doi: 10.1386/ejac.34.3.161_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ivan Stacy is a lecturer in The College of International Education, Hong Kong Baptist University. He specialises in contemporary literature, and is interested in the themes of complicity, testimony and witnessing. He has published articles on Kazuo Ishiguro, China Miéville and W. G. Sebald, and co-edited, with Arin Keeble, *The Wire and America's Dark Corners: Critical Essays*.

Contact: 14F, College of International Education, 8 On Muk Street, Shek Mun, New Territories, Hong Kong.
E-mail: ivanstacy@gmail.com