

# Women of *The Wire*

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## Abstract

In this paper we analyze the representation of women on the popular television show *The Wire*. We discuss how, while writers attempt to portray race, crime, and inner-city life with sociological accuracy, characterizations of women, and of violence against women, are not especially complex or realistic. In particular, the crime of rape is underrepresented. While the show does feature certain competent, successful professional women, overall the portrayal of underclass women differs significantly from that of underclass men, featuring far fewer sympathetic female characters and demonizing several. In these ways the show succumbs to the sexist, patriarchal norms that characterize much of the representation of women in popular entertainment products. Some posit that this asymmetry of gender representation results from the male-oriented street experience of the show's male writers.

**Keywords:** *The Wire*; Women; Rape; African-American; Mother; Television

## Resum. Dones a *The Wire*

En aquest treball s'analitza la representació de la dona en el popular programa de televisió *The Wire* (*El cable*). Discutim com, mentre que els escriptors intenten retratar la raça, el crim i la vida a les ciutats amb precisió sociològica, les caracteritzacions de la dona i de la violència contra la dona no són especialment complexes o realistes. En particular, el delicte de violació està infrarepresentat. Encara que l'espectacle presenta diverses dones competents i amb èxit professional, en general, el retrat de les dones de classe baixa difereix significativament del dels homes de classe baixa. Així, presenta els personatges femenins molt menys solidaris i fins i tot en demonitza uns quants. El programa sucumbeix, doncs, a les normes sexistes i patriarcals que caracteritzen gran part de les representacions de la dona en productes d'entreteniment popular. Alguns postulen que aquesta asimetria de la

representació de gènere és el resultat de l'experiència del carrer fonamentalment androcèntrica dels escriptors del programa.

**Paraules clau:** *The Wire*; dones; violació; afroamericanes; mare; televisió

### Resumen. *Mujeres en The Wire*

En este trabajo se analiza la representación de la mujer en el popular programa de televisión *The Wire* (*El cable*). Discutimos cómo, mientras que los escritores intentan retratar la raza, el crimen y la vida en las ciudades con precisión sociológica, las caracterizaciones de la mujer y de la violencia contra la mujer no son especialmente complejas o realistas. En particular, el delito de violación está infrarrepresentado. Aunque el espectáculo presenta a varias mujeres competentes y con éxito profesional, en general, el retrato de las mujeres de clase baja difiere significativamente del de los hombres de clase baja. Así, presenta a los personajes femeninos mucho menos solidarios e incluso demoniza a varios. El programa sucumbe, pues, a las normas sexistas y patriarcales que caracterizan gran parte de las representaciones de la mujer en productos de entretenimiento popular. Algunos postulan que esta asimetría de la representación de género es el resultado de la experiencia de la calle fundamentalmente androcéntrica de los escritores del programa.

**Palabras clave:** *The Wire*; mujeres; violación; afroamericanas; madre; televisión

### Introduction

Most critical literature treating representations of women in television focuses primarily on shows that foreground female characters (Lotz 2006; Dow 1996). Research shows, however, that women characters in general, and particularly women of color, remain vastly underrepresented in the majority of popular television shows and films (Smith 2008). These underrepresentations take a variety of forms, including the fact that there are simply fewer women characters; the ones that exist have far fewer lines to speak, and much less air time, than the male characters; the women characters tend to be younger than the men, and much younger than the average age of women in the population; and finally, the women characters tend to be hyper-sexualized in their representations, in ways reaffirming the hegemony of young, white, extremely thin, often blond images as the most sexually attractive (Lauzen 2015; Smith et al. 2008).<sup>1</sup>

While *The Wire* is a remarkable show, and pathbreaking in its representations of race, class, the drug trade, and inner-city life, it is disappointing in its representations of women, and – perhaps unsurprisingly, though surprising for a show touted for its sympathetic representations of men of color – is particularly disappointing in its treatment of women of color. In this chapter, we point out some of the strengths of this show, which we both value highly; but temper this discussion with an in-depth examination of its highly biased and

1. See Ulaby (2013) on the increasing but mixed representation of professional women on popular television.

stereotypic representations of women. We conclude with a theorization of this pervasive problem in television representation.

*The Wire*, developed in 2002 by David Simon based on his experiences working as a police reporter in Baltimore and his co-author Ed Burns' experience as a homicide detective and later a middle-school teacher, is a remarkable television show that is often cited as one of the best shows that has ever aired (Carey 2007; Kennedy and Shapiro 2012; Miller and Traister 2007; Olmstead 2011; Roush 2013).

One of us (Bruce Williams) has been teaching an undergraduate class on *The Wire* for the last four years. Using the social science literature, the class considers what *The Wire* does, from a social scientific perspective, "right" – i.e. what seems most accurate in its representations of the inner-city – and what it does "wrong," i.e. what seems most distorted and stereotypically ideological in its story-telling.

The show frames its narrative with a sophisticated institutional perspective. Each season, viewers are shown how the relevant institutions operate to structure the lives of the characters which inhabit them. For example, in season one, we learn how crime statistics are used by the Baltimore police department in its adoption of the "CompStat" System to evaluate individuals and divisions within the department. Well-known in criminology studies for flaws which were dramatized on the show, the "CompStat" system was a system in which productivity was measured and individuals held accountable for spikes in crime as measured by a series of computer-tracked events (Moore and Braga 2003). Through its treatment on the show, we acquire a sense of how bureaucratic politics within the department operate, including the often perverse incentives they create for officers up and down the chain of command.

Also in season one, we learn how the drug trade operates, from the young children who serve as look-outs, to the street-level teenage dealers, to those atop the various gangs who control the trade. As with the police department, we come to understand the ways in which the organization of the drug trade shapes the choices of the young men and women who work within it. This attention to the operations of specific institutions is one of the greatest achievements of *The Wire*. It ensures that a broad range of viewers can potentially identify with the show's exceedingly wide range of characters and come to understand their behavior, often criminal and even horrific, to be the result of the institutions they live within rather than the fault of evil or amoral personalities. Consequently, the show operates as a powerful critique of what is more common in popular media, which is the demonization of inner-city men and women of color. Rather, the perspective most viewers would find dominant in *The Wire* argues that the problems of the characters we encounter stem not from them being "different" from average middle-class Americans. Instead, the representations illustrate that the lower-class individuals depicted – called the "underclass" in sociological terminology – often share middle-class values, but exist within a radically different set

of institutional structures from that encountered by most middle-class HBO viewers.

The humanistic appeal of the series is stunningly illustrated in the first season. We get to know, and to sympathize with, three young black teenage boys (Wallace, Bodie, and Poot), friends since childhood, who are now low-level dealers. In one narrative thread, Bodie and Poot are told by higher-ups in the drug gang that Wallace is a snitch and needs to be “taken care of.” They follow him to his room and shoot him dead, but not before he tearfully begs for his life, appealing to their long friendship. *The Wire* does something unusual with this tragic episode. First technically, the camera moves restlessly around the room, showing us the faces of the three teenagers, reminding us of what we know about the circumstances of their lives and the *structure* of the drug trade. We see Wallace’s terror, but we also see the uncertainty in Bodie and Poot’s faces as they point guns at their friend and berate him for being “soft.” Bodie’s hand shakes and he cannot pull the trigger until Poot shouts “do it,” at which point the gun fires. Poot, with tears in his eyes, then fires his gun, not to kill Wallace, who is already dead, but to demonstrate that he is in the killing with Bodie. The scene leaves us with the sad realization that there are three victims, not just one, in this room - and they are all children, which ensures that the characters and the scene will garner universal sympathy.

### Does *The Wire* have a “Woman Problem?”

There is little doubt that *The Wire* creates several nuanced and thoroughly unique portrayals of women. Particularly notable is Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs (Sonja Sohn), one of the main characters throughout the series. We meet Kima in the very first episode when she is in charge of a drug bust and, after the dust settles, shows her two subordinates (also continuing characters – Herc and Carver) that they have missed a loaded gun in their search for the dealer’s car. As the episode continues, we see her in a number of situations, such as joking back and forth with Herc and Carver as they fill out paperwork, and working with her immediate superior Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) to figure out how to respond to demands from higher-ups in the Baltimore police department’s chain of command. The result is that we quickly understand that Kima is a supremely competent detective who has the well-deserved respect of both her superiors and her subordinates.

While the portrayal (media stereotype) of women professionals as being uber-competent and respected is hardly ground-breaking,<sup>1</sup> later in season one we also acquire a more nuanced perspective on what it means to be respected by fellow police. After the police have staged a drug raid and lined up “the usual suspects,” i.e. young black street-level dealers, one of them (Bodie) hits one of the officers (an older alcoholic burn-out). The police immediately throw Bodie to the ground and begin beating him savagely. Kima sees what is happening and begins running to the scene of the beating. Everything about

the scene leads us to believe that she is going to restrain the other officers and stop the beating; instead, she enthusiastically joins in, showing us that she is “one of the guys;” she’s a cop, she’s an insider.

That Kima is an “out” lesbian in a lesbian relationship which is foregrounded in the show also serves to contrast her with the more typical female cops on television. On the one hand, this is a convenient plot device; since Kima is up-front with her sexuality, the show never need deal with questions of wanted or unwanted advances by her mostly male partners.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the series offers a nuanced exploration of the evolving relationship between Kima and her partner Cheryl (Melanie Nicholls-King), an African-American lawyer. Again, in this instance, by focusing on the ways individuals respond to the institutional incentives they face, the series explodes many gender as well as racial stereotypes.

For example, at the beginning of season two, both Kima and Daniels are off the street: Kima because she was shot in season one, and Daniels because of bureaucratic politics that consigns him to a dead-end assignment. Both have promised their partners that they will not return to the assignments that cost them so dearly.<sup>3</sup> Both couples struggle with a much-used trope in television cop shows: the police officer whose craving for the excitement and danger of the street leads to family crisis. In a memorable scene, Kima and Daniels are shown telling their partner over dinner that they are returning to their old assignments. The scene cuts back and forth between the two couples as the camera circles the dinner table until both Cheryl and Marla put down their utensils and angrily leave the table.

Over the course of five seasons, *The Wire* continues to challenge gender stereotypes as it follows the arc of Kima and Cheryl’s relationship. In one narrative arc, at Cheryl’s insistence (primarily), the couple decide to have a child, which Cheryl carries. During the pregnancy, Kima - acting like a stereotypical male cop - becomes bored with the increasing domestic responsibilities, and alienated from Cheryl and the baby. She begins to pick up women in lesbian bars and becomes closer to another main character, Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West): the two become prototypical “drinking buddies,” and in drunken conversations they express frustration with their “civilian” partners (in McNulty’s case, his ex-wife).

In season two, as the show explores the terrible impact of the “disappearance of work” on the white working-class, we meet another memorable female character, Beatrice “Beadie” Russell (Amy Ryan), a Port-of-Baltimore police officer. Beadie is temporarily assigned to the Baltimore detective squad investigating the deaths of thirteen women found dead in a shipping container. Once again, highlighting the ways in which broader institutional dynam-

2. In Daniels’ case his wife, Marla Daniels (Maria Broom), is an elected Baltimore City Council member.
3. The actor playing her, Deidre Lovejoy, along with Sonja Sohn (who plays Kima Greggs), are the only two women who receive a top-billing at the beginning of every episode.

ics shapes the choices faced by individual characters, Beadie is a single mother of two who only became a Port Authority officer because the benefits and pay were far superior to her former job as a toll taker. While she proves herself to be an excellent detective and is invigorated by the work, the end of the season finds her back patrolling the port alone, exactly as she started out: upward mobility based solely upon talent and hard work is shown to be a myth.

No longer a central character in subsequent seasons, Beadie remains an occasional character as she develops an on /off relationship with McNulty. While his career is on the skids, McNulty is willing to make a commitment to this single mother, her children, and domesticity. However, once he is called back to the special detail headed by Daniels, his obsession with police work leads to a return to the drinking, late nights, infidelity and general emotional withdrawal which characterized his relationship with women throughout the earlier seasons. McNulty is very different from the other police on *The Wire*, as in many ways he is a stereotypical television cop hero who takes his cases personally, flaunts bureaucratic rules and hierarchy, and is guided by his own internal moral compass. What makes him so interesting is that we are shown that these particular stereotypical characteristics which characterize McNulty (and by implication the vast majority of television police) are precisely the ones that make him so unreliable and destructive in his personal life and, ultimately, as the denouement of the series shows, to his fellow police.

There are other memorable women on *The Wire*, some of whom we discuss in the next section, but none who break new ground like Kima or Beadie. While we appreciate the new ground that these two characters break, for the most part we argue that *The Wire* commits the typical sins of omission and stereotyping in its portrayal of gender, sexuality, and intersectionality.

### *The Wire* Stumbles Over Gender, Race and Class

Given the show's other remarkable achievements, its more fundamental gender blindness is all the more disappointing. This general problem is acknowledged by Laura Lippman (2009), a celebrated best-selling crime novelist and wife of David Simon. While lauding the treatment of many female characters on the series, she attributes many of *The Wire*'s blind spots to the paucity of women in creative positions on the show: in the first two seasons, only one woman wrote for the show at all, and only three directed episodes. As Lippman notes, the world described on *The Wire* is "starkly masculine" (2009:55). She goes on, in effect, to apologize for this, stating "Yes, many of the women in *The Wire* appear in secondary roles, but that is a simple truth about the world it portrays..." (2009:60). The sentence continues tellingly, however: "—and the point of view through which it is filtered." Admission of this filter is key to our own critical perspective on the series. What we are shown on *The Wire* is an ultimately *male* perspective, a male filter; and this, unfortunately, makes the show mundane, no different from the vast majority

of popular television and film to which *The Wire* has often been compared so favorably.

*The Wire*'s male perspective is played out in the representation of many of its central female characters, aside from Kimmy and Beadie. Many of the minor female characters on *The Wire* serve as plot devices, rather than fleshed-out individuals, but the same would also be true for many of the minor male characters. More telling is the show's treatment of one of its main characters, Assistant State's Attorney Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy), who appears in all 60 episodes.<sup>2</sup> Though she is omnipresent, the main role Pearlman plays is as the lover of first Jimmy McNulty, and then Cedric Daniels. Despite being an ambitious lawyer, we learn almost nothing about her inner life or her own perspective; or why, for example, she puts up with McNulty's thoughtless treatment (e.g. showing up at her door, late at night and seemingly seeking only sex).

If the treatment of Pearlman is disappointing, *The Wire*'s portrayal of African-American women, especially single mothers, who are members of the drug gang, or merely residents of the projects where the drug trade operates, is even more disturbing and systematically flawed (Ault 2012). Given the series' achievements in humanizing the young black men in the drug business, the pervasive failure to do the same for black women in similar situations is even more noticeable. The failure is also mystifying, since David Simon and Ed Burns spent a year observing drug dealing in Baltimore and produced a book and HBO mini-series (both called *The Corner*) which chronicled several moving and nuanced portrayals of black women (one of whom was played by Maria Broom, who plays Marla Daniels in *The Wire*), characters who were essentially lost somewhere in the translation from book/mini-series to television series.

Many black mothers appear in *The Wire*, most of whom we meet only in passing. Unfortunately, these brief appearances seem almost to mandate that these images are reduced to popular stereotypes of the welfare-dependent, drug-addled, and irresponsible parent (and are at odds with the portrayal of similarly situated women in *The Corner*). After Wallace (the young teenager in season one) is shot by his friends, for example, the police track down his mother to tell her that her son is dead. She comes to the door, clearly high, and when asked when the last time she saw Wallace was, she answers angrily "what has he done now?" The detectives are left to shake their heads and we understand the difficult life that Wallace faced; what we are never shown, with similar sympathy, are the circumstances of his mother's life, from her own perspective or from any perspective sympathetic to her as a character.

Another character similarly portrayed is Raylene Lee (Shamika Cotton), the mother of Michael (Tristan Wilds), one of the four middle-school students who are the focus of season four. Raylene is a substance abuser, incapable of caring for herself or her children Michael and his half-brother "Bug" Manigault (Keenon Brice). Michael is shown to be a caring and devoted older brother, making sure Bug does his homework, goes to school, and is

well fed and clothed. Indeed, a gang member, seeing Michael and his brother, comments, “Fucking Huxtables and shit.” As Michael begins to earn money in the drug trade, he gives money to his mother for groceries, much of which she uses for drugs. Michael returns home one day to find that his mother has brought Devar Manigault (Cyrus Farmer), his step-father (and Bug’s father), back into the house. Michael is afraid of Devar and it is strongly implied that he has been sexually molested by him. In response, Michael asks for help from a gang enforcer, Chris Partlow (Gbenga Ainnagbe), who beats Devar to death. Though indirectly they are murderers, Michael and Chris are portrayed sympathetically: it is implied, for example, that Chris has also been the victim of sexual abuse, which is why he beats Devar so savagely. Yet, we obtain no similar understanding of Raylene; we never learn why she would let Devar back into the house, what his violent temper meant for her, how she became such an ineffective and unsympathetic mother, etc.

It would be unfair to point out the failure to develop one or two characters among so many others if this portrayal of single black mothers was not repeated so often. More central female characters are also portrayed in this way.<sup>3</sup> For example, consider De’Londa Brice (Sandi McCree), the mother of Namond Brice (Julito McCullum), one of the four middle-school students in season four. While not married to him, De’Londa has taken the last name of Namond’s father, Roland “Wee-Bey” Brice (Hassan Johnson), a fearsome hit man for the Barksdale drug family. As Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), second in command of the Barksdale gang, says to Wee-Bey, “You so evil, you have to count up the number of people you’ve killed on the fingers of both hands; even you don’t know how many people you’ve killed.” When arrested, to avoid the death penalty, Wee-Bey pleads guilty to many unsolved murders (even some he did not commit); in return, he asks for a pit beef sandwich with extra horseradish from his favorite restaurant. As with so many other characters, despite his horrific actions, Wee-Bey is treated with a good deal of sympathy. We learn, for example, that he keeps tropical fish as a hobby and is worried about who will care for them while he’s in prison. He brings a toy fish-tank to prison and we sympathize with him when it is smashed by an angry prison guard.

In season four, Wee-Bey is in prison, and De’Londa is essentially a single parent to Namond. She lives with her son in a nice (if gaudily furnished) apartment, buys him nice school clothes and, from among the four young friends, he is the only one with a parent watching out for him. Namond’s fate turns on the conflict between De’Londa and Howard “Bunny” Colvin (Robert Wisdom), who is helping lead an intervention program for at-risk kids on which Namond is enrolled. Bunny is, for *The Wire*, an almost saintly figure. We meet him in season two, as a Major in the Baltimore Police, who is deeply troubled by the Department’s punitive and statistics-driven approach to the drug war. In season three, he risks his career by establishing, on his own, a zone in his district where drug dealing will essentially be legalized. By confining the drug trade to this one small area (called Hamster-

dam), crime and violence in the rest of the district declines and ordinary residents are seen reclaiming their streets. The experiment is shut down, however, and Bunny loses his job after Hamsterdam becomes a political football in the mayoral elections. He eventually finds a rewarding job working with a Johns Hopkins professor on the intervention program where he meets Namond.

While Namond's mother pushes him to become more like his father – i.e. to become more serious in his drug dealing in order to move up in the Barksdale organization, it takes Bunny – and not Namond's mother – to see a different set of possibilities. Bunny believes that Namond is a smart and sensitive young man, ill-suited to his path, who, with the proper support, might actually escape the drug trade and the street. The conflict between the two adults comes to a head when Namond is arrested for drug dealing and Bunny intervenes to get him out of jail. When Bunny brings Namond home, De'Londa is outraged. She berates her son for being so weak that he cannot endure “baby booking,” and warns Colvin to stay away from her son.

Ultimately, Bunny and his wife decide they want to informally adopt Namond, but De'Londa resists giving up her son. Bunny goes to prison to talk to Wee-Bey and tells him that Namond is not a “soldier” like his father. Rather, Namond can escape the streets and become anything he wants to be, “maybe even president.” Convinced by Bunny, Wee-Bey tells De'Londa that he has decided that it's best for their son that he live with the Colvin's. When De'Londa is resistant, Wee-Bey chillingly tells her that, even though he is in prison, there is nowhere she can hide where he cannot find her. Not only is De'Londa an evil, inept parent; she is also weak, compared to Namond's more criminal father (who is portrayed, paradoxically and inexplicably, as the superior parent). We last see Namond enjoying a warm family dinner with Bunny and his family.

Throughout the season, the conflict between the two adults is presented in stark terms. De'Londa is unsympathetic and self-interested, she is constantly pushing Namond to be more aggressive, more involved in the drug trade, and focused on becoming a good earner for the Barksdales (and by implication for her). Bunny, on the other hand, is a warm, honest, and generous figure (throughout the episodes in which he appears), only interested in what is best for Namond, an escape from the streets.

Yet, if we use scholarly ethnographies of inner-city neighborhoods, this stark contrast between “street culture” and “middle-class culture” is a vastly over-simplified portrayal of the situation facing De'Londa and Namond (e.g. Bourgois, 2003, Goffman, 2014, Leap, 2012, Venkatesh, 2008, 2009). Elijah Anderson's (1999) seminal ethnography of inner-city Philadelphia, for example, finds that anytime they venture outside, even children from solidly “decent families” (as he labels them) must abandon the values they learn at home and negotiate a very different street-culture. This requires of them a sophisticated ability to “code switch” between the two sets of cultural values. In most ways *The Wire*, especially in season four, addresses the necessity of

code switching, its difficulties, and the psychic toll it takes on children trying to be decent. The issue we raise here is that the show's plotting makes Bunny the voice of decent values and allows him to swoop in and remove Namond from the environment in which he and both his parents have always lived. This eliminates the whole issue of the difficulties of code switching and the life-and-death need to understand the street culture values voiced by De'Londa, thereby reinforcing this unflattering portrayal of yet another blameworthy black mother. This leads to the unsettling portrayal of Wee-Bey, in contrast with De'Londa, as the "good" parent who acts in Namond's interests, as opposed to his black single mother.

### **The Dog That Didn't Bark: The Absence of Rape and Sexual Assault in *The Wire***

Another problematic feature of *The Wire's* treatment of gender issues is its failure to portray the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in the culture of the drug gangs it portrays. Rape is mentioned only six times throughout the entire series, and never figures prominently.<sup>4</sup> The most significant rape occurs off-screen during season four, in the bathroom of the middle school attended by the four central characters. A female student is lured into the bathroom by her boyfriend, where his friends are waiting and force her to have sex with them all. One of the boys we are following, Randy Wagstaff (Maestro Harrell), is talked into standing guard outside the bathroom. We never see the victim or the perpetrators or learn anything about the rape's effect. Instead, the assault is used as a plot device; after Randy is called in by a school administrator, he is labeled a snitch by other students. Ultimately, this labeling leads to tragedy as Randy's home is firebombed, his foster mother is burned to death, and he winds up in a grim group home.

The absence of more extensive consideration of rape might seem unremarkable; rape is not often dealt with in a serious manner in the media. Our criticism here is based, once again, on ethnographies of inner-city drug gangs. Philip Bourgois (2003) studied Hispanic drug dealers on Manhattan's upper west side and found that participating in the gang rape of young women was a central part of the gang's initiation. Gang members attracted young women by becoming their boyfriends, sometimes even promising them gang membership, and then bringing them to rooms where she would be raped by the new and old members. In her ethnography of gangs in the Los Angeles area, Jorja Leap (2012) similarly chronicles the role that rape and sexual assault have played in the lives of the poor inner-city women of color caught up in gang culture and the drug trade. Like Bourgois, she finds that violence against

4. Space does not allow it, but a similar argument would apply to Brianna Barksdale (Michael Hyatt), the sister of family leader Avon Barksdale and mother of D'Angelo Barksdale. Brianna sacrifices her son's best interest in order to preserve her material well-being, even though she is ultimately betrayed by Stringer Bell.

women is central to gang culture and she is able to chronicle its effect on the many women she came to know.

Given *The Wire's* commitment to verisimilitude in portraying its characters' environment, and the long experience of its creators with the specific gang culture they portray, the failure to deal with violence against women is puzzling. Bourgois suggests one explanation in a detailed discussion of his own struggle with whether to include what he found about gang rape. He worried that if he were to include this in the book, it would make it impossible for readers to identify at all with the drug gangs he was studying. Like many ethnographers, and like *The Wire* itself, what he was trying to do was "humanize" an often de-humanized class of inner-city black and brown young drug dealers. Obviously, rape is a difficult issue to deal with in this context.

What all of this research indicates is that rape and sexual assault is a central part of this particular culture (as we have learned lately, it is central to many other cultures, closer to middle-class life, like university fraternities). To sum up, why is this? Why does a show that portrays so many other dimensions so realistically, fail so abysmally on these dimensions? As mentioned above, Laura Lippman offers one answer, as she discusses what a "boys' club" *The Wire* production was, with few women writers and directors. That is one reason for the constant presence of gratuitous sex and nudity in the show – HBO's requisite "titty bar" scene. In this way, the show's creators take advantage of the lack of censorship on HBO, as is happening currently on *Game of Thrones*, to massive cultural censure (Itzkoff 2014; Koehler 2014). However, if you read the book *The Corner*, on which the show's story is based (Simon and Burns 1998), authored by David Simon and Edward Burns, and turned into a miniseries on HBO prior to *The Wire* – there are many nuanced sympathetic but flawed women characters. It thus remains unclear why these characters do not quite make it into the television series.

We suspect that the "boy's club" nature of the series and its production – and television in general – explains the stereotyping we see in *The Wire* and its women. This explains the constant stereotyping of the single black drug-lord mother. The absence of the rape issue poses a more difficult analytic issue. This is reflected in current discourse about the lack of attention to rape in the military and on university campuses, and more generally about our confusion over how to portray the issue of rape.

What I (Williams) have learned from my students affords a good note on which to end this discussion. The first time I taught this class, the question of rape's relative absence came up in class. My first attempt to explain this is that rape is clearly a crime that puts one beyond the pale: you cannot have sympathetic, identifiable characters committing those crimes. Rape is seen as a horrible, horrendous crime; viewers simply cannot identify with a rapist.

A student in Williams' *Wire* class mentioned another theory. His explanation was that, while we say rape is a crime that is beyond our ability to sympathize, unlike most other crimes shown in *The Wire*, rape and sexual assault is a crime that is ongoing and ever-present in middle-class and upper-class culture,

unlike drug dealing, etc. In the first season, we identify with two 13-year-old boys who pull out a gun and shoot and kill their best friend because they think he is a snitch, even as he begs for his life. Middle-class white people rarely have experience with this level of violence, but rape is a closer issue. Perhaps because of this, it was too threatening for the writers to treat this issue.

One of the great achievements of *The Wire* is that we can sympathize with people who do absolutely heinous crimes, a not uncommon occurrence on this show. However, our ability to sympathize with institutionalized rape is still untested. This was territory into which even *The Wire* dared not tread. Stringer Bell is a classic Shakespearian character, who commits all sorts of shocking and heinous crimes. President Obama's favorite character on *The Wire* is Omar – the gay stick-up boy who shoots people repeatedly.

Finally, the character of Bodie has no parallel in other popular entertainment. Viewers follow Bodie through his whole character arc: he is a relatively good-hearted character who sticks to his principles, yet commits terrible and violent crimes along the way. The show builds up enormous sympathy for him, however, and when he is killed viewers want to cry. You end up crying for both Wallace and Bodie, seeing both as kids caught up in a terrible institutional spiral. In season two, as per Wilson (1997), kids turn to drugs when their other livelihoods disappear. Even the ridiculous Zigi inspires sympathy when he murders. However, we do not come close to trying to portray rape in a similar unflinching yet sympathetic light, perhaps because rape is a ubiquitous middle-class crime. We await the “David Simon” of university culture to help us humanize and figure out the ever-present nature of this crime amongst white, middle-class university students.

## Conclusion

In this essay we posed the question of why a show like *The Wire*, frequently touted as one of the best, most incisive and critical shows ever shown on television, portrays so many disadvantaged people sympathetically and non-stereotypically, yet abjectly fails to do so when portraying most female characters. Although this is a pervasive problem on television, even on most so-called “quality” television products like *The Wire* and its ilk (Newman and Levine 2011), it is nevertheless worth mentioning, and questioning, in each individual case.

The essential problem, in our view, is threefold. The representations of women are marred by the status hierarchy among genres, due to which genres more often featuring male protagonists, such as the criminals and cops of the “police procedural,” are favored over other genres in “quality” television. Also, the representation of women on television is affected by their concomitant under-representation amongst television's back-stage workers such as writers, directors, and producers, noted by Lippman (2009) in her almost apologetic piece detailing this issue in the case of *The Wire*. Finally, women's representation on television is harmed by overall norms of women's amply

documented under- and distorted representation in most media, which create a situation where women's relative absence is barely noticed by female or male audience members, critics, and industry personnel (Smith 2008). *The Wire* may represent a first step toward improving representations of men of color, the underclass, and lesbians, but it is not similarly valuable vis-à-vis the representation of women overall.

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