



**The Reframing of Black America:  
The Portrayal of African Americans  
in American Television Crime Dramas**

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## ABSTRACT

Crime dramas are one of the most popular genres in film and television history. For over 100 years, American audiences have watched depictions of the conflicts that occur between cops and bad guys, and sometimes between cops and cops, or bad guys and bad guys. In the early days of film, the most common role of police officers was that of the bumbling fool who was there to serve as a laughingstock for the audience, and to serve as both a set-up and a punchline for the protagonist. But what happened when people were asked to take onscreen police officers more seriously? And what happens when lines between worlds fictionalized and real begin to blur?

This research explores the evolution of the police drama from the series that invented the genre in the 1950s to the one that deconstructed and revolutionized it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it particularly looks at the roles that race and racism played in the changing nature of this genre. It examines how African Americans are represented in crime dramas and looks at the way that these television shows replicate or challenge stereotypes that suffuse American media and popular culture. Sometimes the shows acted as a mirror to reflect the broad national view. At others, they were intended to serve as a gadfly to instigate change.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the enduring legacies of American mass media has been the ossification of stereotypes based on race and ethnicity. Such portrayals were not accidental or simply by circumstance. They were instead a vestige of the manner in which non-White people had been rendered to the broader culture since the nation's founding. In the era before the innovation of film, the popularity of minstrel shows was not merely due to being a form of entertainment. They were also specifically "a vehicle for whites to ridicule African Americans."<sup>1</sup> The mocking way African Americans were displayed was a direct outgrowth of what the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Harvard scientist Nathaniel Southgate Shaler called the "Negro Problem."<sup>2</sup> This problem was the growing worry of how to handle the population of four million people who had suddenly been freed from their former lives of enslavement. Minstrelsy was a way for the broader White audience to keep Black people at a lower status, and thus an intentional way to maintain White supremacy.

This supremacist philosophy became baked into the structure of various modes of entertainment, which grew to touch upon all forms of mass media. In 1915, the first feature length film created in Hollywood was released. Along with many technological innovations, *The Birth of a Nation* also established a precedent of depicting African Americans based on crude

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Recchio, (2011). "The Serious Play of Gender: Blackface Minstrel Shows by Mary Barnard Horne, 1892-1897." *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* (Vol. 38, No 2).

<sup>2</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, (2011). *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

stereotypes rather than as fully-formed human beings. Due to the new medium's ability to live beyond the moment, such stereotypes were images that carried past American shores as well as perpetually into the future. As a visually-based medium, rather than one using written text, it also allowed for these stereotypes to bypass some of the difficulty that language or lack of education may have presented in books or journals.

Based on the novel *The Clansman* by Reverend Thomas Dixon, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was the first 12-reel film in cinematic history. It also pioneered many other techniques that quickly became standards of the film industry such as an original musical score, high angle and panoramic long shots, close-up shots on individual faces to enhance emotional effect and dissolves to change scenes. Innovations such as these have led to *The Birth of a Nation* being regularly named as one of the most influential movies in the history of film. In 1993, it was voted into the National Film Registry at the United States Library of Congress; five years later the American Film Institute listed it as number 44 in the 100 greatest films in American history.<sup>3</sup>

By any measure, *The Birth of a Nation* is also a profoundly racist film. Set during the Civil War and Reconstruction era of United States history, it uses White actors in blackface to portray African Americans as highly unintelligent and overly sexually aggressive toward White women. One scene shows a militia made up of African-American men ransacking a house occupied by White women before being defeated by Confederate soldiers. The Ku Klux Klan is depicted as a noble force set on protecting White citizens from the dangers of Black people. Toward the end of the movie, Klansmen line up outside of the homes of Black citizens to

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<sup>3</sup> Source: AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies, <http://www.afi.com/100Years/movies.aspx> (retrieved 29 August 2016)

intimidate them into not voting. There are various scenes throughout the film depicting African Americans engaging in stereotypical behavior such as sitting around lazily drinking liquor and gorging on fried chicken.

On its surface, this was not a new phenomenon. At the time *The Birth of a Nation* was released, minstrel shows had been making similarly stereotypical depictions of African Americans for decades, first using White actors in blackface and later using Black performers. Although one defense of minstrel shows may have been that they provided a way for White Americans to learn about Black culture, one scholar doubts the legitimacy of such an explanation by pointing out that any member of a minstrel show audience could have simply watched Black street performers, or the daily lives of Black people in general. This same scholar offers the following thoughts:

For white audiences saddled with their own social insecurities, [a minstrel character] offered a figure they could laugh at and look down upon, whose failures at refinement out-measured their own shortcomings, whose station on the lowest rung of the social ladders assured their own tenuous hold on propriety. In short, blackface performance...was gratifying because it provided two things middle-class Americans ached for: release and assurance.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, minstrel shows were popular because they afforded White audiences an opportunity to watch and be entertained by a segment of the population that they perceived to be of a lower class, which further fed into the racism of the day. *The Birth of a Nation* was also

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<sup>4</sup> W. Brundage, (2011). *Beyond blackface: African Americans and the creation of American popular culture, 1890-1930*.



instrumental in shifting the stereotypical view of African Americans from the childlike buffoons they usually were in minstrel shows to the dangerous criminals they were often depicted as in later media portrayals.

Although the setting was of a bygone era, the politics of *The Birth of a Nation* were meant to be contemporary. After the conclusion of the Civil War, the emancipation of that formerly enslaved population led to a period of uncertainty in the American South. There was no blueprint on how to incorporate four million people who had suddenly acquired a new status and no precedent on how the rest of society should react to the new reality. To keep order, the United States military maintained a presence in the former Confederate states from the war's end in 1865 through 1877. During this period, people who had been formerly enslaved developed a semblance of upward mobility, gaining both economic and political influence. There was even a legislative movement to help them, as Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed African Americans equal treatment in public transportation and public accommodations such as hotels and theaters. However, in 1876 a compromise was reached between White Americans in the North and the South that resulted in Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes winning the presidency. In exchange for support from voters in the South, Hayes agreed to withdraw the military presence. By 1877, the last remainder of these troops left Louisiana and South Carolina, ending the period of Reconstruction and allowing the former Confederate states to begin dealing with African Americans however they saw fit, with virtually no interference from the federal government. Over the next several decades, this resulted in innumerable acts of violence committed against African Americans, with most of the perpetrators never having to legally answer for these

crimes. By the time of *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915, “America was well prepared to embrace a new way to celebrate the long-held notions of White superiority and Black inferiority.”<sup>5</sup> The innovation of film provided just such an outlet.

This knowledge is key to understanding the environment that existed in the era of *The Birth of a Nation’s* release. The orchestrators of popular entertainment at the time were establishing a mentality among audiences that reduced the characterizations of Black people to a few negative stereotypes. While this had been damaging to the portrayal of African Americans during the era of minstrel shows, adapting it to film elevated this to an exponentially more dangerous level because of film’s role in the birth of a new form of mass media.

*The Birth of a Nation* was not the first film that was rooted in anti-Black racism. Charles Fred Hearn tells us that “racism was the theme of dozens of silent film shorts...that ridiculed African Americans by portraying them as primitive, clumsy, ignorant, immoral and not to be trusted.”<sup>6</sup> However, its technological innovations and long running time—at a time when most films rarely ran for longer than 15 minutes, *The Birth of a Nation* runs for over three hours—caused it to stand out from among its peers. Although its box office performance has long been the source of speculation, periodicals such as *Time* and *Variety* estimate that it took in approximately \$5 million during its theatrical run, which would be over \$117 million in 2016.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Fred Hearn, (2014). "The Birth of a Nation: The Case for a Tri-Level Analysis of Forms of Racial Vindication." *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5366>.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Fred Hearn, (2014). "The Birth of a Nation: The Case for a Tri-Level Analysis of Forms of Racial Vindication."

The combination of high-tech advancement and extreme popularity gave *The Birth of a Nation* a level of influence heretofore unforeseen in the nascent film industry.

The invention of cinema created a paradigm shift in the way media was dispersed to the public. Prior to its creation, people took in media on a personal or local level, such as an individual reading a book or a community attending a play together. Film provided the means for a content creator to make something once and then share that same media product multiple times with wide-ranging audiences. At this point, the influence of those content creators became much more powerful than what had previously been possible. Thus, when D.W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, the portrayal of African Americans established in the film could reach a wider range of audiences than any minstrel show had previously been able. Included within this reach were international audiences, who had previously had little-to-no experience with minstrel shows due to the limitations of geography.

In 1910 the Biograph Company, a film company based in Manhattan, sent D.W. Griffith to Los Angeles to shoot the motion picture *In Old California*, which was about that state when it was still a part of Mexico. Griffith chose to shoot in a small village called Hollywood. *In Old California* was the first film shot in the state of California; over the next few years, other studios and directors followed this lead and began shooting films in the southern part of the state as well, driven in large part by the mild climate, reliable sunlight and the cheaper cost of doing so compared to New York City. By the time World War I started, Los Angeles in general—and Hollywood in particular—had established itself as the most prominent film industry in the world.

During the ensuing decades, the film industry would grow exponentially larger as it became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the world. In 1910, approximately 26 million people visited movie theaters every week.<sup>7</sup> Within 20 years that number had grown to over 60 million, which was over 65% of the American population. Although those numbers fell during the 1930s, by 1942 they had once again surpassed the 60 million people mark.<sup>8</sup> Such an enormous audience provided ample opportunities for the messages and stereotypes that had been shown in *The Birth of a Nation*, and that is precisely what happened. Films such as *Check and Double Check* (released in 1930), *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) and *Up in the Air* (1940) were released by Hollywood studios incorporating many of the same racial caricatures as the 1915 film. In the case of *Check and Double Check* and *Up in the Air*, Black characters were played by White actors in blackface, even though African-American actors were common by this time. Meanwhile, although it cast Black actors in the roles written for African-American characters, *The Littlest Rebel* mimicked *The Birth of a Nation* by utilizing a plot set in the South during the Civil War, with Confederate sympathizers serving as the protagonists. All the African-American actors played enslaved people. The complexity of the relationship between African Americans and the film industry during this era is addressed in an exhibit entitled *From Blackface to Blaxploitation: Representations of African Americans in Film* displayed at the John

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<sup>7</sup> Eileen Bowser, (1990). *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> C. Cowden, (2015, January 6). "Movie Attendance Has Been On A Dismal Decline Since The 1940s." *Business Insider*.

Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African-American History and Culture at Duke University:

African Americans have had a long and rather complex history in the American motion picture industry. Early depictions of African-American men and women were confined to demeaning stereotypical images of people of color. During the first decades of the 20th century, many films depicted a nostalgic and idealized vision of life in the antebellum South. Memories of the Civil War were still fresh, and these films served as a means for creating some measure of reconciliation between the North and South by glorifying the image of the Old South and its "Lost Cause." African-American characters, in keeping with the dominant stereotypes, were portrayed as incompetent, child-like, hyper-sexualized, and criminal.

Even the roles for African Americans that were intended to be more positive--such as loyal servants, mammies, and butlers--reinforced a belief that the proper social position for Blacks was that of a servant who was unswervingly devoted to his/her White masters and to upholding the current social order.<sup>9</sup>

Such depictions were spread even further with the advent of a new technology: the television.

The first United States patent for the device that would come to be known as the television was granted to Charles Francis Jenkins in 1925. Three years later, the Federal Radio Commission authorized him to begin broadcasting moving images on a regular schedule. In

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Thompson, (2016). *From Blackface to Blaxploitation: Representations of African Americans in Film*. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from <http://exhibits.library.duke.edu/exhibits/show/africanamericansinfilm>.

1945, there were fewer than 10,000 television sets in American homes. Fifteen years later there were an estimated 52 million sets, meaning nearly 90% of American homes had a television set in them.<sup>10</sup> The popularity of television as a new medium provided another outlet for certain messages and ideologies to be disseminated to the American public, although the way such messages were sent often differed greatly from how they had in film. Blackface did not survive the transition to television. White actors Freeman Godsen and Charles Corell had performed as the main characters in the *Amos 'n Andy* radio show, as well as in onscreen versions in films such as *Check and Double Check*. But when the show made the move to television, the roles were recast with African-American actors Alvin Childress and Spencer Williams. Tellingly, Childress and Williams “had to be coached to act stereotypically and speak with heavy dialects like the whites who had mocked them on radio.”<sup>11</sup> This suggests that audiences were less interested in seeing an authentic portrayal of African-American life than they were in watching exaggerated parodies.

Following this, African Americans were constantly depicted in ways that often skewed toward caricature. White actors wearing blackface in *The Birth of a Nation* gave way to Black actors being limited to servile roles such as butlers, drivers and mammies in the 1930s and 40s. By the 1960s, societal pressure in the form of the Civil Rights movement, as well as work being done by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had helped foster an environment that created more opportunities for African Americans. Black actors such as Harry

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<sup>10</sup> Glenn Elert, “Number of Televisions in the US.” *The Physics Factbook*.

<sup>11</sup> S. G. Larson, (2006). *Media & minorities: The politics of race in news and entertainment*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Belafonte, Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier began to be featured in leading roles. The advent and proliferation of television programming also provided openings for Black actors, with Bill Cosby in 1965 becoming the first African American to have a lead role on a televised drama. But these examples were few and far between, with most Black actors still being relegated to marginal roles.

Film and television roles for African Americans started to become more available and prominent in the 1970s. In film, Blaxploitation emerged as a genre unto itself. Movies such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown* featured casts that were composed mostly of Black actors. Additionally, some of these films also offered African Americans opportunities behind the camera in producer and director roles. On television, Black sitcoms were gaining in popularity as shows such as *Good Times*, *Sanford & Son* and *The Jeffersons* all ran for several seasons.

However, while these films and television shows opened the door for a greater number of Black actors, there was criticism from some corners on the value of the roles. Virtually all the plots and storylines in both Blaxploitation films and Black sitcoms centered around poor people in destitute sections of American inner cities. Poverty, drug use and sexual promiscuity were near constant themes or topics of discussion. While Black actors were getting more breaks, the types of roles being offered were still very much categorized into a very thin niche. In 1972, Henry W. McGee III (who would later become the long-time president of HBO Home Entertainment) was an undergraduate student at Harvard University. He wrote an article for the school's newspaper titled "Black Movies: A New Wave of Exploitation." In it he says, "what appears to be a breakthrough for a people previously excluded from this important medium is

instead another cruel hoax played on the black community. Blacks have been let into the movies, but only in roles that perpetuate derogatory stereotypes or create counter-productive myths.”<sup>12</sup> African-American actors were being pigeonholed into playing characters whose lives were largely defined by the crime around them.

In his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films*, film historian Donald Bogle names five stereotypical roles that make up the majority of those played by Black actors:

- The Tom – named after the titular character in Harriet Becher Stowe’s book (later adapted into a movie), this character is intended to endear himself to a White audience by always remaining submissive and gentle no matter what hardship he encounters;
- The Coon – a buffoonish character who serves as an object of amusement;
- The Tragic Mulatto – usually female, this character is mixed race and often ostracized by both White and Black characters for not fully fitting into either world;
- The Mammy – a female character who works in service as a housekeeper or nanny for a White family;
- The Buck – a large man who embodies the dangerous characteristics of violence and sexual aggression, and poses a constant threat to White people, especially women.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> H. W. Mcgee III, (1972, October 10). “Black Movies: A New Wave of Exploitation.” *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1972/10/10/black-movies-a-new-wave-of>

<sup>13</sup> Donald Bogle. (2016). *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films* (5th ed.). New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.



Although the primary source for these stereotypes were characters in films and television from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, patterns were established that continue to echo into modern times. It is this last archetype that is of note for this project. By the 1980s, the idea of seeing Black people in criminal environments in film and television had become largely ubiquitous. As activists and civil rights organizations continued the fight for more inclusion for African-American actors, Hollywood power brokers were finding ways to make use of said actors. Perhaps inspired by the way Black actors were used in Blaxploitation films, directors and producers were employing an increasing number of them to use in the popular crime drama genre. Although they were cast as being on both the right and wrong side of the law, they were most frequently used as drug dealers or thieves, or were shown engaging in other types of criminal activity. These roles often made use of the “Buck” stereotype since it played into already-established fears.

This project will examine such portrayals in four television crime dramas spanning the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: *Dragnet* (which aired from 1951-59, and then again from 1967-70), *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87), *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) and *The Wire* (2002-08). Each of these shows represented an evolution in the way that crime dramas told their stories. A part of that evolution was the manner in which African Americans were represented in the genre. As a primary lens through which the broader American public viewed the relationship between police and the Black community, these shows now serve as benchmarks for an historical examination of the depiction of African Americans on television.

## PRE-TELEVISION ERA

Like few other occupations, the work of police has been an institution displayed in film and on television since almost the beginning of both media. In 1922, silent film era star Buster Keaton co-wrote, co-directed and starred in a short film called *Cops*. As is the case with much of Keaton's work, *Cops* is a slapstick comedy that pokes fun at authority figures, in this case the police. Over the course of the 18-minute movie, Keaton's never-named character engages in a series of events that portray police officers as bumbling and incompetent. The rising action of the early part of the film leads to the critical moment where the officers mistake Keaton's character for someone else who tried to plant a bomb in a police department parade. Although the character is clever enough to outsmart the entire department and lock them up in a building, he is guilted by his love interest into ultimately releasing them. The final shot of the film is of a tombstone on which perches the porkpie hat that Keaton's character has worn throughout all the events.

Nearly 100 years later, the broad strokes of *Cops'* plot are eerily recognizable: a man whose only crime was to have the misfortune of running into police officers at the wrong time ends up dead. Buster Keaton's take on interactions between police and the public foreshadowed the skeptical way many Americans view officers of the law to this day. In the third chapter of a five-part series she wrote for the *Washington Post* about the depiction of police on television and film, columnist Alyssa Rosenberg points out that "Keaton was early in his decision to depict police killing a civilian in circumstances that are obviously, outrageously

wrong.”<sup>1</sup> But what may be less familiar to modern audiences is the whimsical lens through which *Cops* sees officers. They serve as the comedic foil for Keaton’s character and are depicted as blundering, inept and none too intelligent.

Such comic portrayals of police were not uncommon during the silent film era. Charlie Chaplin provided a similar one of law enforcement in his 1916 film *Police*. Perhaps most famously, from 1912-1917, a series of films produced by the Keystone Film Company showcased a collection of perpetually incompetent policemen. This group of officers took its name from the film company and the Keystone Cops became a cultural touchstone.

Although such depictions entertained American audiences and proved to be quite popular, real-life police officers were understandably less thrilled by how their occupation was being shown. As early as 1910, the International Association of Chiefs of Police formally adopted a resolution to condemn the film industry because, as the association’s president said at the time, in movies “the police are sometimes made to look ridiculous.”<sup>2</sup> This stance received further support in 1915 when the Supreme Court, with a 9-0 ruling, said in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* that motion pictures were not protected by the First Amendment (this ruling was eventually overturned in 1952). Actions such as these helped police departments by allowing them to constantly nudge film companies into showing officers

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<sup>1</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 26). “Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part III: in Pop Culture, There Are No Bad Police Shootings.” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/26/in-pop-culture-there-are-no-bad-police-shootings/>

<sup>2</sup> Tim Newburn, (2012). *Handbook of Policing*. Cullompton, Devon, UK: Willan Pub.

in ever more slightly positive lights. Then in 1951, the most significant media portrayal of police work up to that point began showing on television.

## DRAGNET

*Dragnet* began its life as a radio show in 1949. By 1951, television sets were a ubiquitous enough presence in American households that the show added that platform as another way to tell its stories, airing weekly on NBC. It “became the template for the modern cop drama”<sup>1</sup> and established the blueprint for virtually every police procedural that has followed in its wake.

*Dragnet* pioneered genre staples such as: the “case of the week” format; focusing on the police’s ability to solve a case instead of action scenes; and detectives working with other members of the police department such as their bosses and ballistic and forensic experts. Most crucially, *Dragnet* established the police as an unambiguously moral force, full of honest men whose chief responsibilities were to remove bad guys from the street for the benefit of good American citizens.

This virtuous portrayal of the police was not by happenstance. To depict *Dragnet* more realistically, series creator Jack Webb (who also plays Joe Friday, the show’s chief protagonist) enlisted the assistance of Marty Lynn, a Los Angeles Police Department detective who had served as a technical advisor for Hollywood movies. This connection led to additional relationships between Webb and members of the LAPD. In exchange for greater access to the inner workings of the department, Webb agreed to allow it to have final approval over scripts. As might be expected, the LAPD focused on stories that displayed its members in the most

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette & Ben Bethell, (2015). *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

positive way possible. This missive was further aided by a branch of the United States government. In 1934, the Federal Communications Commission had been formed to regulate interstate electronic communication. Although film did not fall under its purview, television did. Within a few years of its creation, the FCC had taken the stance that it was responsible for guiding the moral direction of the various media that it governed. By the end of the 1940s, it was promoting “only those kinds of shows which could be considered beneficial to family life, law and order, and ‘the American way.’”<sup>2</sup> This direction dovetailed perfectly with the wishes of the Los Angeles Police Department, and the way it wanted to be seen via its proxy in *Dragnet*. It also happened to coincide with the moral sensibilities of Jack Webb, who personally shared many of the characteristics of the character he played on the show, a man “who respected the Constitution, hated drugs and solved crimes by using modern, scientific investigative techniques and focusing squarely on ‘just the facts, ma’am.’”<sup>3</sup>

This arrangement proved to be everything the LAPD could have hoped for from a public relations standpoint. Many of its peers took notice and followed suit. Within a decade of *Dragnet’s* debut, several other police procedurals that had likeminded relationships with real-life police departments arrived on the air. Included among these were *Highway Patrol* (which was a direct result of a request by Bernard Caldwell, who was the commissioner of the California Highway Patrol and wanted a show like *Dragnet*) and *Naked City*, which was

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette & Ben Bethell, (2015). *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 26). “Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part III: in Pop Culture, There Are No Bad Police Shootings.” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/26/in-pop-culture-there-are-no-bad-police-shootings/>

*Dragnet*'s counterpart in New York City. This wave even swept up the imagination of the top cop in the United States. In 1965, after rejecting several other versions that did not meet his standards, Federal Bureau of Investigations Director J. Edgar Hoover gave ABC his blessing to create the television show *The F.B.I.* As befit the arrangement between law enforcement agencies and television productions, and in step with his reputation for being obsessive and controlling, Hoover had full script approval for the show, and even checked the politics of actors before allowing them to be cast for roles.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, the changes could be viewed as a net positive for all involved parties. Television networks received hit shows that boosted viewership. Television viewers got updated stories to watch and new heroes to cheer for on a regular basis. Police organizations could reshape their image in the eyes of the public. But such a surface level view also obstructs a complete picture of what was happening. The stories being shown onscreen were not necessarily inaccurate. However, they were crafted in a way to reflect the version that the police departments wanted American audiences to see. Much as *Dragnet* set a foundation for other shows to build from, Joe Friday was established as the archetypical persona of a police officer who was never wrong and always did the right thing for the good of his community. The idea was to paint the protagonists of these shows as selfless heroes but as Alyssa Rosenberg argues, they “were, by design, misleading about the harshest realities of the law enforcement agencies they portrayed.”<sup>5</sup> While he was overseeing how the FBI was represented onscreen,

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette & Ben Bethell, (2015). *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 26). “Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part III: in Pop Culture, There Are No Bad Police Shootings.” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from

Hoover was simultaneously maintaining surveillance of the most prominent civil rights activist in the country. No episodes of *The F.B.I.* ever showed agents listening to phone taps of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In any event, these shows seemed to connect with audiences. *Dragnet* was one of the 10 most watched television programs for most of its run. *The F.B.I.* maintained a constant presence in the top 20, and never ranked outside of the top 30 until its last season.<sup>6</sup> So perhaps it is not surprising that during a period when the nation was undergoing social change, the attitude of the larger population seemed to mirror the sensibilities of the men who were the creative forces behind these popular shows.

Jack Webb's politics were staunchly right-wing and that ideology manifested in both the character he played on television and the plots that served as the backbone of *Dragnet* storylines. This became especially apparent in the show's second iteration during the 1960s. Although *Dragnet's* original run ended in 1959, Webb brought the series back to air in 1965 and reprised his role as Joe Friday. In the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Webb found quite a bit of material that inspired many of the program's antagonists. Writing for *Cinema Journal*, Christopher Sharrett notes that "Webb has a full array of 'others' who serve as raw meat for his angry, voracious ideological appetite: hippies, protestors, pot smokers, black militants, liberal intellectuals, and a gaggle of miscellaneous social misfits constitute an army of opposition that

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/26/in-pop-culture-there-are-no-bad-police-shootings/>

<sup>6</sup> Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows (1946-present)* (9th ed.). New York: Ballantine.



is always the fantasy life of the Right.”<sup>7</sup> In one scene of the episode “The Big Departure” that aired on March 7, 1968, Joe Friday and his partner Bill Gannon have detained three young hippies for taking part in a political protest. During the interrogation process, the detectives inquire as to the motivations of the protestor. After gaining this insight, which is painted as simple youthful angst against the establishment, Friday and Gannon proceed to scold the young men for not appreciating everything that the United States could offer them, and how great their country is compared to everywhere else. It is, in effect, a variation of the same speech that people from one generation have given to those following them for several decades, this time with those in the counterculture painted as villains. In the episode “The Big Prophet” that aired earlier in that same season, Friday and Gannon encounter a self-described guru who advocates the use of marijuana and LSD. When he contends that the use of such recreational drugs is not too different from drinking liquor, Friday lectures him on why alcohol is safer and how marijuana is the true gateway drug to a wasted life. Episodes such as these portray the police as being squarely on the opposing side of the counterculture movement, while not so subtly hinting that if the police were the good guys, then anyone else must be bad.

While the political leanings of Jack Webb influenced the direction of one show, those of J. Edgar Hoover were of much greater direct significance to the nation’s status quo. After obtaining his Master of Law degree from George Washington University in 1917, Hoover was hired by the Justice Department. Two years later, he was put in charge of a division of the Bureau of Investigation that was tasked with observing and, if necessary, breaking up the work

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Sharrett, (2012). “Jack Webb Right-Wing and the Vagaries of TV Entertainment.” *Cinema Journal*, 51(4), 165-171.

of domestic agitators. In 1924, at the age of 29, Hoover was appointed the head of the entire Bureau, which was eventually renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was a position he held until his death 48 years later. While guiding the FBI, Hoover expanded the scope of the agency's jurisdiction to take on any entity he considered a threat to national security. Included in this was the Hollywood entertainment industry, which he believed had been infiltrated with Communist agents who were looking to use film and television to turn Americans against the leadership of the nation. While discussing the book *J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: the FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War* for the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, M. Todd Bennett points out that Hoover's team "genuinely believed that Communists had not only infiltrated Hollywood...but also bent movies 'in a direction unfavorable to American ideals and customs.'"<sup>8</sup> The significance of Hoover's concern is that he could deem anything that he viewed as un-American to be a threat and act as he saw fit, which he usually did in covert ways. Among the many things that Hoover decided were associated with Communism were "positive portrayals of 'Negroes.'"<sup>9</sup>

Jack Webb and J. Edgar Hoover appear to have had different personal philosophies on how to interact with the African-American population. While Hoover amassed blackmail material as political ammunition against Civil Rights' activists, there is no indication that Webb's

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<sup>8</sup> M. Todd Bennett. "J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 33.3 (2013): 518-521. *Humanities International Complete*.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Osborne, (2013). "*J. Edgar Hoover Goes to the Movies: The FBI and the Origins of Hollywood's Cold War* by John Sbardellati (review)." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 43(2), 83-85. Center for the Study of Film and History. Retrieved January 15, 2017, from Project MUSE database.

views were particularly extreme for a man of his era one way or the other. But it is Webb's series that more overtly paints a picture of Black Americans as culturally antagonistic towards law enforcement. This is most keenly observed in the episode entitled "Public Affairs" that was the first episode of the 1968-69 season and aired on September 19, 1968. This was three years after the Watts riots, and tension between the Los Angeles Police Department and the community it served remained strained. The plot of the episode revolves around Detectives Friday and Gannon appearing on a local talk show called *Speak Your Mind* to discuss interaction between police and the community, with an audience made up of local people from the area.

It is evident from the beginning of the episode that the purpose is to depict police officers in the best way possible, as was the norm for any episode of *Dragnet*. The other members of the panel on which Friday and Gannon sit, as well as most of the audience, largely consists of people who are caricatures of those who made up the counterculture and anti-establishment movement of the 1960s. There are two other members of the panel alongside the detectives. The first is a history professor wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a tweed jacket with elbow patches, who takes regular puffs on his pipe. The other is the editor of an alternative magazine who wears his hair in a long ponytail and is wearing tie-dyed clothing. During the discussion, every point raised by these two men is countered by the detectives with well-crafted responses that paint the LAPD in the best possible light. When Jesse Chaplain, the magazine editor, criticizes the police as instruments of "the establishment" that do not work with the best interests of students or people of color, Friday retorts that the concept of an establishment is misguided and police always work to the benefit of all citizens. When the professor, Tom Higgins, says that there is a difference between police working to curb robbery

versus acting against peaceful demonstrators, the detective again has an ideologically perfect response. He says that his job is to protect all people, and if protestors are acting within the law and have permits, he will also protect them. If they do not like such limitations, they are free to suggest changes by voting in elections. The episode essentially serves as a propaganda piece for the police department. Reviewing it for *The Atlantic*, Conor Friedersdorf describes it as showing “viewers the world from the perspective of exceptionally eloquent, honorable cops who were nonetheless portrayed as typical.”<sup>10</sup>

But it is the depiction of one Black character that establishes a blueprint for how crime dramas would handle African Americans for the next several decades. Approximately halfway through the episode, this character walks to a lectern intended for audience members to ask questions. He introduces himself as Mambo Mabanda, “the president of the Black Widow Party,” a fictional Black activist group. Mabanda wears his hair in an Afro, and has on a dashiki and dark sunglasses. He addresses the detectives as “honkeys” and compares them to less stylish Nazis. In appearance, words and action, he is the perfect encapsulation of the stereotype of a 1960s Black radical. When he asks Friday to discuss why patrol officers constantly drive through Black neighborhoods to bother the residents, Friday says that although race relations are not perfect, they are improving. He also adds that the LAPD chief is making that improvement his number one priority. As Friedersdorf points out in *The Atlantic* article, Friday

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<sup>10</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, (2015, June 12). “The Dagnet Effect: How TV Has Obscured Police Brutality.” *The Atlantic*. Retrieved January 10, 2017 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/the-brutal-facts-that-sergeant-joe-friday-ignored/395591/>

offers no further explanation on how exactly the chief planned to do that.<sup>11</sup> However, it is the subsequent exchange between Mabanda and the detectives that would prove to be the most foretelling. Mabanda asks the detectives to discuss a Black teenager who had recently been gunned down by Los Angeles police officer. Once again, they have a ready-made response.

MABANDA: What about that 15-year-old boy who was shot down last week by one of you brave boys in blue. Tell us about him, will you do that, man?

GANNON: That 15-year-old was sniping at passersby from a rooftop. He wounded six people, one of them seriously, before the officer got there. The officer was a better shot.

FRIDAY: You can be shot just as dead by a 15-year-old as by his grandfather.

In these three lines of dialogue, we can see the foundation of the ways that police violence against African Americans would be used for the next several decades. When asked why a boy had to be killed by the police, it is first pointed out that he was a threat to others. The unspoken insinuation is that the responding officer had no alternative. And significantly, by referencing his grandfather, Joe Friday links the boy to adulthood, suggesting that he seemed older than he was and was just as dangerous as a fully-grown man. By crafting the response in such a way, there is a clear attempt to make it seem as if the way the situation was handled was the only possible solution. *Dragnet* never aired an episode that contained a scene where the possibility existed that a young Black boy might be viewed as not guilty.

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<sup>11</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, (2015, June 12). "The Dragnet Effect: How TV Has Obscured Police Brutality." *The Atlantic*.

## HILL STREET BLUES

By the 1980s, writers and producers of police dramas had begun to experiment with the formula that had made the genre such a popular staple of television. These newer shows took a more complex approach to telling their stories, which also included showcasing characters who were more three-dimensional than the binary, black-and-white depictions that had been pioneered by *Dragnet*. The most influential of these new cop shows was *Hill Street Blues*, which debuted in 1981 on the same NBC network where *Dragnet* had begun airing 30 years earlier.

*Hill Street Blues* “stood out because it forthrightly tackled social issues that were rarely dealt with on TV cop shows before”<sup>1</sup> and “broke the bonds of what television viewers consider to be ‘drama.’”<sup>2</sup> Writing for the AV Club, Todd VanDerWerff says that “few shows have changed more about television” and argues that it “introduced so many innovations to the TV drama form that it’s possible to mark the evolution of the form in terms of before and after.”<sup>3</sup>

From the very beginning, it was a show that sought to differentiate itself from what had become the status quo for the genre. The very first scene in the pilot episode shows a group of

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<sup>1</sup> Shlomo Schwartzberf, (2010, August 11). “Hill Street Blues: Still a TV Standout.” *Critics at Large*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <http://www.criticsatlarge.ca/2010/08/nearly-thirty-years-on-hill-street.html>

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Macek, (2014, May 13). “Exploring the Depths of the ‘Hill Street Blues.’” *Pop Matters*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <http://www.popmatters.com/review/181739-hill-street-blues-the-complete-series/>

<sup>3</sup> Todd VanDerWerff, (2014, April 29). “Hill Street Blues transcends its era to remain tremendous TV.” *The A.V. Club*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <http://www.avclub.com/review/hill-street-blues-transcends-its-era-remain-tremen-203893>

officers gathered in a meeting room for a morning roll call. In this scene officers are arguing with one another, struggling to stay awake throughout the meeting and even engaging in company gossip. In one darkly comic exchange, the sergeant conducting the meeting tells the gathered officers that they must immediately turn in any weapon that has not been sanctioned by the department. The scene immediately cuts to every officer and detective in the room grumbling as they place a variety of guns, switchblades, clubs and other assorted weapons on a table. The punchline comes when the meeting is adjourned and each one of those distinguished members of law enforcement retrieves their banned weapon before leaving the meeting room, without so much as a second glance from the sergeant.

In just those few minutes, *Hill Street Blues* showed itself to be a very different show than *Dragnet* and the various doppelgangers that had followed in its wake. Gone were the depictions of law enforcement as unimpeachably upstanding members of society who followed the strict moral code established by the law. Instead viewers saw police officers who were not always portrayed as unambiguously heroic. This was by design. *Hill Street Blues* was the result of NBC head Fred Silverman's wish for "a down and dirty cop show that would appeal to a more adult constituency."<sup>4</sup> He entrusted the task of creating this show to a pair of writer-producers, Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll. The duo accepted the job on the condition that the network remain largely hands off; they were somewhat disillusioned with their previous television experiences and wanted the freedom to make something fresh. NBC agreed to this stipulation, and Bochco and Kozoll went to work. While the writing on shows like *Dragnet* and *The F.B.I.* had

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette, & Ben Bethell, (2015). *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

largely depended on input from the various law enforcement agencies that were being fictionalized, Bochco and Kozoll assembled a creative team that proved to be every bit as industry-shaking as their intentions for the show were. Several members of the writing staff had both graduated from and taught writing at various Ivy League universities. Another had been a Literary Associate for a theater company. Kozoll himself had attended graduate school in Paris before also spending time as a college professor. As Robert J. Thompson states in his book *Television's Second Golden Age*, "this was not your average collection of hacks."<sup>5</sup>

That *Hill Street Blues* was a show that took such an innovative approach to telling its stories can be directly linked to the literary pedigree of the writing staff. It was this unique creativity that also led to characters that were more developed than previous police dramas had allowed. One of Fred Silverman's hopes for the show was that it would explore the personal lives of officers and the writers took that request seriously. Viewers were privy to insight such as which characters were romantically entangled with others or who struggled with alcoholism. The show allowed access to the vulnerabilities of police officers previously unseen in the genre. Such access also extended to matters of race.

*Hill Street Blues* did not represent the first time that an African-American actor played a police officer onscreen. Fourteen years before the show first aired, Sidney Poitier famously acted as a Philadelphia detective sent to investigate a murder in Mississippi in the film *In the Heat of the Night* (additionally, Steven Bochco's previous project had been a short-lived

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<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Thompson, (1996). *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER: Hill Street Blues, Thirtysomething, St. Elsewhere, China Beach, Cagney & Lacey, Twin Peaks, Moonlighting, Northern exposure, L.A. law, Picket fences, with brief reflections on Homicide, NYPD Blue & Chicago Hope, and other quality dramas*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.



television series called *Paris*, that featured African-American actor James Earl Jones in the lead role as a police captain). Nor was it the first television series to pair a Black man and White man as law enforcement partners, which had been done earlier by Bill Cosby and Robert Culp in *I, Spy*. But the show's pairing of Officers Bobby Hill and Andy Renko (played, respectively, by actors Michael Warren and Charles Haid) pioneered a partner dynamic that would later be mimicked in films such as the *Lethal Weapon* franchise and on later shows such as *Miami Vice*, as well as another series that will be explored in a later chapter. Unlike *In the Heat of the Night*, issues pertaining to race were rarely the central focus of plots on *Hill Street Blues*. But the show also eschewed the approach of *I, Spy*, which completely ignored discussing race altogether. Instead, the writers of *Hill Street Blues* used the partnership of Hill and Renko to make explorations and observations about race that were far more thoughtful and nuanced than Joe Friday's lukewarm appeal to Black residents. The two men have a genuine friendship but that does not stop Renko from expressing a prejudicial attitude when he learns that his Black partner is dating a White woman. A policeman openly expressing a view that was understood to be socially impolite was a marked departure from what television audiences were accustomed to seeing. But as Shlomo Schwartzberg writes in a 2010 retrospective about the series, *Hill Street Blues* was "aware of its characters' racial, ethnic and religious differences"<sup>6</sup> in a way that no previous series had been.

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<sup>6</sup> Shlomo Schwartzberg, (2010, August 11). "Hill Street Blues: Still a TV Standout." *Critics at Large*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <http://www.criticsatlarge.ca/2010/08/nearly-thirty-years-on-hill-street.html>

This is not to say that the series handled everything regarding race with the same delicate sensibilities. Outside of the main cast (along with Michael Warren, actor Taurean Blacque played Detective Neal Washington), Black actors were often relegated to roles that required them to play criminals and drug addicts. The latter is especially noteworthy given that *Hill Street Blues* aired during a decade that is often associated with the perception of a rise in the use of drugs among African Americans in the inner city. To a watching audience, these portrayals could reinforce the notion that Black people were the main culprits in the drug war. This take carries additional weight because, as Alyssa Rosenberg discusses in her *Washington Post* opus, by this point Richard Nixon's declaration that drug abuse was "public enemy Number One" had become firmly entrenched into the minds of many Americans, and there was real harm in strictly identifying anyone involved in the drug trade with the faces of Black people.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, *Hill Street Blues* continues to exist as a pivotal television series in terms of storytelling, showcasing police and the presentation of African Americans on television. In a 2014 interview with *The Huffington Post*, television producer Joel Fields stated:

What was so remarkable was that Steven Bochco created a cop drama that was about characters instead of police work, about the human condition instead of the procedural elements that had been the hallmarks of television police shows up to that point.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 27). "Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part IV: The Drug War's Most Enthusiastic Recruit: Hollywood." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/26/in-pop-culture-there-are-no-bad-police-shootings/>

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Ryan, (2014, April 29). "TV Writers Weigh in On Legacy of 'Hill Street Blues' As Classic Drama Hits DVD." *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/29/hill-street-blues-dvd\\_n\\_5232710.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/29/hill-street-blues-dvd_n_5232710.html)

By including African Americans in that discussion of the human condition, *Hill Street Blues* helped push forward the conversation.

One of the groundbreaking elements of *Hill Street Blues* was its acknowledgment of law enforcement as capable of being flawed human beings. But while the detectives on that show sometimes proved themselves to be less than always perfect, the main character on a later television project by Steven Bochco took that concept to another level.

## NYPD BLUE

In 1993, Bochco debuted a new series, this time partnering with David Milch, who had been one of the key writers who had worked for him on *Hill Street Blues*. This new series was initially intended to be focused on a character named John Kelly. However, the actor in that role, David Caruso, left just four episodes into the show's second season, at which point it was restructured around the second lead. This character, Detective Andy Sipowicz, was played by actor Dennis Franz and was as ideologically far away from the Joe Friday mold as any protagonist had been on a police drama up to that point.

While Bochco had asked for—and received—creative freedom on *Hill Street Blues*, the success of that show (as well as his immediate follow-up to it, *LA Law*) had provided him with enough leverage to push television boundaries even further. Bochco had long wanted to produce “the first R-rated TV series”<sup>1</sup> and by the early 1990s, ABC was willing to give him the opportunity. This led to the creation of *NYPD Blue*, which eventually became one of the most critically and commercially successful shows in the network's history, as well as one of the longest-running. Much as with *Hill Street Blues*, the police on *NYPD Blue* are clearly shown to be flawed human beings. But unlike the cops on the earlier series, where those flaws are usually seen as minor character quirks, Detective Sipowicz is unmistakably depicted as a drunken, racist

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Thompson, (1996). *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER: Hill Street Blues, Thirtysomething, St. Elsewhere, China Beach, Cagney & Lacey, Twin Peaks, Moonlighting, Northern exposure, L.A. law, Picket fences, with brief reflections on Homicide, NYPD Blue & Chicago Hope, and other quality dramas*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

lout who is more than willing to break rules to achieve his goals. In this regard, Andy Sipowicz is the precursor to the “antihero as protagonist” wave that was the basis of many television series that came over the next several years, such as *The Sopranos*, *The Shield* and *Breaking Bad*.

Writing about *NYPD Blue*, Jason Vest points out that the show “is not an ideologically pure program that advocates a resolutely conservative, liberal, authoritarian, anarchic, totalitarian, or utopian agenda.”<sup>2</sup> This suggests that using Andy Sipowicz as a blatantly racist vessel was a way for Steven Bochco and David Milch to sidestep some of the trappings of the genre while ostensibly remaining within its established parameters. *NYPD Blue* was not trying to take an explicitly political stance the way that *Dragnet* often did, nor was it making broader cultural observations in the vein of *Hill Street Blues*. But Sipowicz’ racism allowed the creative team of the *NYPD Blue* to explore many of the very same subjects that those shows did from a different perspective.

The outlet for that perspective was not subtle. Sipowicz’ bigotry was displayed frequently and with little regard to how anyone around him felt about it, up to and including his casual use of the word “nigger.” His racist nature is often reared due to the conflicts he has with his boss, Lieutenant James Fancy, who is a Black man. Viewers are first shown the complexity of this relationship in the third episode of the first season:

FANCY: I’ve got my personal opinions about you. I think you’re an asshole.

SIPOWICZ: I think you’re an asshole.

FANCY: But that hasn’t affected how I’ve treated you on the job.

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<sup>2</sup> Jason P. Vest, *The Wire, Deadwood, Homicide, and NYPD Blue: Violence Is Power*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011.

SIPOWICZ: You really believe that?

FANCY: Yeah, I really believe it.

SIPOWICZ: You guys make me laugh.

FANCY: Now what guys would you be referring to?

SIPOWICZ: Black bosses.

FANCY: Well, that didn't take long.

SIPOWICZ: I thought I was supposed to feel free to express my opinions.

FANCY: Well, for you I guess that means being a bigot.

SIPOWICZ: Hey, I'm not up nights thinking about the two of us out for ribs, but all I was saying is you guys live inside the books. You act like machines, you know?" You don't like somebody, you go after them like Robohumps.

FANCY: Well, you think we might play it close to the vest because we know people are watching for us to mess up?

SIPOWICZ: Oh, makes you nervous, doesn't it? Somebody always looking over your shoulders, waiting for you to make a mistake?

FANCY: The truth is, I've cut you slack because you were a good cop and you were a good teacher.

SIPOWICZ: I could be that again. I could be that again if you would just get your damn foot off my neck.

In this scene, *NYPD Blue* provides examples of virtually all the ways that Sipowicz's racism would manifest throughout the series: he is combative, groups all Black people together, uses racial stereotypes and is quick to blame Blacks for his own shortcomings. It is also unlikely that

making Lieutenant Fancy Sipowicz's main foil in addition to being a Black man was by happenstance. Alyssa Rosenberg takes note of an observation made by one of the show's creators:

“One reason so many television dramas portray black characters in positions of authority,” David Milch wrote in *True Blue*, his memoir of his work on *NYPD Blue*, “might be that these shows want to have the credentials of liberalism without having to portray in scope or depth minority characters...whose fuller treatment they felt the audience might resist.”<sup>3</sup>

While reviewing a 1998 episode of *NYPD Blue* for the *Baltimore Sun*, television critic David Zurawik pointed out that, by having its main character hold these views, the show ran the risk of legitimizing them among viewers who felt similarly.<sup>4</sup> There was precedent for such a concern. In the 1970s, Norman Lear had created the sitcom *All In the Family* and embodied the main character with every stereotypical trait that could be attributed to bigotry. That character, Archie Bunker, went on to become one of the most beloved characters on television. Whether Andy Sipowicz received that same level of positive response is debatable (in 1999, *TV Guide* ranked “TV's 50 Greatest Characters Ever;” Archie Bunker was ranked fifth, Andy Sipowicz was

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<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 26). “Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part V: Blue Lives: Pop Culture's Minority Cops.” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/28/blue-lives-pop-cultures-minority-cops/?utm\\_term=.7337e804fc0b](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/28/blue-lives-pop-cultures-minority-cops/?utm_term=.7337e804fc0b)

<sup>4</sup> David Zurawik, (1998, Dec 15). ‘NYPD’ takes on racism; preview: Police show goes toe-to-toe with issues in another gripping episode, handling rage and recrimination with honesty and sensitivity. *The Baltimore Sun* Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/406394318?accountid=10598>

23<sup>rd</sup>) but this aspect of the character allowed for the show's writers to examine aspects of race that were figuratively off limits for previous shows.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> episode of the first season, Detective Sipowicz and his partner investigate a robbery that took place at the home of a wealthy White family. After learning that the college-aged daughter of the family had recently dated a Black man, the detectives go to question him. The ex-boyfriend, Lewis Futrel, becomes angry that he is being treated like a suspect and accuses the police of racial profiling. Sipowicz becomes exasperated and begins to respond to Futrel with anger of his own. The brilliance of the scene lies in the way that it can be received differently by viewers with different life experiences. A White person watching the scene may wonder why Futrel becomes irate so quickly when the detectives are just trying to do their jobs. But a Black man who has been harassed by police for crimes which he did not commit might see in that scene his own experience finally shown on television. It is an example of how *NYPD Blue* often showcased its interest in what George Thomas and Richard Leo term exploring "moral judgements and moral ambiguities."<sup>6</sup>

*NYPD Blue* eventually provides a backstory that traces the root of the detective's racism to his childhood, related to an incident that may or may not have happened to his father.

Although his views of African Americans evolve over the course of the show, the mere fact that

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<sup>5</sup> (1999, October 16). *TV Guide October 16-22, 1999 TV's 50 Greatest Characters Ever*.

<sup>6</sup> George C. Thomas, and Richard A. Leo, (2005). "Interrogating Guilty Suspects: Why Sipowicz Never Has to Admit He is Wrong." *What Would Sipowicz Do? Race, Rights, and Redemption in NYPD Blue*. Glenn Yeffeth, Shanna Caughey, eds., 2005.



the show was willing to showcase its main character as holding such views while simultaneously representing officers of the law was groundbreaking.

## THE WIRE

From 2002-2008, the television series *The Wire* aired on HBO, telling an increasingly expanding story about the reality of life in Baltimore, Maryland. Ostensibly a show about the life of police officers and criminals, over the course of 60 episodes it grew into an opus that turned a critical eye to the examination of multiple American institutions. By the end of its run, it was “perhaps the most critically acclaimed show that has ever been on television.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, it has gone on to inspire university courses on campuses as esteemed as Harvard, Duke, Johns Hopkins and the University of California-Berkeley. Of its many notable aspects, perhaps the most significant—and one that firmly separates it from its predecessors discussed in previous chapters—is the way it depicts its African-American characters.

*The Wire* had ambitions that were entirely different from those earlier shows. Although they used a similar platform and point of entry, the creative team behind the show was uninterested in a simple narrative that pits good guys against bad guys. David Simon, who created the show and served as its showrunner, also says:

It is instead, about what we have left behind in our cities, and at what cost we have done so. It is, in its larger themes, a television show about politics and sociology and, at

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<sup>1</sup> Karen McCormack, “Revisiting *The Wire*.” *Visual Studies*. 30:1 (2015) 90-97.

the risk of boring viewers with the very notion, macroeconomics. And frankly, it is an angry show.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, *The Wire* was intended to be a show about the failure of institutions and, more importantly, the way those failures affected the people whose lives depended on them.

Telling a story that attempts to capture the scope of a single institutional failure can be daunting, to speak less of doing so with several such failures. It is easy to understand why the show struggled with ratings during its initial run. Additional factors such as a majority African-American cast and the deep issues it forced viewers to face help explain its “unmistakable lack of broad commercial appeal.”<sup>3</sup> However, while ratings are a goal of any televised program, the creative team behind *The Wire* had other aspirations that drove their creative decisions.

Due to the different ideology that was behind its creation, it is difficult to compare *The Wire* to its contemporaries; what constituted “success” for a show like *The Sopranos* or *The West Wing* would not necessarily apply in this case. Similarly, it can be a challenge to hone in on a singular inspiration for *The Wire*. As Benjamin Leclair-Paquet notes, “the richness, uniqueness and intricacy of *The Wire* has made it difficult to trace its thematic and stylistic heritage.”<sup>4</sup> What can be more easily tracked however, is its legacy.

With its debut season taking place in 2002, *The Wire* had the good fortune of airing during the most revolutionary, and perhaps most important, period of American television

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<sup>2</sup> Jason P. Vest, *The Wire, Deadwood, Homicide, and NYPD Blue: Violence Is Power*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Tyree, “The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season.” *Film Quarterly*. 61:3 (2008) 32-38.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Leclair-Paquet, “The Wire as speculative research.” *Theory*. 18:2 (2014) 135-144.

history. Had it premiered ten years earlier, its narrative density and low ratings would have doomed it to cancellation after just a few episodes. Had it come ten years later, it would have struggled to carve a niche amidst the multitude of program offerings from network, cable and streaming providers. Instead, *The Wire* debuted at a time when it could help usher in a new movement for television. HitFix.com television critic Alan Sepinwall says in his book *The Revolution Was Televised*:

The rise of this movement came at the perfect technological time, as DVRs, On Demand, and especially DVD box sets and video streaming made it easy for people to catch up on that great-but-complicated new show they'd heard so much about. (DVDs allowed fans to turn their friends onto new discoveries the way rock fans used to pass around albums from their favorite up-and-coming new band.) And the spread of the internet into every corner of modern life made it easier to discuss and make sense of shows that might have seemed too challenging back in the day.<sup>5</sup>

This technological advancement allowed *The Wire* to reach audiences that it would not have been able to get just a few years earlier. It also provided what in business circles is referred to as "a long tail," meaning that even though its initial impact may have been muted, its overall influence could last much longer.

It is this extended life that in part helped *The Wire* reach the attention of academics who continue to use it as a teaching tool today. In a 2012 article in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, British researchers Rebecca Bramall and Ben Pitcher stated that, to discuss the

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Sepinwall, (2012-11-08). *The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (p. 5). What's Alan Watching?. Kindle Edition.

show, they would have to “take as our starting point the considerable interest *The Wire* has generated among those working in the humanities and social sciences.”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, while writing for *Contexts*, a publication of the American Sociological Association, University of Minnesota graduate students Sarah Lageson, Kyle Green and Sinan Erensu reached out to multiple professors from various universities to learn about how they utilized the show in their teaching. One of the respondents was William Julius Wilson, who teaches in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. He said the following:

[*The Wire*] does an excellent job of portraying fundamental sociological principles that have been the focus of social scientists on urban inequality. It is part of a long line of literary works that are often able to capture the complexity of urban life in ways that have eluded many social scientists.<sup>7</sup>

Or put another way, *The Wire* could be used as a teaching tool in a way that provided a shortcut to the heart of issues that were otherwise difficult to explore.

In the years since *The Wire* ended, the United States has seen some changes that have fallen in line with the ideals that the show often espoused. In 2014, Colorado became the first state to legalize the use of recreational marijuana. Since then, three other states have followed suit with full legalization and several more have decriminalized its use. This aligns with the message that the show portrayed in its Season 3 story arc of “Hamsterdam,” which showed the potential benefits of ending the war on drugs. *The Wire: Crime, Law, and Policy* is a legal

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Bramall and Ben Pitcher, (2012). “Policing the crisis, or, why we love *The Wire*.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*,16(1), 85-98.

<sup>7</sup>Sarah Lageson, Kyle Green, and Sinan Erensu, "The Wire goes to college." *Contexts* 10.3 (2011) 12-15.

casebook written by Adam Gershowitz, a professor at William & Mary Law School who uses the series as a part of his curriculum. In the book, he asks the following (written before the changes to marijuana laws):

The incarceration of drug dealers removes many African-American men from their communities, leaving children without fathers. How do we weigh the costs and benefits of current drug policy? Is the status quo the necessary or best course of action? Should incarceration be the primary response to the problem? Would legalization of drugs, or partial decriminalization stop some of the violence?<sup>8</sup>

The creators of *The Wire* offer a glimpse into how they view the answer to those questions in the very first episode of the series when one of the characters, Detective Ellis Carver, points out the folly of calling the War on Drugs a war because “Wars end.” They went on to further explore that concept with “Hamsterdam” by fully showing how a true end to that war would look. The changing perspective on marijuana legalization is an example of that vision being made manifest in American society.

As previously noted, this focus on the African-American population is what truly separates *The Wire* from programs such as *Dragnet*, *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue*. In one form or the other, each of those earlier shows addressed issues of race and racism in ways that were largely in step with the broader social mores of the time. But the nature of such mores, alongside the beliefs of who made up the audiences that were watching such shows, dictated that African Americans were treated like “others.” When *Dragnet* used an episode to discuss

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<sup>8</sup> Adam M. Gershowitz, *The Wire: Crime, Law, and Policy*. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2013.

what was happening in the Black community, it did so while operating under the premise that those things were happening to a separate group of people that was wholly removed from those that usually made up *Dragnet's* regular characters and audience. When *Hill Street Blues* addressed tensions that existed between a pair of friends who were of different races, there was an underlying assumption that most of the audience had a certain worldview about such things. This audience needed to be taught that there could be other people who might have different perspectives than what was understood to be the norm.

From the outset, *The Wire* told its story under the direction of a different hypothesis. Unlike those previous series, it was a show that intended to be as much about the people the police chase as it was about the police themselves. Also unlike those shows, there was no presumption that these police were the good guys. This was a revolutionary proposition for a cop drama. *NYPD Blue* had proven to be a departure from the norm when it depicted as its lead character a detective who had moral failings. But it softened this stance by showing him to be the proverbial villain with a heart of gold. Although Andy Sipowicz had his flaws, he still meant well. The audience could justify his actions using the logical argument that the ends justified the means. There was no similarly convenient outlet to excuse many of the bad decisions made by members of the Baltimore Police Department that were shown on *The Wire*. The writers made it clear that these detectives were not the heroes that audiences were used to seeing.

In March 2002, three months before *The Wire* debuted, another show called *The Shield* premiered on the FX network. This show also showed police officers clearly and deliberately acting in ways that countered the “good cop” narrative that had been the standard. However, the writers of *The Shield* again provided reasons for audiences to rationalize such behavior.

These detectives were shown as dirty cops for pure capitalistic reasons. Using their influence as officers of the law allowed them to cut deals with drug dealers and commit robberies with impunity. While little attempt is made to justify these actions in any ethical sense (the final scene of the pilot episode shows the head of the rogue police unit murdering a member of his team after correctly surmising that the detective plans to rat out the team), the economic motivations of the rogue detectives are presented in a way that is simple to understand. Additionally, a side benefit of this criminal activity is that it does in fact help the police squad maintain peace in the neighborhoods they cover. In that sense, the “good guy versus bad guy” dynamic of police dramas has not changed. Instead, the audience is simply asked to root for a different team.

In the world that was depicted in *The Wire*, such distinctions were much more complex, if they even existed at all. The idea of establishing a binary where good existed on one side and bad on the other was not a goal of the creative team at all. Indeed, as David Simon says in the introduction to Rafael Alvarez’s book *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, “the best crime shows—*Homicide* and *NYPD Blue*, or their predecessors *Dragnet* and *Police Story*—were essentially about good and evil. [We] are bored with good and evil. We renounce the theme.”<sup>9</sup> Befitting such a philosophy, rarely are any of the characters in *The Wire* depicted as wholly representative of good or bad. Instead, virtually every character with a speaking part is shown to have traits that can be ascribed to both. In the first episode of Season One, William Rawls—a major in the Baltimore Police Department—is shown berating one of his detectives for, in part, caring about the murder of “some project nigger.” That Rawls, a White man, would use such an

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<sup>9</sup> Rafael Alvarez. *The Wire: Truth Be Told*. New York: Canongate Books, 2009.



obviously loaded term in the first episode is clearly meant to elicit a specific visceral reaction among viewers. That reaction is compounded throughout the rest of the first season as the major serves as a constant foil to Detective Jimmy McNulty, who is theoretically the series protagonist. However, the audience is shown a different side of Rawls in the 11<sup>th</sup> episode of that season. After a fellow detective is shot in the line of duty during an undercover operation, McNulty begins to go into shock. As the one who instigated the investigation that led to her shooting, he blames himself for his colleague's predicament. But it is Major Rawls who pulls him aside to help him get through the trauma by telling him that he is not to blame for the shooting (although he adds, in a manner that is true to both this specific character and the general complexity of everyone on the show, "And the motherfucker saying this, he hates your guts, McNulty. So you know if it was on you, I'd be the son of a bitch to say so"). This display of rough but genuine humanity forces audiences to reconsider a character that decades of genre conventions had conditioned them into viewing in a certain way.

By establishing that every character has both "good" and "bad" aspects residing within them, David Simon and the rest of the creative team of *The Wire* effectively rendered the moral trappings of those simple terms as useless. If everyone was capable of simultaneously being both, then it no longer allowed for the basic narrative that assumed the goodness of police and the evilness of anyone who opposed them, as had been established by *Dragnet* half a century earlier. The deconstruction of that established formula was critical for the overarching messages that *The Wire* shared with its audience. At the very same time that the show was retraining viewers on good and evil, it was also rolling out its message about institutional failure. The first season focuses on the limitations of anyone to change how police departments

operate, regardless of how noble their intentions. Where Jimmy McNulty is an officer who would actually like to make a difference in his community, William Rawls represents the bureaucracy that insists on doing things a certain way, for little more reason than that is how things have always been done.

But the show ingeniously tells that same story from the perspective of the very antagonists that the police are fighting. To fully subvert the good versus bad archetype, and to demonstrate the complexity of good and evil that exists in all people, *The Wire* needed to do something that was uncharacteristic of cop dramas, which is to give the same level of attention to what the criminals were doing as it does to the police. In its first season, it does this by treating one of the drug dealers in Baltimore as the show's co-lead alongside Detective McNulty. D'Angelo Barksdale is a lieutenant in the criminal organization run by his uncle Avon Barksdale. His introduction in the pilot episode shows him being found not guilty of the murder charge that was brought against him when he shot a man in the stairwell of a housing project. But over the course of the season D'Angelo begins to question why so much violence is necessary in his line of work. During a conversation with some of the drug dealers who report to him he asks, "Everything else in the world gets sold without people taking advantage, scamming, lying, doing each other dirty. Why it got to be that way with this?" Like McNulty, D'Angelo is questioning why the status quo must be the way that it is. (The response he gets from his subordinates, "Because [our customers are] dope fiends" is as unsatisfying a response to the drug lieutenant as bureaucratic stonewalls are to the detective.)

By making parallel observations about two organizations that are supposed to be diametrically opposed in the societal (and moral) hierarchy, *The Wire* closed the gap between

them. That in turn forced viewers to consider the people who made up these organizations in a manner unlike any that previous shows had ever asked. For perhaps the first time in the history of the medium, a television show was asking its audience to see both police officers and drug dealers as wholly and genuinely human. *The Wire* subverted *Dragnet's* doctrine of all police officers as heroes. But it did not take the route of *NYPD Blue*, which shows a flawed detective who makes “bad” decisions to get “good” results. Nor did it mimic its contemporary *The Shield*, which showed cops as completely “bad” people. Instead, in the world of *The Wire*, some officers were very good at their job and genuinely cared about their work. Some were just there to make it through the day and collect a paycheck. One character’s natural skills as a detective were ignored by his supervisors due to his refusal to play office politics. Another got his job largely through nepotism. By showing these varying levels of competency and motivation, the show was pointing out that a team of police officers could be made up of the same types of people that any audience member could encounter at their own workplace.

While showing such diversity among the police officers was a step beyond what police dramas usually produced, *The Wire* took things even further by giving that same level of context to the drug dealers that made up the other half of the characters on the show. Rather than seeing them only during their encounters with police, they were also afforded screen time that showed them during candid moments among themselves, or with family members or handling mundane tasks such as getting dressed in the morning or going to the store to buy groceries. As with the scenes that show differentiation among police officers, such scenes were intended to portray the inherent humanity in a population that was rarely afforded the assumption of such. Writers on *The Wire* also found clever ways to point out what they were

doing. In the second episode of Season Three, Detectives Herc, Carver and Dozerman take their girlfriends to the movies. As they are leaving the theater, they run into Bodie, Poot and Puddin, three young drug dealers who are also there with their own girlfriends. After expressing surprise that the detectives have a social life (“Y’all go to the movies?” asks Poot), Bodie explains to the women how he and his friends are harassed every day by these officers, who are always trying to catch them with drugs but always coming up empty. The scene ends with the drug dealers departing, saying cheerfully, “See you tomorrow.”

This type of contextualization is a crucial part in *The Wire*’s attempt to depict authenticity while fighting against the archetypes established by previous examples of the police drama genre. That adherence to authenticity required a very different approach to the way this show told its story. Unlike those earlier shows, *The Wire* used a cast that was mostly made up of African-American actors. This was necessary in part because the setting takes place in Baltimore, Maryland, a city where African Americans make up over 60% of the population.<sup>10</sup> But it also allowed the writers to examine class dynamics that exist among that population. While Black people make up the majority of drug dealers and users on the show, they also occupy a sizable portion of the police force, politicians, educators and the press. In this way, “*The Wire* offers a blend of the contested meanings of race, and recognizes that racial experience is not singular. Black is no longer code for a violence, poverty, crime, deviance, and

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Census 2010, Baltimore city: Detailed Race by Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity, with Total Tallies. *planning.maryland.gov*. U.S. Census Bureau.

drug abuse.”<sup>11</sup> And as noted in the book *Cop Shows*, this forces viewers to recognize that both Black and White characters act in ways that cover the spectrum and cannot be easily characterized as “good” or “evil,”<sup>12</sup> just as David Simon wished it.

This is a constant theme throughout the run of the show. While the failure of institutions may be the overall theme of *The Wire*, and while things like the failed war on drugs may be one of the pet issues that it addresses, there is one other factor that acts as the connective tissue that ties them together, along with almost every major plotline on the show. Perhaps more than any other television program in American history, *The Wire* requires its viewers to pay attention to the way the nation has come to treat those who have been left behind in the pursuit of the American Dream. The second season focuses on how that plays out in the life of White, blue collar workers who find themselves forced to adapt to a society that no longer values them as much as it had in previous generations. However, this is more often explored by following the lives of people in the poor African-American community that makes up Baltimore’s inner city, and nowhere is David Simon’s goal of making the story about politics, sociology and macroeconomics more acutely felt than in the portrayals of the people that make up that community. In the world of *The Wire*—which is meant, by proxy, to reflect the real world—these are a people who are presented as those who have not been allotted a seat at the table of the American Dream. They are a people who are expected to abide by the rules of

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<sup>11</sup> Todd Fraley, “A Man’s Gotta Have a Code: Identity, Racial Codes and HBO’s *The Wire*.” *Darkmatter*. 29 May 2009. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/a-mans-gotta-have-a-code-identity-racial-codes-and-hbos-the-wire/>

<sup>12</sup> Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette, & Ben Bethell, (2015). *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

society, even though society has no interest in rewarding them for that. They are a people who have been left to fend for themselves and then criticized when they are unable to achieve greater success. This type of examination did not begin with *The Wire* nor is it particularly unique to it. It is the type of study that social scientists have undertaken for quite some time. But as Karen McCormack writes, “through strong character development, these struggles are made real in ways that are often hard to capture in academic journals or manuscripts, and thus, the show contributes in unique ways to sociological analysis.”<sup>13</sup>

This is perhaps most acutely felt in the fourth season of the series, when the focus of the story shifts slightly away from the lives of the police and the criminals to focus on four adolescent boys. These are preteens who are growing up in a community that has been forsaken but have not yet been entirely ensnared by its pitfalls. But as we observe them, we see how few options they truly have and why it is almost inevitable that they will succumb to the ills that surround them. J.M. Tyree notes “the truth is that [watching the series] entails an agonizing feeling of helplessness to alter the fates of these characters as they change from boys to men.”<sup>14</sup>

The underlying secret of *The Wire* is that it forces viewers to see inner city Black people, many of whom are drug dealers and murderers, as actual human beings. Instead of dismissing them as caricatures, or reducing them to a homogenous group of “others,” proper context is provided that allows the audience to see the circumstances that create and shape the realities

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<sup>13</sup> Karen McCormack, “Revisiting *The Wire*.” *Visual Studies*. 30:1 (2015) 90-97.

<sup>14</sup> J.M. Tyree, “*The Wire*: The Complete Fourth Season.” *Film Quarterly*. 61:3 (2008) 32-38.

of the people these characters represent. Such a perspective is important considering some of the real-world situations that have taken place since the series ended. The increased attention being paid to the killing of unarmed Black men by police all over the United States may not have come about to the same extent had not there been an increase in the acknowledgment of the humanity of the members of that community. *The Wire* played a role in helping to create that awareness. It made the argument that Black lives matter.

## CONCLUSION

On April 4, 2015 in North Charleston, South Carolina, a 50-year-old forklift operator named Walter Scott was pulled over for a non-working taillight by police officer Michael Slager. At some point during the exchange, Scott got out of his car and ran away. Officer Slager gave chase on foot.<sup>1</sup> The policeman caught up to Scott in an empty lot behind a pawn shop. After the two men engaged in a struggle, Scott broke free and began to run away again. At this point, Michael Slager drew his firearm and fired eight shots at Walter Scott's back. Based on a later coroner's report, five of those bullets landed.<sup>2</sup> After shooting Scott, Slager radioed in to his dispatcher, saying, "Shots fired and the subject is down. He grabbed my Taser."<sup>3</sup>

Slager later claimed that he fired because he "feared for his life" after Scott had taken his stun gun.<sup>4</sup> Unbeknownst to the officer, much of the encounter between the two men had

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Knapp, (2015, April 8). "Dash video strikes at heart of problem, critics of police say." *The Post and Courier*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from [http://www.postandcourier.com/archives/dash-video-strikes-at-heart-of-problem-critics-of-police/article\\_2be4b237-cee6-5b08-8945-0b9baf4f0a01.html](http://www.postandcourier.com/archives/dash-video-strikes-at-heart-of-problem-critics-of-police/article_2be4b237-cee6-5b08-8945-0b9baf4f0a01.html)

<sup>2</sup> Chris Dixon and Tamar Lewin, (2016, May 11). "South Carolina Officer Faces Federal Charges in Fatal Shooting." *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/12/us/south-carolina-officer-faces-federal-charges-in-fatal-shooting.html>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Berman, Wesley Lowery, and Kimberly Kindy, (2015, April 7). "South Carolina police officer charged with murder after shooting man during traffic stop". *The Washington Post*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/04/07/south-carolina-police-officer-will-be-charged-with-murder-after-shooting/?utm\\_term=.79302235c1d1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/04/07/south-carolina-police-officer-will-be-charged-with-murder-after-shooting/?utm_term=.79302235c1d1)

<sup>4</sup> Michael S. Smith and Matt Apuzzo, (2015, April). "South Carolina Officer Is Charged With Murder of Walter Scott". *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from



been captured on cell phone video by a passerby. This video was released after Slager's comments about fearing for his life were made public. It shows the scuffle that occurs between the two men, Scott running away, Slager shooting Scott in the back and Scott collapsing to the ground. Slager walks to Scott's body to handcuff the fallen man's hands behind his back. He then returns to the spot where they were previously scuffling, picks up a small black object, and returns to drop it near Scott's body.

On April 7, 2015, Michael Slager was arrested and charged with first degree murder. He was indicted two months later by a South Carolina grand jury. On October 31, 2016, 18 months after he shot and killed Walter Scott, Michael Slager was put on trial for that act. Exactly five weeks later, on December 5, 2016, Michael Slager became a free man again when the judge declared a mistrial. Despite repeated requests from the judge to keep deliberating, the jury was unable to come to a unanimous decision, with one juror sending a note to the judge saying that "he could not 'in good conscience consider a guilty verdict.'"<sup>5</sup>

The killing of Walter Scott by Michael Slager was just one of several similar incidents that happened within a one year period.

On April 5, 2014, John Crawford was shot and killed by officer Sean Williams in a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio. Police had been called to the store based on reports that a man

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/us/south-carolina-officer-is-charged-with-murder-in-black-mans-death.html?smid=pl-share>

<sup>5</sup> Alan Blinder, (December 5, 2016). "Jurors Unable to Agree in Trial of South Carolina Officer Who Shot Walter Scott". *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 17, 2017.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/us/walter-scott-michael-slager-north-charleston.html>

appeared to be loading a gun and pointing it at other people.<sup>6</sup> The store's surveillance video shows that Crawford, while appearing to be talking on his phone, picked up an air rifle that Walmart sells and held it as he walked through the store. There is no evidence from the video that he ever pointed it at other people.

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was choked to death by officers Daniel Panteleo and Justin Damico in Staten Island, New York. Garner, who had been arrested multiple times for selling untaxed cigarettes, was approached in front of a beauty supply store by two plainclothes police officers. Cell phone video footage of the encounter captures Garner expressing his frustration with the officers:

Get away...for what? Every time you see me, you want to mess with me. I'm tired of it. It stops today. Why would you...? Everyone standing here will tell you I didn't do nothing. I did not sell nothing. Because every time you see me, you want to harass me. You want to stop me...selling cigarettes. I'm minding my business, officer, I'm minding my business. Please just leave me alone. I told you the last time, please just leave me alone.<sup>7</sup>

While Garner is facing one officer, Daniel Panteleo approaches him from behind and attempts to handcuff him. When Garner resists, three other officers approach and help Panteleo wrestle

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<sup>6</sup> Elahe Izadi, (2014, September 25). "Ohio Wal-Mart surveillance video shows police shooting and killing John Crawford III". *The Washington Post*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/09/25/ohio-wal-mart-surveillance-video-shows-police-shooting-and-killing-john-crawford-iii/?utm\\_term=.3ee6e2442710](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/09/25/ohio-wal-mart-surveillance-video-shows-police-shooting-and-killing-john-crawford-iii/?utm_term=.3ee6e2442710)

<sup>7</sup> Susanna Capelouto, (2014, December 8). "Eric Garner: The haunting last words of a dying man". Retrieved February 17, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/04/us/garner-last-words/>

him to the ground. As Garner is still resisting, Panteleo wraps his arm around Garner's neck in a chokehold. Garner can be heard saying, "I can't breathe" multiple times.<sup>8</sup>

On November 23, 2014, Tamir Rice was shot and killed by officers Timothy Loehman and Frank Garmback in Cleveland, Ohio. Responding to a 911 call, the officers met Rice at a park just outside a recreation center. According to their report, when they arrived at the park, they encountered a few people sitting in a pavilion. They observed Rice picking a gun up off a table and putting it in his waistband. When they ordered him to raise his hands, he pulled out the gun, at which point Officer Loehman fired two shots at him.<sup>9</sup> Three days after the shooting, bowing to public pressure, the Cleveland Police Department released surveillance video footage of the shooting.<sup>10</sup> It shows Tamir Rice sitting alone at a gazebo. A patrol car pulls up next to it. Before the car has come to a complete stop, Officer Loehman jumps out of it and fires two shots at Rice. The encounter takes less than two seconds. Tamir Rice was 12 years old.

In each of these circumstances, a White police officer killed a male African American. None of the officers involved in these acts was ever convicted of a crime, and Michael Slager's case is the only one that received a grand jury indictment to go as far as reaching a trial. Given

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Goldstein and Nate Schweber, (July 18, 2014). "Man's Death After Chokehold Raises Old Issue for the Police". *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/nyregion/staten-island-man-dies-after-he-is-put-in-chokehold-during-arrest.html>

<sup>9</sup> Cory Shaffer, (2014, November 22). "Cleveland police officer shoots 12-year-old boy carrying BB gun". *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from [http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2014/11/cleveland\\_police\\_officer\\_shoot\\_6.html](http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2014/11/cleveland_police_officer_shoot_6.html)

<sup>10</sup> Ryllie Danyiko, (2014, November 5). "Protests break out in Cleveland over Tamir Rice shooting, Ferguson grand jury decision". *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from [http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2014/11/protests\\_break\\_out\\_in\\_cleveland.html](http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2014/11/protests_break_out_in_cleveland.html)

the pattern of these outcomes (in addition to many others that were not captured on camera) it is not difficult to imagine that, for some, African Americans and police officers have been placed on opposite sides of a conflict. If this is the case, a key component is examining the role that television—particularly fictionalized accounts of the interactions between police and the African-American community—played in shaping that narrative. This is not simply for the benefit of saving the lives of Black people but also to help police officers in what is already a dangerous job. A January 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 86% of police officers said that the high-profile killings of Black men by police had made their jobs harder.<sup>11</sup> This further complicates an already fraught relationship between the two sides, as a 2016 Gallup poll found that only 29% of Black people in the United States have confidence in the police (compared to 58% of White Americans).<sup>12</sup>

In her opus for *The Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg makes the observation that decades of television police dramas have conditioned Americans to make assumptions about how police are supposed to act:

We want cops to draw their guns rarely, but to be outstanding shots when they do unholster their weapons. We want the police to feel the full weight of taking a life, and yet to pull the trigger in a state of perfect calm and conviction.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rich Morin, Kim Parker, Renee Stepler, and Andrew Mercer, (2017, January 11). "Behind the Badge." Retrieved February 18, 2017, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge/>

<sup>12</sup> "Public Opinion Context: Americans, Race and Police". (2016, July 8). Retrieved February 18, 2017, from <http://www.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/193586/public-opinion-context-americans-race-police.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, (2016, October 26). "Dragnets, Dirty Harrys and Dying Hard, Part III: In Pop Culture, There Are No Bad Police Shootings." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 9, 2017 from

It is worth considering who pays the price when a police officer cannot meet those expectations.

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/opinions/2016/10/26/in-pop-culture-there-are-no-bad-police-shootings/>

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