

**Wired for Destruction?: Understanding the Implications of Michael Lee's Degeneration, American Individualism, and the Institution of the Hood in HBO's *The Wire***

Claude Atcho

“This is the heart of *The Wire*—the memorialisation of an army of young men and women for whom death itself is a rite of passage”  
– Kent Jones

Over its five season lifespan, HBO's *The Wire* has been widely lauded and praised—even being hailed one of the best series ever produced for American television by multiple media outlets including *USA Today* and *Slate* (Bianco, 2008; Weisburg, 2006). Whereas police shows like *CSI* and its various spin-offs are founded on “optimistic depictions of infallible scientific work,” *The Wire* “is committed to a systemic analysis of Baltimore” (Kinder, 2009: 50). More than just a tale of drug dealers and the cops who chase them, *The Wire*, according to its creator, David Simon, is “really about the American city and how we try to live together” (Tyree, 2008:32). Simon's institutional interest in the American city is evidenced in *The Wire*'s depiction of Baltimore's structural dysfunctions; *The Wire*'s narrative deftly shifts in emphasis season to season, crafting an uncompromising portrayal of the city's westside drug trade, police system, work force, political and educational system, and media, in a manner that highly values authenticity—both in its social and character depictions. Drawing moral parallels between the city's politicians, cops, and drug dealers, *The Wire* is slow to emphasize binaries of good and bad and quick to highlight and examine the complexities of its characters and consequently, the social institutions that largely dictate their perceived autonomy and ultimate fate. Simply put, any reasonable viewer will immediately note that *The Wire* is, as Tyree rightly states “many more things” and much too intelligent to be pegged another cop show (2008:32).

Given Simon's intrigue in the institutional structure of the American city, specifically Baltimore's, critics like J.M. Tyree (2008) and Marsha Kinder (2009) have insightfully contributed much to the intellectual conversation on *The Wire* and its systemic analysis of inner-city Baltimore. In his examination of season four, which focuses on the Baltimore educational system, Tyree praises (2008:32) *The Wire* for its “extraordinarily honest depiction of the gravitational pull of the streets and drug ‘corners’ for a generation of African American inner city youth with few other prospects or opportunities”. Similarly, Kinder observes (2009:52) that emotional power of the series is contingent on the “dynamic tension” between “many vibrant characters with enormous potential and, on the other hand, seeing how the culture is wired to destroy them.” What is most notably at play in both respective points by Tyree and Kinder is the implicit concept of the hood as an institutional structure, what Kinder cites as “the culture,” that suffocates any tangible means of hope for the young African American middle schoolers that compromise the narrative cornerstone of season four. The notion of “the gravitational pull of the streets,” as well

as a culture or structure “wired to destroy,” raises questions not just of systemic analysis, but of subjectivity and autonomy undisputedly concerning all central characters of *The Wire* but most compellingly, the young African American middle schoolers depicted in season four.

Continuing the overarching narrative of the city, including the storyline of the drug game and its power shift from the Barksdale organization to Marlo Stanfield’s crew, season four brings the educational system into the narrative fold, closely following four African-American eighth graders from inner-city Baltimore: Namond Brice, Randy Wagstaff, Duquan Weems, and Michael Lee. In keeping with the narrative tapestry of *The Wire*, the four teens are intricately connected to past narratives as they find themselves in the classroom of new math teacher, Mr. Pryzbylowski, a member of the Baltimore police department in seasons one through three. All living in the dysfunctional environment of the hood, the youngsters are a close group, though their individual circumstances are, at times, fairly distinct: Namond, the son of Wee-bey, an incarcerated Barksdale enforcer, is pushed by his charismatic mother to follow in the criminal footsteps of his father; Randy, a product of foster homes, is a shockingly innocent, charming, candy-selling, pseudo-entrepreneur; Duquan, a son of crack fiends, has a mind for math but lives in a home where all his belongings are sold to secure a high; and Michael, the quiet, intelligent leader of the pack, is left to raise his baby brother, trapped in a home with an abusive step father and a heroin addicted mother.

Though each of the boys, aside from Namond, experience dramatic, heart-wrenching, destructive evolutions at the institutional hands of the hood, Michael’s progression from soft-spoken, intelligent leader to violent Stanfield enforcer is particularly ripe for examination. Interestingly, Michael’s aforementioned qualities seemingly bait viewers to simply read his street evolution as a tragic instance of a bright young kid’s inability to choose the so called right path. Interviews and articles on Michael’s evolution over the fourth season of *The Wire* are indicative of an ideological belief—an American individualism—that suggests that Michael, though a product and resident of rugged, inner city Baltimore, is, more or less, autonomous over his fate and outcome—meaning, with a enough wise choices on his part, he can escape the ever present temptations and violence of the streets.

The proclivity to attribute Michael’s degeneration to his flawed decisions indicates an ideological belief of individual autonomy, which happens to largely conflict with the ideological outlook of *The Wire* while fitting perfectly in the American ideology of the individual. Appropriating an Althusserian theory of ideology and the subject, I will attempt to complicate any oversimplified reading of Michael’s shift to the streets as a failure to follow the “constructive path”. In so doing, I argue that a close reading of Michael’s degeneration is one of several prime instances in *The Wire* that solidify the hood as a produced institution that indiscriminately subjects its inhabitants to a destructive existence or death altogether with staggering societal implications, and that to neglect such a central motif of *The Wire* is akin to opting for a voyeuristic romp through the black ghettos of Baltimore only to overlook one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s most needed and important social

commentaries on America, the inner city, race, and capitalism.

D'Angelo Starnes, of *EbonyJet*, (2008) whose blog on the show often offers noteworthy insights, poses the following rhetorical question lamenting Michael's evolution over the course of season four and five: "You direct his positive traits to a constructive path and what do you have? A Johnnie Cochran? A Spike Lee? A Barack Obama?" ("Transitions"). Starnes' proclivity to identify "a constructive path" as the determiner of Michael's fate echoes an American ideology of individual autonomy—that by his choices, and the path he follows, Michael can escape the snares and pitfalls of life in the hood. This ideology of the individual, which Starnes' seems to affirm, clashes with what I'm calling the ideology of the institution, an adaptation of Althusser's ideological state apparatus, held by *The Wire*'s creator, David Simon, who in speaking on the show's model, declares, that the institutions above his characters—politics, the drug trade, school system – these "Postmodern institutions" are the "gods" that dictate fates, rather than individual choices (O'Rourke, 2006). Where critics like Starnes place autonomy and fate in individual choices, Simon places such ultimate outcomes in institutions very much true to an Althusserian ideology, though one that must be considered an adaptation since, unlike Althusser, I find Simon crediting the cause of such institutions to an amorphous societal force rather than a distinct, tangible source.

As alluded this ideology of the institution largely finds its theoretical origins in the work of Louis Althusser's (2007:1271) "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". Althusser posits that all people are "always already subjects," that what people may consider their "free" subjectivity to hold to an ideological belief is, in fact, an act of merely freely accepting one's submission. A person's subjectivity is thus truly only perceived subjectivity; all are ultimately a product of the ideological state apparatuses (what I'm calling the ideology of the institution, or simply the institution of the hood or inner city) to which they ascribe. Simon's revelation that institutions are the gods that determine fates in the narrative structure of *The Wire* skillfully builds upon Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus, blurring the lines of individual autonomy and subjectivity. While this question of subjectivity and the institution is present throughout the entirety of *The Wire* never is it so ruthless and visible than when dealing with the aforementioned crew of westside youngsters and for my purposes, specifically, Michael, whose evolution over season four has multiple pivotal moments in need of critical examination.

"Boys of Summer," the first episode of season four, begins with Baltimore drug lord, Marlo Stanfield's two street assassins, Chris and Snoop, buying a power performance nail gun which they use throughout the season to tomb up their murder victims in the decrepit vacant housing projects throughout the city, boarding them up with "IF ANIMAL TRAPPED" signs. J.M. Tyree astutely comments (2008:34) on Chris and Snoop's eerie ambivalence toward their morbid work, but more notably asserts that their undetected, seemingly nightly murders and burials prove that "the inner city has literally become a graveyard for its lucklessly non-white inhabitants". The figurative parallel between the countless murdered minorities not even granted the dignity of a

funeral with family or proper burial and the “IF ANIMAL TRAPPED” signs which enclose their decaying bodies are too obvious and disturbing to unpack—yet *The Wire*’s point must not be overlooked: the institution of the inner city or the hood (terms interchangeable for my purposes) function much like a trap, hailing its inhabitants and offering them nothing but a ticket toward destruction and death.

In showing the “enormous potential” of characters like Michael and then tortuously portraying how the hood “is wired to destroy them,” Simon illustrates the institution of the hood as a social structure built to condemn even its most hopeful subjects to the pits of destruction (Kinder, 2009: 52). Of the young westside crew (Randy, Michael, Duquan, and Namond), it seems Simon and his writers wish to portray Michael as the most likely to avoid the descent toward demise through the hood’s gravitational pull toward guns, drugs, and crime. In “Boys of Summer” and “Soft Eyes,” the first two episodes of season four, Michael, in his fatherly affection for his baby brother, Bug, proves himself to be the closest substitute to a father in a community utterly devoid of father figures. Michael’s tenacity, loyalty, leadership, and toughness are undeniable and particularly evident in his loyalty toward the oft-bullied Duquan and Randy and his tenderness in essentially raising his younger brother, provisionally absent of his addicted mother.

It must be clearly reiterated here, as Althusser asserts, all individuals are always already subjects, and Michael, despite such admirable qualities, is, by his locale and his ethnicity already “hailed” and subjected to the institution of the inner city and its dominant outcome: destruction (2007:1269). Michael’s subjectivity, consequent of his locale and ethnicity, is witnessed immediately in the season four: he lives by the drug corners controlled by the king of Baltimore’s drug game, Marlo Stanfield, and even within Michael’s home, he is forced to cope with a sexually abusive step father and a heroin-addicted mother. Thus even while characterized in early episodes as the intelligent, quiet, leader of his peers, try as he might, Michael’s personal qualities cannot negate his subjectivity to the inner city. Yet, even trapped within the institution of the inner city and its subsequent street ideology, Michael’s personal qualities become more laudable as he shrewdly attempts to remain as unsubjected and autonomous as possible.

As the entire city begins preparing for school in a few days, Marlo makes a play to win the favor of the children and teens in the hood, sending one of his enforcers to hand out cash to kids near his corners for school clothes shopping. The younger children receive the cash with joy, as do Michael’s boys, Randy and Namond. Leary of the subjection implied by such a handout, Michael chooses not to take the \$200 and walks away visibly agitated. Marlo, watching from across the street, approaches and confronts him. Standing his ground, when questioned by Marlo (“You such a bitch-ass punk you worried about where my money come from?”), Michael does not respond but stares at him firmly, eye to eye. Impressed by Michael’s audacity in not cowering, Marlo dismisses Michael, assuring him that they are “cool”. Later in the episode, ignorant to the potential strings attached to Marlo’s handout, Namond and Randy revisit Marlo’s perceived generosity, curious as to why Michael refused the cash:

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RANDY. Marlo wanted us to have it [the money], he wanted to show us who calling the shots out here.

NAMOND. Yo, Michael, why you ain't take it?

MICHAEL. That ain't me.

NAMOND. Say what?

MICHAEL. That owing niggas for shit. That ain't me. (2007: "Soft Eyes")

Michael's ability to detect that a potentially ambiguous debt would be accrued toward Marlo by taking the free handout is indicative of Michael's keen character but more notably, illustrates his ever-alert desire to remain as removed from subjection as possible. While his peers are unable to see Marlo's ploy, Michael displays a shrewd awareness of subjection: that nothing comes free from a person's hand without some form of "owing". Michael's rejection of Marlo's handout becomes all the more provocative given the fact that he is in need of money to provide for his and Bug's school supplies and other basic needs; in fact, prior to Marlo's cash giveaway, Namond temporarily gives his job as a drug runner for street-seasoned dealer, Bodie, to Michael so that he might earn enough cash to purchase school items for he and Bug. With this small but important detail in mind, it is understood that temporary drug dealing for Michael is more autonomous, advantageous, and desirable than taking an immediate payout that would satisfy his monetary needs at the expense of "owing niggas for shit"—becoming subjected to another.

Michael's temporary stint as a corner boy only adds to Marlo's respect for his character and his interest in enlisting Michael in his organization. The episode, "Home Rooms" shows Michael to be a much desired asset: Marlo and Chris, impressed and somewhat surprised, to see Michael working Bodie's corner as a job as opposed to taking their baited handout, remark that Michael has "got good signs on him"; while Bodie, equally impressed with Michael's cocksure corner skills, attempts to convince him to drop out of school and deal full time. In explaining that his corner career was meant to be purely temporary, Michael vocalizes that school is his priority, a response that leaves Bodie nonplussed at Michael's naiveté: "What the fuck you wanna go to school for? What you wanna be? An astronaut? A dentist? A pay lawyer?" (2007: "Home Rooms"). Bodie, a "tremendously important character in the grand scheme of the show" and one of the longest standing characters in *The Wire*, has been dealing on the corner since season one (since age thirteen he reveals in a later episode), long enough to garner the respect of rogue detective Jimmy McNulty (Shoals: 2008). If any eyes have understood the underbelly of the inner city institution surely Bodie is that character. Even so, Bodie's commentary on the function of school reveals what ought to be near obvious, the educational system is not geared toward Michael or for any viable success, a tangible truth seen nearly every time the cameras of season four visit the dysfunctional Edward Tillman Middle and Mr. Prezbo's classroom which is consistently chaotic, occasionally violent, and built solely upon improving its dismal state test scores.

In becoming a corner boy for Bodie, Michael has already subjected himself by choice to the institution of the inner city (and specifically, the Baltimore drug trade) but seemingly on his own terms, terms which allow him to reject Bodie's full time offer in favor of school. Thus in rejecting Marlo's conspicuous attempt to subject him as well as Bodie's proposal, Michael can

be read as keenly more alert to the institutional power structure of the hood than his peers, while simultaneously attempting to exercise as much autonomy as possible in an institution, that has very limited options for viable success. Michael seems to understand that dabbling in the drug game may have advantages as long as he can do so with autonomy, independence, and the ability to exercise a perceived subjectivity. Yet what is complicated about Michael's prized subjectivity is that he does indeed subject himself in time to Marlo's organization however not due to poor choices but because, in his understanding, allegiance to Marlo grants him more subjectivity than otherwise attainable.

Seeing the decrepit apartment Michael calls home, Snoop confidently reasons that "a hard run" to recruit to Michael will have him in no time, insinuating that Michael's poverty will make the prospect of cash and luxury as a Stanfield soldier irresistible (2007: "Refugees"). In this instance, Simon presents a clear assertion: the institution of the inner city, particularly its poverty and neglect, will likely force the strong-willed Michael to acquiesce to the gravitational pull of the streets in order to escape the ills of poverty inherent to life in the hood. While this consequence of the hood is largely accurate, Michael has already proven his shrewd independence in his ability to leave Bodie's corner after accumulating enough money to temporarily fend off the monetary consequences of his mother's addiction and neglect. In so doing, Simon shows viewers that Michael's shrewd street resourcefulness and alert intellect will thus enable him to make ends meet without fully relinquishing his subjectivity to the hood's incessant attempts to remove his autonomy and place him on a path toward destruction. While financial destitution may be temporarily satisfied in Michael's cunning resourcefulness, *The Wire* adds a layer of complexity, showing the hood's institutional fates cannot be escaped even by a youth shrewd as Michael when his sexually abusive step-father returns home after a drug related prison stint. The tension between Michael and Bug's father is thick and uncomfortable as undertones and later strong signs of sexual abuse emerge as Michael refuses to leave Bug alone at home with his father. Coupled with Michael's distrust of overly friendly men and Bug's step dad's decree, "ain't no forgiveness in your soul," viewers are strongly suggested to believe Michael was sexually abused by his step-father prior to his time in prison (2007: "Corner Boys").

In the return of his step-father, Michael is presented with a force attempting to subject him on multiple practical and deeper fronts. Practically, his mother announces that Michael is no longer in charge of the family's finances (she orders that the family D.S.S card go to Bug's father) and he is no longer the primary person who spends time with Bug. This transfer of Michael's autonomy as the man of the family to his step-father indicates Michael's subjection to another, even more concerning a subjection to another whose sexual behavior toward Bug and Michael is highly questionable, as is his ability to provide for their family's needs. The reappearance of Bug's father presents Michael with a problematic circumstance that threatens to remove his subjectivity as the man in his home, the owner of his body and his emotional well-being, along with his role as protector and functional dad of his brother. Bug's father represents a precarious circumstance that, unlike financial problems, temporary drug dealing will not solve. At an intense crossroads that will dictate the outcome of his highly prized subjectivity, Michael explores multiple paths to

rectify the intrusion of his stepfather into his world of perceived subjectivity and autonomy. In exploring these paths, Michael finds that the hood offers little resolution but those found in the streets.

Visibly shaken by the presence of his stepfather at home, Michael's demeanor at school becomes languid, garnering the attention of Mr. Prezbo, who reads the situation as a problem at home, prodding Michael to open up to him for help and offering to send him to social services. Michael remains silent and in doing so, displays distrust in the possible outcome of accepting Mr. Prezbo's goodwill. Notably, Ben Walters asserts that multiple white characters on the show actually serve as a case study of "how even ostensibly well-intentioned white people can exacerbate the problems of black people" (2008:64). This seems to be the cause of Michael's reluctance to trust Mr. Prezbo's earnest desire to help him—white people's attempt to help in the hood seemingly increase problems, a potential sign that individual solutions are not needed but systemic, an assertion that strongly confirms the hood as a functioning Althusserian institution. As Michael inquires of Randy what social services would do if he reported his situation and learning that he and Bug would likely be split and sent to group homes (ultimately the place where Randy will end up by season's end), Michael realizes the institutional structure of his environment meant to help him, education, good intentioned adults, and government social services, are not actually able to do so. In Michael's moment of realization, Simon illustrates that the institution of the hood has been structured by "unchecked capitalism," leaving its inhabitants with little hope in the flawed structures that are supposed to provide renewal and hope, ultimately subjecting them to find answers on streets that promise everything but (Jones, 2008: 23).

When Michael brings his familial problem to Marlo, in season four's "Know Your Place," viewers are affronted with the reality that the institution of the inner city has seemingly forced Michael's hand toward this fate. However, in entering an implied pact with Marlo, Michael can be seen as exchanging his subjection from the jurisdiction of his abusive stepfather to that of Marlo and in so doing, remaining autonomous over his body, his brother, and regaining his perceived role of head of the family. Thus, while Althusser's theory of the always already subject rings true, I assert that it adapts once more in a proper reading of Michael's evolution, as he does not assume evoking a favor from Marlo makes him unsubjected—rather in choosing to be subjected to Marlo as opposed to his father, Michael retains subjectivity in the areas necessary to remain true to his character: his physical, masculine, emotional, and monetary independence as well as that of his brother's. Whereas most perceive themselves free subjects, it seems Michael calculates that he is never fully a free subject, only more or less subjected; this metacognitive understanding of an ubiquitous, unavoidable subjection leads Michael to conclude that within the large suppressive institution of the inner city, only under the employment of Marlo is he most advantageously subjected, an incredible testament to the shrewdness of Michael's character and, possibly more so, a disheartening testimony of the ruthless nature of the inner city.

Tyree hints at this concept of the institution of the inner city, noting that characters like Michael "spring traps on themselves because their environment offers them no real choice." Indeed,

the temptation of the street life is rampant: “In *The Wire* the drug trade really is a trade and entry level begins in pre-adolescence” (Jones, 2008: 24). While Tyree rightly asserts 2008: 36) that the hood “environment” gives its inhabitants no options but to fall into the “traps” of the street, he seems to suggest that Michael ignores a rare option for help: “Although he has a positive mentor in boxing coach and former Barksdale enforcer Dennis “Cutty” Wise...Michael ultimately turns to Marlo, Chris, and Snoop to rid his family of its tormentor, entering a Faustian pact to become a drug dealer and killer himself in the process.” Though Tyree is ultimately not reductive and negligent of the institutional nature of the hood as DeAngelo Starnes appears in speculating that a constructive path would have Michael as the next Barack Obama, Tyree’s reference to the hope in Cutty’s mentorship hints at an ambiguously similar stance. Notably, it is Michael’s past sexual abuse that arrests any chance of trust toward Cutty, as Michael finds him “too friendly...like he some type of faggot or something” (2007: “Know Your Place”). Regardless, were Michael to ascribe to Cutty’s tutelage, he would still be a resident of the hood, and thus subject to its inherent landmines and trappings. More good choices or positive role models in Michael’s life would not negate his subjection to the institution of the hood by his locale and ethnicity. Therefore, Michael demonstrates the dangerous shrewdness the hood produces in its most autonomously minded inhabitants by seeking the path that gives him the most power and independence—becoming a Stanfield soldier.

The means of securing his brother’s well being and his own, along with his qualified subjectivity by a conscious and willful subjection to Marlo, not only proves Michael’s shrewd desire to be as independent as possible but also the street evolution necessary in the institution of the hood to attain a semblance of autonomy and purpose. Once Chris and Snoop take care of Michael’s problem, with an untypically brutal murder of Michael’s stepfather, Michael’s persona begins to reflect his qualified subjectivity and his evolution as a Stanfield soldier. Michael’s increased audacity, independence, and street evolution is seen as he heads the plot to enact revenge on the crooked cop, Officer Walker, who constantly makes trouble for the young quartet. Masked in bandana and hoody, Michael’s emergence as a street player is evident as he handles a gun in the otherwise boyish plot to key Walker’s car and cover him with paint. Firing a warning shot to show Walker he means business, Michael commands Walker to kneel down in order for Namond to douse him in paint. As Michael spots the gaudy diamond ring on Walker’s finger, he brakes from the crew’s plan, removes his bandana, and takes the ring off Walker, risking being seen unmasked by Walker in the process. Namond is angry, scared, and surprised by Michael’s renegade risk, a noteworthy event in Michael’s degeneration (2007: “A New Day”). Freed from subjection to his stepfather, Michael now acts increasingly in step with his acquired empowerment through his subjection to Marlo and the streets.

Michael’s street evolution reaches a similar pivotal moment as he violently beats Kenard, the defiant thirteen year old corner boy, whose insubordination against Namond lead him to steal Namond’s drugs instead of selling them. As Michael makes swift work of Kenard, Namond, undergoing an identity regeneration, is traumatized by the violence, running away tearfully, crying “I ain’t want it [the drugs]” back anyway (2007: “That’s Got His Own”). Kent Jones describes



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(2008: 25) the next encounter between Namond and Michael, as “two characters at a spiritual crossroads, one moving into abasement, the other into regeneration”. Looking to make up for his weakness with Kenard, Namond attempts to act tough in front of Michael by bullying Duquan. Michael, enraged by Namond’s weak, hypocritical character for the last time, pummels his former friend with several punches to the face. At this moment, Michael has begun his descent into the street game, shortly to take over his own corner and commit his first murder as a Stanfield soldier. As Namond tearfully recoups from his beating, he remarks that “Mike ain’t Mike no more,” a sentiment which, while truthful and a satisfactory quick answer, presents a reductive understanding of Michael’s actions neglecting the deeper aspects of Michael’s street evolution.

That Michael must turn to the streets for purpose and solutions which are not found in his environment’s educational or government systems speaks loudly to Simon’s understanding of the inner city as institution that forces its inhabitants to the only viable option: enlisting in the street game, an ultimate move toward destruction and death. As season four closes with Michael coolly walking up to his target, face to face, and firing one bullet to the head, his moral degeneration is unquestionable (2007: “Final Grades”). Yet aside from the anomaly of Namond’s regeneration in escaping the corner through his adoption to ex-cop turned social researcher, Bunny Colvin, Michael’s choice to subject himself to the hood through Marlo is arguably the best choice of the quartet, which in and of itself, is a damning testimony to the destructive nature of the inner city as revealed by Simon. Randy, in his naive innocence and trust of adults, is unable to keenly understand the workings of subjectivity and the hood like Michael, getting pegged as a stitch (the most despised persona in the hood) and consequently being placed in an abusive, dysfunctional group home after teens burn his foster home down in retaliation for his stitching. Duquan, on the other hand, resides with Michael in his new apartment free, yet once Michael makes a play at increased autonomy, Duquan feels he can only turn to living on the streets and becomes dependent upon heroin. While only Namond is able to escape the destructive nature of the hood, reaching “salvation” by virtue of adoption, Randy and Duquan progress toward “damnation” as they cannot escape subjection to hood nor do their actions indicate they are privy to their subjection. Michael, too, progresses toward damnation particularly when contrasted with Namond’s journey; however Michael’s awareness of the inescapable nature of the hood enables him to maneuver with a more autonomous posture within the trappings of the inner city than Randy or Duquan, thus Randy and Duquan’s damnation is total while Michael’s remains qualified as he uses his degeneration to his benefit.

After following this young quartet over the course of season four and sections of five, Simon assaults viewers with the gut-wrenching prospect that the damnation of Randy, Michael, and Duquan is the ubiquitous, expected outcome for inner city youth subjected to the institution of the hood. Tyree notes that “[i]n Hollywood, we would only see Namond’s reclamation story; in *The Wire*, Namond is seen as a brilliant and unlikely exception to the rules of the game, in which institutions crush individuals.” According to *The Wire*, Namond is an anomaly as are all “individuals who overcome the odds [are]...pernicious and unacceptable” (Tyree, 2008:38). Similarly, Michael’s qualified subjectivity makes him somewhat of an anomaly considering his

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increasingly autonomous posture by season five's end.

Given this constant decree that the institution of the inner city hands to its inhabitants only death and destruction, Michael's ability to maneuver through the active graveyard that is the hood, though ultimately subjected to its inevitable outcome, is the course of an independent mind trapped in an environment designed to suffocate his existence. Whereas season four's closing montage shows Michael moving up the ranks of the Stanfield crew, "Late Editions" of season five (2008) and the closing montage of the season/series in "—30—," illustrate Michael's boundary-testing quest to achieve as much subjectivity and longevity as the institution of the hood will permit. As the Stanfield crew begins to deteriorate with the Chris's arrest on murder charges, questions arise between Marlo, Chris, and Snoop as to whether or not there is a stitch in their crew. Deciding that Michael may be the stitch, Snoop picks him up in her SUV following orders to murder him. Aware of the vulnerable state of the crew, Michael has already scoped out the scene prior to Snoop arrival and is privy to the setup. In the car, Michael asks Snoop to pull into an alley so he can go to the bathroom, as Snoop acquiesces, Michael quickly pulls his own gun from his jacket. As Michael, gun ready, prepares to eliminate Snoop, she smirks at Michael's reading of the plot:

SNOOP. Smart nigga. You always was. How you know?

MICHAEL. Y'all taught me...Why? What'd I do wrong?

SNOOP. Chris locked up over something he did for you and you downtown with the police.

MICHAEL. I ain't say a word.

SNOOP. Yeah, that's what you say but it's how you carry yourself. Always apart, always askin' why when you should be doin' what you told. You was never one of us and you never could be. (2008: "Late Editions")

In what comes across as an eerily tender exchange, Snoop reveals Michael's independence stopped him from being a good soldier, quiet and obedient. Blogger intellectual, Bethlehem Shoals skillfully addresses the possible readings of Snoop's assessment of Michael's character, the comment "You was never one of us," stating:

There's still the possibility that, in making this move, Michael showed what we've suspected all along: That's he destined to end up like Marlo, because he's just too smart, shrewd and determined to work for anyone else. Hence that flipping of what Chris and Snoop taught him about how to scope out a potential hit. He took the field manual and used it for himself. (Shoals, 2008)

Implicit in Shoals' insightful commentary are strong hints of Michael's unflinching desire to remain as unsubjected and autonomous as his environment will allow. While not addressing the institution of the hood explicitly, Shoals's observation that Michael "took the field manual and used it for himself" affirm my reading that Michael's shrewdness comes from an adept, metacognitive understanding of the rituals, as Althusser would state, or the workings of the institution of the hood, and more so, being able to implement them to secure as much free subjectivity as possible in an environment created to subject and eventually destroy all.

In the closing scene of season five, *The Wire* (2008) cements Michael as a shrewdly autonomous

figure able to maneuver through dangers of the hood to his own benefit by drawing an overt parallel between Michael and Baltimore's infamous, gay, renegade stick-up artist, Omar. A key figure in *The Wire* since season one, Omar is nothing short of legendary status in the hood, known for his renegade rules of never "serving any masters other than himself and never cursing," and constantly sticking up strictly big time dealers for their cash and supply (Weisburg, 2006). What's noteworthy is that Simon fashions Michael, fresh off his departure from the Stanfield crew, as the next Omar. Episode "—30—" shows Michael coolly robbing local dealer, Vinson's cash front, shooting him in the knee when he quips "You're just a boy," and quickly responding in Omar-esque fashion, as Vinson writhers in pain, "and that's just your knee". The last image viewers catch of Michael is his replacement of Omar as the hood's the quintessential autonomous street renegade, the one player in the streets free from rules and a chain of command, the one player with the most free subjectivity. In Michael, viewers are presented with a character, who evolves from a typical inner city youth to a shrewd player in the drug game—yet his ability to kill before killed, to kill and slang to position himself most advantageously in life should be read as a teen exerting his intelligence and autonomy as best as his environment permits, which is unquestionably the damning indictment of the intuition of the inner city *The Wire* wishes to be seen, felt, and understood.

As intricate and intriguing as Michael's evolution is, a reading of his evolutionary complexities that omits the societal implications of his evolution—that is, not considering what his path reveals about the hood as an institution—would be disrespectful to the *The Wire* and the systemic analysis it so emphatically embodies. In the character of Michael Lee, *The Wire* presents us with a promising, smart youth with enormous potential, possibly the next Barack Obama or Spike Lee according to some, only to show viewers how such promising characters are devoured and destroyed by the inner city. Even Michael's display of shrewd intellect in becoming the street's autonomous renegade damns the institution of the inner city, showing that Michael could only take the destructive path dictated to him by his environment, yet skillfully made from this fate what he could.

As enticing as it is to be consumed solely by the compelling nature of *The Wire's* characters, Simon speaks to being interested in the institutional and how individual evolutions point to the flawed institutions of the American city. While the institution of the hood or inner city functions to destroy, it is, in fact, a product of a larger institution or cause. Just as Althusser claims that ideological state apparatuses and their ideologies and rituals are created by specific entities like the church or government, Simon similarly attributes the state of the hood to the larger, somewhat ambiguous system of "unchecked capitalism" (Jones, 2008: 23). That is, the marginalization of a particular demographic must occur in order to allow the dominant demographic to maintain their financial, educational, and material well-being. Kent Jones puts it well, "That 'raw, unencumbered capitalism,' to quote Simon, is the real enemy; that the drug trade is only its most visible and destructive manifestation" (Jones, 2008:25). The institution of the hood, a system gravitationally pulling its inhabitants toward the streets and its destructive fates, is the product of "capitalism unbound" where "nothing but the moral luck of the draw separates us from the homeless addict

Bubs, or Namond, the teenager with no heart for the game” (Jones, 2008: 26). In a worldview where all are already always subjects, constructive paths or right choices do not free one from the institutions that dictates fates, rather it is exclusively the “luck of the draw” as to what institution one is subjected to via uncontrolled factors like locale or ethnicity that determine one’s ultimate outcome, a systemic repercussion of capitalism unchecked.

In accordance with Simon’s statement that *The Wire* is about the “triumph of capitalism,” “the very simple idea that...human beings—all of us—are worthless,” a constant concept fleshed out in *The Wire*’s treatment of its characters and in Simon’s revelation that institutions dictate fates, it’s crucial to register the discrepancy between what Simon sees *The Wire* revealing in this regard, and what viewers seem apt to take away (O’Rourke, 2006). As Simon’s statements affirm, and my close reading also attempts to affirm and nuance, *The Wire* is about the institution of the American city and the fates they dictate, like angry Greek gods, upon their subjects. Yet intelligent, insight commentators like the aforementioned DeAngelo Starnes can misread Simon and characters on the show itself by claiming that Michael on a constructive path could evade the ills of the hood, a reading that largely misses the function of Michael’s character: that the hood is designed to predominately destroy even its most potentially vibrant subjects.

If an astute mind can misread *The Wire*’s institutional commentary, how much more so might the so called average viewer fumble this infinitely valuable critique, which Simon affirms as the central thematic purpose of *The Wire*? Surprising or not, Tristan Wilds, the brilliant young actor who plays Michael, reveals a similar misreading of his character’s subjectivity and *The Wire*’s emphasis on institutional power over individuality, as does the LAist interviewer (2008), who asks him, “Right from the start it was easy to see that Michael was different from the other kids, a leader. If swayed in the right direction, he has potential to do great things, what do you think him going the other way says about today’s youth?” Like Starnes, Wilds’s response signifies an emphasis on individual choices ignoring the subjection to an institutional power, “...even with positive influences around him, he [Michael] went the other direction because he felt it was the only way he could get what he needed done. He didn’t realize there were plenty of other ways he could have gone, being from Baltimore and seeing what he has seen, he thought this was the only way he could go” (Wilds, 2008). Wilds dances near the show’s concept of the institution in mentioning Michael’s subjection consequent of his locale and environment (“being from Baltimore”), but the claim that “[Michael] didn’t realize there were plenty of other ways he could have gone” denotes a contradictory ideology to the show’s. Wilds’s belief that fate lies in the actions of an individual neglects the power of the institution and is largely indicative of the American ideology of the individual, that is “the inevitability of progress through can-do attitudes” and correct individual decisions. The fact that “*The Wire* is, at its core, a critique of America itself,” particularly this ideology of the individual, and still the concrete implications of this critique, the indictment of American capitalism and its subsequent institutions, are misread, or worse missed entirely by countless viewers, reveal that this America ideology of the individual may be an unshakeable paradigm (Tyree, 2008:38).

## PREVIOUSLY ON

The destructive, marginalizing effects of the ideology of the individual constitute the core of *The Wire*'s narrative and its critique of the American city. Simon and his writing team, in their portrayal of characters like Michael, vividly display that the institutions of the American city, erected by capitalism, are inherently poised to destroy its inner city inhabitants barring a great and unlikely systemic restructuring of the social and political system. Sadly, it may be the case that those who rightly laude *The Wire* for its cinematic merits, impeccable acting, authentic writing, and hyper-realism and those who just plain enjoy the show, lay viewers, if you will, may both neglect, at varying levels, the incredible societal commentary leveled against the American ideology of the individual. As seen in *The Wire*'s portrayal of Michael (and countless other characters not treated in this argument), individual actions—whether it's urban youth following good role models or suburban outsiders being more philanthropic or more after-school programs at urban schools—will not lead to progress aside from monumental institutional reworking in the capitalist political and social spheres that create institutions like the hood.

With its authenticity being one of its most celebrated attributes, *The Wire*'s depiction of the institution of the inner city is certainly taken seriously, however viewers remain unable or unwillingly to recognize Simon's explicit critique of the capitalist institutional powers that create such institutions like the inner city. Such a mishandling of Simon's critique as seen by misreadings of Michael's street evolution has disastrous social implications as it places the onus for reform in the hood on the shoulders of its inhabitants needing to pull up their boots straps or schools needing more programs, rather than a total revaluation of American social and political ideologies with issues of subjectivity in mind. Noting the realism of his character's street evolution, Wilds states "[w]hat you see on the show is really happening, and not just in Baltimore. It's happening in a neighborhood two blocks down from where you live" (Wilds, 2008). There is indeed a wrenching exigency tied *The Wire*'s portrayal of Michael's degeneration and its social critique of the institution of the hood and the structures that put it in play. Viewing Michael's degeneration over the course of season four and five without grasping the systemic critique that the institution of the hood dispenses only destruction is a functional castration of *The Wire*'s social commentary; it is akin to viewing the show solely to "better understand the lives of black drug dealers and those living in neighborhoods where they [the viewers] work" (Walters, 2008: 64). This fantasy-like voyeurism squanders the commentary crafted to bring awareness and reform to the institution which perversely and rightly requires Michael's moral degeneration to be read as an intelligent youth's shrewd, resourceful path to make something for himself in a society that promises him only destruction.

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