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Flore Coulouma

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**“That’s the game, yo”:
Stereotype and Identity in *The Wire***

Flore COULOUMA

In David Simon’s *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), stereotypes play a crucial role in the characters’ definition and assertion of their own identity. In the gangsters’ dialect, stereotypes are displayed in the form of fixed locutions and are a structural part of discourse. This paper focuses on the gangster characters in the first season of the series. It analyses the founding clichés of their social order: the metaphor of the game and its rules, the imperative to “be a real man”, and the basic stereotypes of capitalist business. My aim is to show how these social stereotypes and their linguistic expression affect the characters’ representation of themselves as players in “the game”, and how they contribute to David Simon’s criticism of contemporary American society.

Watching *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) is an experience in field linguistics: as a TV series whose lead character is Baltimore, it displays the idioms and accents that shape the social landscape of the city. As a fiction, the series has been hailed as a masterpiece of realism, thoroughly consistent in plot, characterization and narration down to every detail¹. David Simon, the series creator and primary writer puts forth a sharply critical analysis of US society through the struggle for power between, and within, the city’s various communities: the drug dealers, the police, the local union leaders, the politicians, the educators, and finally the press. On either side of the law communities face the same tensions and predicaments, all related to the violence and absurdity of their neo-liberal obsession for profit. David Simon has described his show as “revolutionary television, capturing ‘the truth’ about the ‘universal themes’ of life in the era of unrestrained capitalism².”

¹ See for instance Mark Bovden, “The Angriest Man in Television”, *The Atlantic online magazine*, January/February 2008: “The dress, manners, and colorful language of the show’s cast, which is largely African American, are painstakingly authentic, down to the uniquely slurred consonants and nasal vowel sounds of the local dialect, Balmerese. *The Wire* seems so real that I find myself, a Baltimore native, looking for the show’s characters when I pass through their familiar haunts.”
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/the-angriest-man-in-television/6581/>>, consulted June 2011.

² Quoted in Oliver Burkeman, “Arrogant, moi?”, *The Guardian*, March 28th, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/28/david-simon-the-wire-interview>>, consulted June 2011.

On the other hand, both the police and the gangsters elaborate their respective identities through a common set of discursive tropes: virility and obedience to hierarchy. In this paper, I wish to concentrate on the gangsters' linguistic identity as it develops in season 1 of the series. Focusing on the main drug-dealer characters in the first season, my aim is to show how those linguistic stereotypes play out ambiguously in each character, enabling them to define and assert their identity and sense of belonging within their community, while at the same time conflicting with their very existence as individuals.

In the series, proverbial phrases and linguistic clichés function as structural tropes in gangster speech. Idioms and truisms such as “the game is the game”, “that’s the game”, “It’s all in the game” all define their speaker’s identity within the gangster community. Linguistic tropes contribute to the elaboration of stereotypical characters with distinct functions in the narrative: the corner-boy, the man, the fiend (i.e. junkie), the snitch, the good police, and so on. Inversely, characters consciously display a dialect and discourse consistent with their persona and status among their peers. Identity is a central issue in *The Wire*, both for the gangsters and the police, especially since the distinction between them is sometimes blurred.

Stereotypes are beliefs, opinions, representations concerning a given social group and its members. As fixed images in the collective imagination, they filter our perception of reality, enabling us to comprehend and categorize it³. Because of their fixed nature, stereotypes represent the common knowledge of a given community, and thus play a crucial part in social and linguistic interaction as well as in processes of identification⁴. Linguistically, stereotypes can translate as fixed idioms: they are recognisable landmarks in discourse, and play a prominent part in a subject’s assertion of his identity. However, the generic nature of the stereotype makes it at once the very symbol of assertion⁵ (a singular speech act) and the paradigm of commonplace utterance. In *The Wire*, the generic nature of discursive clichés affects the characters’ identity since, paradoxically, they use this very genericity as the primary tools to express their individual self.

In the first season of *The Wire*, the tension between genericity and specificity plays out in the characters’ struggle to define their own identity within the gangster hierarchy, and in (or against) society in general. The Barksdale organisation introduces us to a strictly codified

³ See Amossy, Ruth and Herschberg-Pierrot, Anne, *Stéréotypes et clichés: langue, discours, société*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2005.

⁴ Stereotypes function both as signals or “identity markers” and as processes, since identity is also a social construct. See Losa, Stefano, “Le Stéréotype comme révélateur identitaire. Analyse d’un discours oral en interaction: le cas d’un entretien sociolinguistique”, in *Stéréotypage, stéréotypes: fonctionnements ordinaires et mises en scène, tome 2: l’identité*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007.

⁵ See Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1970.

gangster *milieu*, particularly restrictive of individual expression while promoting displays of individual violence. Characters can only develop and assert their identity in accordance to the defining stereotypes of the gangster hierarchical order and code of conduct (the “rules of the game”). Therefore, unquestioning acceptance of impersonal rules constitutes the paradoxical prerequisite for self-assertion in the gangsters’ “game”. This inevitably leads to inner turmoil when oppressive self-restraint together with the daily routine of exerting physical violence onto others become unbearable. D’Angelo Barksdale and Wallace tragically embody the struggle between their sincere loyalty to their community and their individual yearnings. In the series, any character who is slightly at odds with the rules of the game is also linguistically subversive, questioning the ideology and language of the game itself. *The Wire* thus plays up social and linguistic stereotypes the better to pin them down through subversion, transgression and narrative irony.

I will examine in turn what I call the catechism of the corner-boy, then the importance and function of manliness and virility in the gangsters’ code of honour, and finally the series critical representation of American society through the prism of gangster capitalism and its common stereotypes.

1. “The Game is the Game”: A Corner-boy catechism

1.1 Chess game

In Season 1, episode 3, D’Angelo Barksdale explains the game of chess to two young corner-boys, Bodie and Wallace. The scene is a metaphorical initiation to the gangster system, for the boys as well as the viewer. D’Angelo lays out the rules of “the game”, i.e. Avon Barksdale’s criminal organisation in West Baltimore. This early scene also gives us an insight into the psychology of three central characters in the season: D’Angelo, nephew of kingpin Avon Barksdale and a mid-ranking chief in the organisation, oversees drug-dealing in a poverty-stricken West Baltimore neighbourhood (the Projects). He is depicted early on as a sensitive character prone to anguish and moral qualms. Thoughtful and articulate, he betrays a sense of doom later turning to desperation in the face of his probable future. Bodie and Wallace are two local boys working for D’Angelo in the Projects. They learn the ropes and rules of the game with candid interest, but while Bodie openly voices his ambition to make rank within the system, Wallace is more of an accidental player of the game – soon to become one of its victims (at the end of season 1). Let us take a look at the chess-game dialogue in the scene:

D'ANGELO. Now look, check it. It's simple, it's simple. See this? This the kingpin. Alright? And he the man. You get the other dude's king, you got the game. But he trying to get your king too, so you gotta protect it. Now the king, he move one space, any direction he damn choose cause he's the king. Like this, this, this, alright? [*shows moves on the chess board*] But he ain't got no hustle. But the rest of these motherfuckers on the team, they got his back. And they run so deep, he really ain't gotta do shit.

BODIE. Like your uncle.

D'ANGELO. Yeah, like my uncle. You see this? This the queen. She's smart and she's fierce. She move any way she want, as far as she want. And she, is the go-get-shit-done piece.

WALLACE. Remind me of Stringer.

D'ANGELO. And this over here is the castle. It's like the stash. It move like this, and like this.

WALLACE. Dog, stash don't move, man.

D'ANGELO. Come on yo, think. How many times we move the stash house this week? Right? And every time we move the stash, we got to move a little muscle with it, right? to protect it.

BODIE. True. We right. Alright, what about them little bald-headed bitches right there?

D'ANGELO. These right here? These are the pawns. They're like the soldiers. They move like this: one space forward, only. Except when they fight, and it's like ...[*shows move*] or like this. They like the front lines, they be out in the field.

WALLACE. So how do you get to *be* the king?

D'ANGELO. It ain't *like* that. See the king stay the king. Alright? Everything stay who he is, except for the pawns. Now if a pawn make it all the way down to the other dude's side, he get to be queen. And like I said the queen ain't no bitch. She got all the moves.

BODIE. Alright, so, if I make it to the other end, I win?

D'ANGELO. If you catch the other dude's king, and trap it, then you win.

BODIE. Alright but if I make it to the end, I'm top dog.

D'ANGELO. Nah yo it ain't like that, look. The pawns, man, in the game, they get capped quick. They be out the game early.

BODIE. Unless they some smart-ass pawns⁶.

This dialogue is rich with both metaphorical and explicit references to the rules of organized crime. D'Angelo's explanations function as a cautionary tale for the two boys, since perfect knowledge of the rules is of crucial importance if you want to "make it to the end". D'Angelo's narrative also hints at the risks inherent to the game itself, regardless of transgression: those on the front lines "get capped quick". For the viewer, the scene also hints at the probable fate of the characters themselves. To understand the rhetorical import of D'Angelo's chess lesson in the overall narrative of season 1, we need to go through a number of grammatical remarks.

⁶ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yomxz2-AQ64&feature=related>>. Last consulted 30 October 2011.

D'Angelo speaks exclusively in the present tense, which is typically used to describe reality and generic truth in a detached, objective way. Here, D'Angelo does not tell the boys what they can do on the chess board, but *how it is*. His use of the simple tense – there is only one instance of the aspectual –ing form in the dialogue – shows that none of the players have a say in the way the game is laid out, and that there is no other way: “It ain’t like that. The king stay the king.” The rules take on a universal dimension, along with the suggested certainty that there is no other reality but that of the game itself. D'Angelo’s generic assertions on the rules of the game thus echo a common mafia cliché that there is no way out of the game once you’re in. Here, the seemingly casual conversation and harmless board game in fact suggest an oppressive and desperate reality: “the king stay the king. The pawns ... get capped quick.”

Besides their use of the present tense, the characters’ Afro-American, Baltimore gangster dialect (or at least, its fictional representation) also significantly highlights defining features of the criminal game, especially through the use of the bare infinitive form of verbs: “the king, he move one space, any direction he damn choose”. Such forms are systematically used for third-person singular occurrences, except for the verb *be*, which only appears in its bare infinitive form when emphasized. Thus D'Angelo’s final remark on the pawns, “They be out the game early”, stands out against his first, unmarked description: “these are the pawns. They’re like the soldiers”. This specificity paradoxically adds an abstract dimension to the oppressively self-affirming reality. Because it does not bear any mark or tense, aspect or person, the bare form of a verb refers to abstract states and actions not grounded in concrete reality and thus not subject to positive or negative assertion. In our scene, such a de-realizing effect hints at the impossible involvement of the speaker, D'Angelo, in his own speech. On the one hand, reality asserts itself: “the game is the game”. On the other hand, D'Angelo’s role is reduced to passing on an abstract, formatted catechism. Getting rid of the verb altogether further enhances the abstract and formulaic dimension of D'Angelo’s speech: “This the kingpin”, “This the queen”. The speaker’s act of grammatical predication (i.e. using a copula verb to explicitly bring together the demonstrative and its attribute) gives way to a juxtaposition of key concepts. Thus reduced to its bare essentials, the game *speaks itself* and is made all the more potent: no one can distort or subvert its rules, let alone reorder the natural hierarchy of its pieces.

This linguistic setup helps us determine three essential characteristics of the (criminal) game. First, the game relies on the rigidity of its own system in terms of hierarchy and role distribution. In the chess game conversation, the lack of subjectivity markers shows that D'Angelo, Bodie and Wallace only exist as mere functions in the game. Such a setup already posits the characters’ tragic end should

they try to assert their individuality and go against the pre-existing order of things. Unsurprisingly, D'Angelo's youthful enthusiasm for the game of chess ("Now look, check it. It's simple. It's simple.") turns to slight irritation at Bodie's objections, then to fatalism ("they get capped quick. They be out the game early."). In that regard, the one occurrence of aspectual subjectivity in the dialogue is worth noting: "You get the other dude's king, you got the game. But he trying to get your king too, so you gotta protect it." The form betrays D'Angelo's involvement as a player, and gives us a sense of urgency: both in chess and in life, the game requires a constant state of alertness to the fact that someone is always out to get you. Any action, be it defensive or offensive, such as in the struggle for drug territory, is already a response to presupposed ongoing threats.

The second essential characteristic of the game derives from its rigid organisation: you cannot question the system itself: "It ain't like that... everything stay who he is". Part of the efficiency of the system is that some moves are impossible: a pawn/soldier can only make rank once he has proven himself by "making it all the way down", but can never himself become the "kingpin". Questioning the order of things amounts to disloyalty to your superiors and to playing out of the game.

However, this setup reveals its own ambiguity in that it both discourages and nurtures ambition (stay loyal to your king, or else; get bigger or get capped). Like chess, the criminal game is based on strategically deceiving your opponents. Unlike chess, it is a game which exists only as a transgression of law-abiding society: cheating is paradoxically at the very core of the rigid, oppressive rules of the game. Bodie's final answer can thus be viewed as an optimistic response to D'Angelo's darker perception of the reality of the game: "The pawns man, in the game, they get capped quick. They be out the game early. - Unless they some smart-ass pawns". Nothing is allowed, but everything is possible if you can cheat the system. This is no small feat, however: Bodie and others will become the victims of their own confidence later on in the series, tragically confirming the iron grip of the game on its hapless pawns.

1.2 The rules are the rules

In *The Wire*, the rule exerts its violence as a threat: obey or get killed. Any voluntary or involuntary deviation from the given course of action automatically triggers a death sentence. This imparts all statements pertaining to the rules of the game⁷ with an unmatched imperative force. In season 1, asserting rules to oneself and others takes the form

⁷ From here onwards, any mention of the game will refer to the gangsters' criminal activities, unless otherwise stated.

of threatening injunctions, with formulaic, repetitive and symmetrical syntactic structures, such as “We either step up or we have to step off” (Bodie, 1.12), “Play or get played” (Omar, 1.08) and “look the part be the part” (Prop Joe, 1.09). In “Play or get played”, the apparent choice between two contradictory imperatives enhances the threat conveyed by the injunction itself: in fact the syntactic coordination here refers to a semantic subordination expressing strict conditionality (“if you don’t play...”). In “look the part be the part”, the repetition underscores the imperative and suggests a causal relationship between appearance and reality, “look the part” being the necessary first step towards the realization of a greater injunction: “be the part”. This brings us back to the existential destructiveness of reducing individuals to their apparent functions in the criminal game.

Paradoxically, the commonplace nature of such formulas does not weaken but enhance their pragmatic effect on speakers and listeners, as in the following warning from D’Angelo to young Wallace (1.12): “Anybody asks you whether you in this game, you tell them you in it for life, alright? You play it hard, you play it tight and make sure niggers know you gonna stand by your people. *No loose talk, no second thoughts and no snitching.*” D’Angelo’s ternary repetition (my emphasis) brings home to Wallace in mantra form what he explains in his previous sentence. The negation presupposes the dangers of any positive instance of “talk”, “second thoughts” and “snitching”. D’Angelo’s reminder that gang life is implicitly equated to serving out a prison sentence (“you in it for life”) also suggests that life itself is at stake, should you reconsider your obedience to gang rules. The system being mostly based on intimidating its own members, it is no surprise that much of its imperative discourse consists of interdictions. The use of modal forms further adds to the imperative expression of rules.

In 1.11, D’Angelo and Bodie comment a recent shooting ending up with a wounded police officer:

D’ANGELO. You can’t just be dropping Five-O like that (...).
BODIE. Look like a couple niggers gonna get dropped.

Here, Bodie simply states the obvious: killing police is against the rules (it is bad for business). The logical consequence will be punishment from the gang’s bosses. D’Angelo simply perceives what is not allowed as inconceivable: the modal “you can’t” expresses the physical or material inability for a subject to realize an action. In this scene, D’Angelo’s absolute disapproval is conveyed through the modal form, and provides an amount of comic relief to the viewer since, ironically, D’Angelo’s moral judgement refers to rule-breaking rather than to murder itself.

Finally, obligations are expressed in the usual compounded form “gotta”: “you gotta stand your ground”, “you gotta get the count

right”, “you gotta take the weight”, and so on. This points to the business-like dimension of people’s obligation as opposed to the moral imperative conveyed by “must”, a form rarely used by the gangsters except Omar (see below). In the Barksdale organisation, there is no inner, moral imperatives but only orders from the outside (the rules, the bosses), as Bodie reminds Poot when they are told to kill their friend Wallace (1.12): “Cause the man said so, that’s why. The man gave the word. We either step up of we have to step off. That’s the game yo, that’s the fucking game.” Bodie knows not to look for an explanation: asking why already amounts to dissention and thus, to disloyalty. In the Barksdale system, words retain their full pragmatic import, and more: in a context where words directly trigger violent action, any injunction functions as a direct speech act, literally making things happen in reality. In such a social order, the Searlian distinction between the word-to-world and world-to-word directions of fit collapses⁸: imperative and descriptive utterances are one and the same, since any injunction uttered by “the man” already amounts to a description of reality. This is the most distinctive feature of gangster speech separating it from the otherwise similar rhetoric of police speech in *The Wire*. As Detective Carver remarks to his partner Herc (1.12): “See, that’s why we can’t win. They fuck up, they get beat. We fuck up, we get pensions.”

In *The Wire*, the commonplace metaphor of the (chess)game and the recurring linguistic stereotypes define the gangsters’ dialect in order to better manipulate and control their reality. There is no arguing the catechism of the corner-boy: just as the rules are physically enforced in reality with violence and death threats, the gangsters’ own identities (linguistic, social and affective) must also conform to the ambiguous rules of the game. Stereotypes shape people’s identities and are in turn reinforced by the manipulation and exploitation of individuals working within the system. Now that the basic rules of the game have been explained, we need to examine a central tenet of the system in its relationship to individuals, and it’s only moral imperative: “be a man”.

2. “Be a man”: honour and virility in the game.

In *The Wire*, most players in the criminal game use its founding stereotypes as the building blocks for their own individual identity, and such stereotypes essentially equate self-worth with masculinity and virility. This also entails the violent rejection of everything that is sensed as undermining genuine masculinity. Misogyny and

⁸ See Searle, John R., “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts”, in *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge: CUP, 1979, pp. 1-30.

homophobia thus largely define a stereotypical gangster. In order to assert themselves as “real men” and earn respect within their community, gangsters need to fulfil a number of conditions, according to a set of commonplace injunctions: “stand your ground”, “be a soldier”, “don’t be a faggot”. Importantly, the recurring imperative to “be a man” linguistically levels out single entities to make them generic, with the indefinite article in “a man/a soldier” referring to undifferentiated tokens of a generic type⁹. In season 1, low-ranking dealers Bodie, Wallace and Poot strive to prove themselves as “men”, yet they can only reach a status of respected masculinity by suppressing their own individuality. Indeed, the only words available to them for self-assertion are precisely those which undermine their distinctiveness as individuals. A linguistic equation makes it clear: Bodie = a man, Poot = a man, Wallace = a man. All three have become interchangeable tokens of a single type or generic model, where of course, “a man” is not to be confused with “The Man (in charge)”. Let us now examine the defining criteria for “being a man”, and how they translate into linguistic stereotypes.

2.1. *Be a man: stand your ground*

As Bodie realizes along with the viewer in the first season, “be a man” first means “stand your ground”. This is true literally – defend yourself and your assigned “corner” – but also linguistically. Throughout the series, gangsters constantly – and comically – punctuate their speeches and dialogues with assertive formulas used only to signify forceful agreement with themselves or their co-speakers. Such phrases amount to phatic speech: they only maintain linguistic contact with co-speakers, without providing any informative content. The recurring phrases “True that”, “no doubt”, “most def”, “word”, “we right” maintain speakers in a constant state of positive (re-)assertion: to be a man means to stand one’s linguistic ground; doubts and epistemic uncertainty have no place in gangster speech. The emphasis on positive assertion symbolically represents another display of masculinity in the gangster system. At the same time, narrative irony reveals the ambiguity of the game through individual assertion: to the viewer, the constant repetition of assertive phrases by all gangster characters comically strips them of their individuality; to us they are just parroting a generic stance and affirming their subservience to the system rather than their own (masculine) self.

⁹ I am using C.S. Peirce’s *type/token* distinction to refer to the opposition between a general concept or meaning (eg. the definition of “man”) and its particular, concrete instances (interchangeable *tokens*). See Récanati, François, *La transparence et l’énonciation*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, pp. 70-74.

However, assertive formulas constitute the core linguistic tools of a gangster's stance against adversity, and the one-word phrase "word!" epitomizes their pragmatic impact. "Word!" is a trademark exclamation of the Baltimore gangster dialect, used in response to a co-speaker, in any given context, serious or trivial: "Man, whoever invented these [chicken nuggets], he off the hook. – word! (Wallace and Poot, 1.02). "Word!" evokes finality ("the final word") and exclusivity (the utterance it refers to is unique in its relation to truth, as in "that's the word and no other"). "Word!" also brings in authority ("say the word"), and when the word comes from "the man", this seemingly insignificant word (!) forcefully reasserts its divine heritage: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God" (John: 1,1). In a world where words are generally equated with violent action, any utterance deemed deserving of such an epithet really is to be respectfully taken in. In daily life, and even more so in the exacerbated violence of *The Wire*, dialogue has much to do with face¹⁰. In confirming their co-speakers' utterance as true, gangsters not only show respect but also implicitly *authorize* the utterance itself. This enables them to maintain both their co-speakers' face and their own as "real men".

Other conversational exchanges between gangsters can use common tropes for ironic purposes, such as in the following: "I don't believe we met. You ever steal from me I kill your whole family" (Prop Joe, 1.10). In this scene, Prop Joe has arranged a meeting between Stringer Bell (Avon Barksdale's second in command) and Omar, so they can negotiate a truce. Proposition Joe rules Baltimore's Eastside drug-dealing organisation. Omar Little is a notorious Baltimore stick-up man who pledges allegiance to no one and is feared and hated by the other gangsters. In fact, Prop Joe already knows Omar, but needs to pretend they have never met in order to protect his peaceful dealings with Stringer Bell. Prop Joe's line here is thus ironically stereotypical since both Omar and the viewer know it is directed at Omar but meant for Stringer. Prop Joe uses the cliché for a comically formal, gangster-like introduction as well as to reaffirm his status as a powerful man. In *The Wire*, stating the obvious through the use of formulaic clichés enables characters to constantly posit their status as real men, endowed with virile powers of linguistic assertion and physical violence.

¹⁰ "Face" is a crucial concept in the social and linguistic studies of human interaction. It was first defined by Erving Goffman as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or his religion by making a good showing for himself." (*Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* [1967], New Brunswick, Aldine Transaction, 2005, p. 5). The concept is commonly expressed in the phrase "to lose face".

2.2. Be a man: be a soldier

Being a man in the Baltimore gangster society is as much about positively asserting yourself through commonplace formulas as it is about being silent and silencing others. In the gangster dialect of *The Wire*, a “soldier” acts as an enforcer for the organization. This can include mundane activities such as driving or collecting money, but it mostly consists in killing anybody who constitutes a threat to the organization: potential witnesses, people resisting racket, and challengers. Throughout the series, Wee-Bey Brice represents the model soldier: he has no moral qualms about his crimes; his loyalty to Avon Barksdale is absolute. He does not hesitate to kill one of his own friends when Stringer deems him unreliable (1.12). At the end of season 1, Wee-Bey is arrested and confesses his own murders as well as others, in order to protect his bosses. He is sentenced to life without parole and is regularly seen in prison scenes throughout the series. As a ruthless soldier close to the bosses, he impresses the aspiring or doubtful main characters of the first season: Bodie, D’Angelo, Wallace. All three display different attitudes towards the social and personal implications of being a soldier.

Bodie is most suited for the role, and, as mentioned previously, he has no doubt about his self-worth (see his “smart-ass pawns” comment quoted above). For Bodie, “you gotta have heart”. He equates manly courage with open displays of violence, however reckless or detrimental to his own health. In episode 3, Bodie punches a police officer as he is being searched by a whole crew; as a result he is beaten up by officers Carver, Herc and Greggs: “Get him! Get him! You don’t hit a cop! What’s wrong with you, boy?”. In the next episode, Bodie’s answer to a social worker’s commiseration is “You should see the cop”. He later escapes the juvenile delinquent detention centre and comes back triumphantly to the projects: “Man, Boy’s Village [i.e. juvie] is shit. I’m just too bad for that off-brand little boy bullshit, man. It can’t hold me”. When back downtown for questioning, he tells officers Carver and Herc: “I want for you to suck my dick” (1.05), and takes another beating. Bodie is fearless and eager to prove his value to the bosses. However, his loudmouth attitude turns to silent acquiescence when he is ordered to kill his friend Wallace (1.12):

STRINGER. What’s up with that boy? (...) I heard he damn near shit his pants when he saw what happened to Omar’s bitch.

BODIE. He just ain’t built for this you know. His heart pump Kool-Aid.

STRINGER. Right. What about you? You built for this shit?

BODIE. No doubt.

STRINGER. You ready to put the work in?

BODIE. *nods silently*

STRINGER. You got heat?

BODIE. *points to gun in his pocket.*
STRINGER. All right, soldier.

Bodie is put to the ultimate test: by killing his friend, he renounces his own emotional life to gain soldier status. He is thus ready to exert violence, to suppress all dissent, including in himself, to be silent and if necessary to “take the weight” in order to protect his bosses. Before they kill him, Bodie and Poot treat an unsuspecting Wallace to food and soda; Bodie lectures him: “You talking about your mama like you still a kid. Soft link break the chain. What are you, a boy or a man?” Later, as he draws his gun to kill him, he taunts: “Man, you’s a weak-ass nigger, man. You should’ve stayed down in the country man. You fucking brought this on yourself, man. You brought this on yourself!”. Wallace broke the rules (“no snitching”) and Bodie only stands as the executioner of a sentence pronounced by “the man”. At the same time, because he commits murder, Bodie traps himself irrevocably in the game. His abnegation and quick promotion paradoxically assures he will always be a subordinate to his boss, as a truly loyal soldier must be. Bodie’s tragic fate in the fifth season eventually demonstrates D’Angelo’s early intuition about the pawns in the game. Bodie’s efforts to emulate Wee-Bey’s example bring him closer to a stereotypical soldier character, but his very loyalty eventually becomes his downfall, reminding us that rules often do not apply to the bosses.

Diverging from the commonplace ideal of virile ruthlessness are Wallace and D’Angelo, who betray their soft sides early on in the series. After witnessing the tortured body of Brandon, Omar’s accomplice and lover, Wallace confides in D’Angelo that he wants out of the game: “It fucks me up” (1.06), “I don’t wanna play no more” (1.09). In his last conversation with his friends he confirms his rejection of violence: “your ass ain’t got to be hard all the goddamn time.” (1.12). Wallace’s discourse counters the unforgiving imperatives endorsed by Bodie and the bosses. He finds understanding in D’Angelo, who feels trapped by his job and disapproves of the system. In the opening scene of episode 1.03, he chastises Bodie, Poot and Wallace for bad-mouthing their junkie customers. Their contrasting attitudes translate in the dialogue as one set of clichés against another. On the one hand, the boys’ dismissal of “junkie motherfuckers”:

D’ANGELO. You ain’t got to punk him like that.
POOT. He punked himself. He’s a goddamn drug addict.
D’ANGELO. And you a goddamn drug dealer.
BODIE. So? What? “The customer’s always right”?

To this, D’Angelo counters a remarkably candid view of economic relationships in the legal society:

D'ANGELO. Everything else in the world gets sold without people taking advantage. Scamming, lying, doing each other dirty. Why's it got to be that way with this?

POOT. Cause they dope fiends.

D'ANGELO. Yeah but the game ain't gotta be played like that. You can't tell me this shit can't get done without people beating on each other, killing each other, doing each other like dogs. Without all that you ain't got Five-O there on your backs every five minutes.

D'Angelo cannot bear the violence that is part of the game, even though he has no alternative discourse to counter that of the drug-dealing scene. Here, his speech consists of a description of his social context, subjectively marked (recurring continuous verb forms), in which he expresses his disapproval of the game. This results in a series of accumulated negations: "you can't tell me this shit can't get done without...". Yet when he again vents his desperation to his new girlfriend Sharlene, he admits to having no other plan (1.08):

D'ANGELO. You got people using each other, scamming each other, cutting each other up cause they're late on a bill. Shooting folks cause there might be a fucking dollar in it. It gets to sometimes like I can't fucking breathe. Like I can't even get no air. (...)

SHARLENE. Do something else.

D'ANGELO. *Shake heads*. So you happy with your job?

D'Angelo's language goes against the stereotype of the ruthless soldier, but his inability to find an alternative discourse to the one he lives in already suggests that there is no way out for him. Let us finally turn to a third element which both negatively defines the gangsters' masculine stereotype, and subverts it: the theme of homosexuality and its embodiment in the mysterious figure of Omar Little.

2.3. *Be a man: don't be a faggot*

Here is how Avon Barksdale reacts to the news that Omar is gay (1.04):

STINKUM. You know Bird jailed with Omar down the cut. He said, he all faggot.

AVON. A faggot? Get the fuck outta here.

STINKUM. Said he had a whole stable of boys down in Jessup.

WEE-BEY. This punk motherfucker got even less use for pussy now that he home.

STRINGER. So he got a lot of heart for a cocksucker huh?

AVON. Yo yo yo we doubling down on Sweet-Lips alright? We make it four motherfucker thousand dollars on him. Six if I get the chance to holler at him before he get got.

WEE-BEY. Say no more.

The “faggot” epithet calls for several remarks. First, Avon and his crew know that homosexuality in prison does not necessarily reflect sexual preferences, but essentially denotes power relations. The fact that Omar had “a whole stable of boys” in jail clearly implies that he is not just a “faggot” but also a very powerful man. Omar’s brazen robbery of Avon’s stash in the previous episode (1.03) demonstrated his fearlessness and ridiculed the Barksdale organisation. In this scene, Avon and his men cannot belittle Omar too much – ironically, Omar’s surname is “Little”, making him a cheeky David against Barksdale’s Goliath – for being gay because it threatens their own masculinity. Being robbed by a gay man upsets their whole ideological system and will make them the laughing stock of their peers. It is therefore no surprise that Stringer insists on Omar’s courage (“a lot of heart for a cocksucker”). Omar’s sexual orientation directly subverts the stereotype, and reveals a complex and mysterious character, unashamedly gay and self-proclaimed king. In episode 8, Omar forcefully reminds Avon who is in charge when he goes after his main soldiers, killing Stinkum and wounding Wee-Bey: “Hey yo listen here Bey. You come at the king, you best not miss.” With his menacingly cheerful signature whistle, Omar does not hide: the force of his assertion is fully performative and disrupts Avon’s whole game. As Stringer remarks to Avon when the hunt for Omar’s head turns to an obsession, “This is the worst part of the game, man. Best we do, is break out even (...) This shit got out of hand” (1.08).

Omar is not simply a challenger out to destroy Avon’s stable image as the man. He also creates his own myth, trading the kingpin-and-his-gang cliché for the “lone ranger” stereotype. He constantly maintains an ironical distance in his dealings with the gangsters and the police, often referring to himself in the third-person: “Omar don’t scare” (to Greggs and the detail, 1.06), “A man must have a code” (to the detail, 1.07), “Omar know nothing about Stinkum getting got” (to the detail, 1.08), “a man gotta earn a living” (to Stringer, 1.10). His use of generic locutions (“a man”) posits his persona as a separate, abstract entity and helps him create the myth of the solitary avenger, or, as Stringer puts it, his “Robin Hood shit” (1.09). Omar checks all the attributes of his self-made persona: a long, dark coat, a sawed-off rifle – Greggs and Lester jokingly remark that the man is “a loose cannon, literally”, in 1.08 – an impressive scar along the side of his face. Omar only has contempt for the so-called rules of the game and he sticks to his own code of honour. In that regard, Officer Bunk Moreland’s remark in episode 1.07 stands in stark contrast to the commonplace “you gotta follow the rules” of the Barksdale organisation:

OMAR. Don’t get twisted, I do some dirt too. But I ain’t never put my gun on nobody who wasn’t in the game.

BUNK. A man must have a code.

OMAR. No doubt.

Omar's own rules and individualistic style make him endearing even to the police officers who question him in episode 1.08:

OMAR. Well if I was gonna come after certain people, I definitely wouldn't want to give y'all fine people here any cause for concern. I mean there are some rules here right?

LESTER. Rules?

OMAR. Yeah. No mistakes, no bystanders, no taxpayers getting caught up in the mix.

You just get in close and you just hit the right nigger.

LESTER. And loose the gun afterwards, that'd be a rule too I think.

OMAR *smiles*. (...)

MCNULTY. While we're all grateful for the case you gave us on Bird, and we all have a certain admiration for your do-it-yourself nature –

LESTER. We need you to hang back. (...)

OMAR *leaves*.

MCNULTY. Lester, are we still cops?

LESTER. Technically, I suppose so...

Omar is aware of his fascinating power and cultivates his lone-wolf image, often to comic effect, such as in episode 9, when he robs yet another of Avon's stash-houses: "Y'all need to open this door, man, before I huff and puff. Come on now, by the hairs of your chinny-chin!" Omar's extraordinary feats and cleverly built self-narrative maintain his aura: he is both "just a man" to the police and "the king" to Barksdale – both unique ("*the* king" means there is only one), and unremarkable (you cannot catch him because he is a man like any other). Omar's character is essential in the narrative in that he helps define the other gangsters by contrast, and provides the bridging element between the mob and the police to reveal their conflicting inner identities: not a stereotypical gangster in the Barksdale style, Omar is also not a stereotypical upholder of the law, although he does display a sense of moral justice. In *The Wire*, the writers' narrative games with gangster stereotypes enable us to reflect on identity and self-assertion in, and out of, the game.

3. The game is business

There is an ironic similarity between D'Angelo and Stringer Bell in season 1: both reflect on the nature of business outside of the game, and both hint at how the game should really just boil down to business. The similarity ends there. D'Angelo's thoughts mostly stem from his detestation of violence; Stringer Bell's aspirations for respectability and (semi-)legitimate business stem from his realization that they bring in more money and more power. To round off our overview of stereotypes in *The Wire*, season 1, I wish to briefly show here that the defining

stereotypes of the game partially overlap commonplace views of business, and that the creation of wealth in the game is based on its own caricatured version of capitalist exploitation.

3.1. The language of exploitation

From the very beginning, the game can be seen as a literal interpretation of human resources exploitation. The Barksdale organisation shares its features with different business models. First, it functions like a corporation: its many fronts, legal and illegal ventures are all labelled under separate names, thus keeping Avon Barksdale separate from the (legal) liabilities of his enterprises as well as avoiding possible traceability. Each of Avon's dealers on the street stands responsible for his corner, and takes full responsibility when caught. The Barksdale organisation is also a tight family business, with Avon at the head, his sister Brianna as treasurer and financial advisor, his childhood friend Stringer Bell as the second-in-command, and his nephew D'Angelo as a lieutenant in the drug trade. It is a local affair (limited to West Baltimore) and a family tradition. Avon and Brianna having been raised in the drug trade, they want their business to stay in the family and their family to stay in the business, as Brianna reminds D'Angelo when he is finally arrested: "You hurt [Avon], you hurt this whole family. (...) This right here is part of the game, D! And without the game, this whole family would be down in the fucking Terrace, living off scraps. Shit, we probably wouldn't even be a family" (1.12). Sacrificing a member of the organization, even her own son, is a step Brianna will take to ensure that the business can carry on. In the last episode of the season, (1.13, "Sentencing"), Avon, Brianna, Stringer and their lawyer give up D'Angelo in a plea deal so that he will take most of the blame and Avon can get a lighter sentence. Both Wallace's death (1.12) and D'Angelo's (2.06) make them literal embodiments of the ruthless exploitation of human resources for financial profit.

In season 1, the Barksdale business presents a strict hierarchy with only limited upward mobility at any given level. It can be viewed as a dystopian (or literal?) version of economic and work relationships in legal society. At the very bottom, the "dope-fiends" are the customers. Bodie's ironic remark in 1.03 ("What? The customer's always right?") only emphasizes his contempt and the brutal treatment meted out to the "customers". Since drug addicts are literally captive customers, they provide better profit, as Stringer reminds D'Angelo in the same episode:

STRINGER. Ain't no new package. Just gonna put that same shit out in a different colour gel cap is all. Might spike that shit with some procaine, some cocaine, but otherwise the same.

D'ANGELO. String, man, people are already coming back on us telling us that shit is weak.

STRINGER. I know, shit is weak, but you know, shit is weak all over. But the thing is, no matter what we call heroin, it's gonna get sold. Shit is strong, we're gonna sell it, shit is weak, we gonna sell twice as much, you know why? Cause a fiend, he's gonna chase that shit no matter what. It's crazy, you know? We do worse, and we get paid more. The government do better, and it don't mean no never mind. This shit right here D, it's forever.

Of course, Stringer's savvy economic sense remains valid only as long as there is no competition in the market for a given territory. Market monopoly is thus the second asset to protect after supply.

Ranking low on the organisation ladder, the corner-boys and look-outs provide the hand-to-hand exchanges with the customers and act as the first-line defenders of their gang's territorial exclusivity. In the concluding episode of the season, Bodie and his friends fight off young men who are dealing on their territory (1.13):

BODIE. Motherfucker, what the fuck is up?! Huh?! Fuck is y'all doin'? Yo, do what you feel. But be ready to finish what you start. What is you doin'? This ain't no open market, you know that.

ONION. Ain't no market at all, nigga. You ain't got shit to sell, back that ass up for those that do.

BODIE. You know what? What?! Fuck, fuck. Get the fuck out of here, bitch!

Bodie, Poot and others beat them up with baseball bats.

This scene paves the way for the following seasons, where narrative focus shifts to economic competition and gang wars.

Further up in the organisation, mid-management such as D'Angelo's is further out-ranked by the real enforcers, the soldiers, represented by Wee-Bey, Little Man and Stinkum in season 1. Most of their assignments being contract killing, they hold considerable power over the other gang members, including D'Angelo. However, they themselves are merely viewed as disposable manpower. In *The Wire*, Baltimore gangsters borrow the euphemistic vocabulary of the workplace to refer to their own very literal management of human resources, thus grimly – sometimes comically – echoing the everyday violence of capitalist exploitation in society as a whole. When Little Man shoots detective Greggs and sends her to hospital, Stringer takes immediate measures: "Little Man gotta go" (1.11). In the same episode, Little Man's lack of professionalism elicits similarly uncharitable comments from Bodie: "them Park Heights niggers just ain't got no

fucking common sense. A lotta heart, just no sense. (...) Looks like a couple more niggers gonna get dropped.”

As the season progresses, the investigators and the viewers gradually map out the hierarchy and power relations within the Barksdale organisation, witnessing its inner violence and ruthlessness, and understanding its strictly profit-oriented agenda: indeed, as D’Angelo reminds us after Greggs shooting (1.11), “How you gonna shoot a police? Ain’t no percentage in that, know what I’m saying? Somebody around here do that, every knocko in the world be down there busting heads.” Building and maintaining a business empire is precisely what Stringer Bell works at, and his strict business policy within the organisation reveals the inner tensions of illegal trafficking as well as the ambivalence of legitimate society itself.

3.2. Ambiguities

By regularly using the language and discursive tropes of business and economics, Stringer Bell reveals the many common features his organisation shares with “legitimate” companies. Stringer’s personal ambivalence towards the game becomes a prominent part of seasons 2 and 3, but he shows early signs of his interest in straight business in the first season. Episode 1.08 (“Lessons”) sheds light on Stringer’s seriousness and business-like aspirations when McNulty follows him to a local community college where he is seen taking an “introduction to macroeconomics” class and studiously answering questions on product elasticity and consumer demand. Later in the same episode, Stringer scolds the corner-boys he employs in one of his legal fronts, a copying centre:

STRINGER. You’re not gonna bring that corner bullshit in here, you hear me? Look, you know what we got here is an elastic product. You know what that mean? That mean, when people can go elsewhere, and get their printing and copying done, they gonna do it! You acting like we got an inelastic product and we don’t! Now, I want this to run like a true fucking business. Not no front, not no bullshit. Understand me? I’m serious.

In season 4, when McNulty searches Stringer’s apartment after his death, he is amazed to find Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* on a bookshelf. Stringer Bell’s ambitions lead him to do business on both sides of the law, gradually converting the drug trade organisation into semi-legal ventures in real-estate development. His aspirations for power, wealth and respectability make him a conflicted character and cause tensions with Avon Barksdale, a more old-fashioned gangster who reigns over his organisation like a warlord and often displays thuggish impatience and territorial pride. Stringer’s ambiguities also highlight the narrative’s strongly critical view of American society: on

either side of the law, legitimate businessmen, politicians and gangsters share the common goals of money and power, whatever the human and social cost might be. Thus, Bodie's candid remark in the last scenes of the season (1.13), "It ain't no open market", is also, at the narrative level, an ironical comment on society as a whole: no market really is "open" in the legitimate society of corporate business, where corruption and social injustice make the search for profit as much of a scramble as a corner-boy brawl in West Baltimore.

Conclusion

For the main gangster characters in *The Wire*, season 1, there is no way out of the game. D'Angelo's intuition that once you are in it, "it's for life" turns out to be accurate for him and most of his peers in the whole series. Similarly, there is no possible identity outside of the game, as Wallace grimly demonstrates: "you can take the nigger out of the Westside but you can't take the Westside out of the nigger" (Poot on Wallace, 1.11), and "this shit, this is me, yo, right here" (Wallace to D'Angelo, pointing to the Westside projects, shortly before getting killed by his own friends in one of the run-down vacant houses, 1.12). *The Wire* depicts the game both as a discourse and a social construct: linguistic stereotypes define the characters' identity according to their given function in the game. Conversely, the rigid social set up at work in the Barksdale organisation constantly legitimates a language made of clichés and ready-made assertions. We are back to the chessboard where each piece is defined by its function and each function in turn determines the moves: in *The Wire*, West Baltimore is the board of a game in which each character's function, identity and fate are already written.