

The Politics of Brisket: Jews and *The Wire*

Keith Kahn-Harris | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

*The Wire*¹ generally avoids simple characterisations of heroes and villains in favour of ambiguous, finely drawn characters. Our expectations of characters' behaviours are constantly challenged and played with. But in this world of complex motivations and contradictory actions, the lawyer Maurice Levy stands out for his near constant repulsiveness.

Levy appears throughout the five series of the show as the lawyer of choice for those in 'The Game'. We first see him at the start of episode one, series one, defending D'Angelo Barksdale. His smugness and lack of surprise when Nakeesha Lyles, a key prosecution witness, backtracks on her story indicates his tacit complicity in what is clearly a case of witness tampering. From this beginning, Levy is shown to be not just a defence lawyer, but a part of The Game himself, although for the most part staying just about within the bounds of legality. As Omar Little responds to Levy when he attempts to discredit his character as a witness at Bird's trial in season two: 'I got the shotgun; you got the briefcase. It's all in the game'. At times Levy acts as a kind of *consigliere* to his major clients, at the end of series one advising Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale to - in not so many words - dispose of any possible witnesses to their criminality, leading to the murder of Nakeesha Lyles. He provides routes into the legitimate business world for Bell, Barksdale and later on for Marlo Stanfield, providing connections to property developers who have no qualms as to where they receive their money from.

During the fifth series, Levy is shown to be a criminal himself. He is discovered to have purchased court documents and to be involved in high level corruption of the justice system in Baltimore. Yet he is never actually charged with anything, as in the final episode he bargains his freedom with prosecutor Rhonda Pearlman in exchange for the conviction of Chris Partlow and others members of Marlo's gang, together with the retirement of Marlo himself from drug dealing. In a series in which there are few outright winners, Levy manages to play The Game without losing.

In *The Wire*, family is often used as a way of 'humanising' even the most immoral characters. Avon Barksdale is seen visiting a sick relative in season one and extolling the virtues of family, even Chris Partlow is shown briefly with his 'peoples' in series five. So it is that two references are made to Levy's family in the five series. Both of these references link Levy's family life to his Jewishness. The first of these reference occurs when he is called out in episode two of series one to attend the interrogation of D'Angelo Barksdale. On his way to the interrogation room he complains to McNulty:

Levy: *Shame on you McNulty, dragging me from the Levy family preserve on a Friday night*

McNulty: *My apologies*

Levy: *Yvette made brisket*

McNulty: *Good?*

Levy: *When served hot*

This exchange and Levy's annoyed demeanour suggest that while he will work on the Sabbath, he sees his time with his family at the Sabbath table as sacrosanct. The second reference to Levy's Jewish family occurs in the final episode of series five. After informing Marlo of the deal he has struck with Pearlman, he goes to meet Herc, an ex-detective who is now Levy's investigator. Herc had previously used his contacts with his ex-partner Carver to find out about the illegal wiretap responsible for Marlo's prosecution and had then informed Levy of this. Levy elatedly tells Herc:

Kiddo, you are a goldmine to me you know that? You've taken this law firm to a whole new level [...] Now if Marlo takes the deal he's going to take a walk after being charged in a multi-million drug seizure. That doesn't happen very often and when it does happen the name and number of the lawyer goes in the front pocket of every respectable drug trafficker. You're a genius for what you brought me on this [...] Here [handing Herc his address], you should come over for dinner tonight. Yvette's making brisket [...] You're mishpocha² now.

For Levy, the comforts of the home, bound up in the comforting, calorie-rich taste of brisket, are a kind of sanctuary from the dirty business of The Game he plays in his working life. He may play The Game but his home and family are not in the West Baltimore neighbourhoods where his clients live. We can read Yvette (who never appears in the series) as Levy's 'angel of the hearth', someone who has not been dirtied by The Game and the street. For Herc to be invited into this sanctuary is a special honour and Herc's pleased expression suggests he sees it as such. At the same time, it is also made clear that Levy's brisket is paid for by his involvement in the drug trade. Levy may have his domestic sanctuary, but it is a sanctuary that is built on his corruption.

What is intriguing is how far our brief insights into Levy's home life are tied in with references to his Jewishness. His family life is bound up in Jewish ritual (Sabbath dinner) Jewish food (brisket) and Jewish belonging (*mishpocha*). Levy's invitation to Herc to become *mishpocha* has unmistakably clannish, even conspiratorial overtones. He extends the warmth of his Jewish family to someone who has loyalty to him - loyalty forged through Herc's betrayal of Carver. In turning his back on his loyalties to the police and to his former partner, Herc is received into Levy's Jewish family circle. Even if Herc has previously betrayed Levy himself through giving Marlo's cell number to Carver (something of which Levy is not aware) Herc's pleasure in Levy's invitation indicates his willingness to forge a new set of loyalties that, whilst anchored in the Jewish home, are built on the values of The Game. In other words, Levy succeeds in seducing Herc - one of *The Wire's* dumbest and most suggestible characters - away from the rectitude represented by his former partner in the police (who over the five series has come to be redeemed from his earlier corruption). The embrace of Levy's Jewish home is ultimately the reward for Herc's betrayal. The home, a source of succour for other characters, is in the case of Levy a source of corruption.

Levy's crookedness, his cynical exploitation of the drug trade and his 'seduction' of Herc all recall common negative stereotypes of Jews as sinister, venal and secretive. I am not arguing here that *The Wire* is anti-Semitic in any crude sense, rather that this one character is constructed in ways that recall certain common anti-Semitic tropes. That said, the other two major Jewish characters on the series Sergeant Jay Landsman and Assistant State's Attorney Rhonda Pearlman are much more sympathetic than Levy.³ We can assume with a reasonable degree of confidence that Pearlman is Jewish as she has a common Jewish surname, although her Jewishness is never referred to in the series. Landsman's character is based on a 'real life' character who is Jewish⁴ and in his 'eulogy' for McNulty at the end of series five someone can be heard shouting out 'play the fucking tape Jew'. Both of these characters are much more morally complex than Levy is. Pearlman is one of the few characters in the series who manages to retain her integrity while managing to balance idealism with career-advancement. Landsman, while a fat slob and a time server, retains his capacity for moments of compassion and loyalty, as with his sensitive treatment of Bubbles in series four and Ziggy in series two. Their Jewishness is not referred to as explicitly as Levy's is and it is not treated as a significant source of either characters' strengths and weaknesses.

What then is the significance of Jews in *The Wire*? How far is it significant that there are only three Jewish characters? What is the significance of the fact that the Jew whose Jewishness is most explicitly referred to on *The Wire* is one of the show's most unpleasant characters, whose depiction is consistent with some anti-Semitic tropes?

To approach these questions we have to look at how *The Wire*'s Baltimore relates to 'real world' Baltimore and in particular the real world of the Baltimore Jewish community. While the comparison of text with an external reality is often seen to be naïve in most contemporary critical theory, an assessment of how far *The Wire*'s Baltimore resembles the Baltimore that is lived in by its residents remains valid given that show creator David Simon has explicitly described *The Wire* as a portrait of the contemporary American city:

The Wire is about the American city: How it works, or doesn't, and ultimately, what is at stake for all of us in these times. In that regard, it reflects, with precision, the Baltimore that the writers know and, yes, in a very real sense, love. It is not the work of Hollywood writers on studio lots. It is homegrown and organic and hence it is very much about place.⁵

There has been a significant Jewish presence in Baltimore since the late eighteenth century and the Lloyd Street synagogue is the third oldest in the US.⁶ Today, there are around 100,000 Jews in the Baltimore Metropolitan Area, about 6% of the population.⁷ Baltimore Jewry is a 'strong, cohesive, active Jewish community',⁸ with a highest proportion of Orthodox Jews than any other American city. It is largely inmarried and has strong traditions of Jewish education, community involvement and philanthropy. Baltimore is also

the home to Baltimore Hebrew University together with a number of *yeshivot* and seminaries.

More than 71% of the Jewish population lives in Baltimore County rather than Baltimore City,⁹ reflecting a suburban concentration shared by other 'white' groups in a two-thirds African-American city. Within the County, Jews are concentrated in a few suburbs such as Pikesville. County Jews tend to have been in Baltimore for a longer period than City Jews who are newer to the city and are dispersed across many neighbourhoods. Through the twentieth century there was a gradual process in which Jews moved in a northwesterly direction out from the city centre towards the suburbs. Jews were part of the 'white flight' that left many neighbourhoods in West Baltimore and elsewhere dominated by African-Americans.¹⁰ It has been argued that over the twentieth century Jews in America gradually became classed as a 'white' minority and accrued the same privileges afforded to other white groups¹¹ and certainly nowadays Baltimore Jews are largely (but not exclusively) a well-off, well-integrated but still distinct part of Baltimore's white minority.

The Wire does not portray 'white Baltimore' as homogeneous. The second series starts off with a dispute within the Polish community. McNulty is at one point referred to as a 'Mick' by Landsman in his eulogy and there are other Irish police characters as well. Carcetti is identifiably Italian-American. The 'Greek's gang is mostly Greek, with Russian and Israeli members. Yet the portrayal of white communities is much more uneven than that of African-American Baltimore. *The Wire* presents a cross-section of African-American Baltimore; from elites such as Clay Davis and Clarence Royce, through mid-level police officers and political aids, to upstanding residents of the ghettos of West and East Baltimore, to players of The Game in those neighbourhoods. The series also shows some of the generational differences within African-American Baltimore; from elderly church-going residents through to the brutalised schoolchildren being drawn into The Game. With the partial exception of the Poles in series two none of this diachronic or synchronic complexity can be found in *The Wire's* portrayal of white Baltimore. Nor indeed is there much of a presence of minorities that do not easily fall into the black-white dichotomy. The growing Hispanic minority is invisible save for journalist Alma Gutierrez in series five and some of the gardeners that Cutty works with in series three.¹² Asian-Americans are completely absent save for the screaming Korean store keeper present at Omar's shooting in season five and a brief appearance of a South Asian storekeeper in series three.

It would be absurd to demand of *The Wire* or any other programme that it exactly replicate the complex demography of a multicultural modern city. At the same time though, the explicit desire of David Simon to treat Baltimore as both the theme and location of the series suggest that we are entitled to question the different levels of attention paid to different communities. All representations are by definition partial, but some are perhaps more partial than others. My contention though is that whilst the absences in the representation of Jews and other minorities on *The Wire* might be seen as a

'failure' to fully attend to the diversity of non-African-American Baltimore, this failure can be read as dramatically and politically appropriate.

In an interview conducted just before the fifth series ended, David Simon discussed the significance of the newspaper as a focus for the final series (a focus that puzzled some viewers and critics):

We know that the mayor is cooking the stats so he can become governor. We know that he's taking apart the Marlo task force. We know that he's backing No Child Left Behind, and hyping a dubious gain in the 3rd grade test scores though the schools remain an unmitigated disaster. We know that these politically charged prosecutions of Clay Davis are being undercut behind the scenes by a variety of conflicting interests, that there's turf wars that result in complete lapses of any anti-corruption effort. We know that Prop Joe is the biggest drug dealer in the city with the main connect, and when he's killed, it's a brief. We know who Omar is — and, listen, you'd need a really good police reporter to write a story about Omar, but it could happen, but it certainly isn't going to happen at that paper.

The main theme is not the fabulist and what he is perpetrating. That's the overt plot. The main theme is that, with the exception of the bookends - at the beginning, the excellent effort at adversarial journalism that begins the piece in episode one and the genuine piece of narrative journalism that concludes it, with Bubbles - it's a newspaper that is so eviscerated, so worn, so devoid of veterans, so consumed by the wrong things, and so denied the ability to replenish itself that it singularly misses every single story in the season[...]

That is the last piece in the Wire puzzle: If you think anyone will be paying attention to anything you encountered in the first four seasons of this show, think again.¹³

The *Baltimore Sun's* ignorance of what is happening in Baltimore is shared by other institutions in the city. We can read the entire series as an interrogation of the disconnection and absences that are endemic within the post-industrial city. The police department, city hall and the newspaper are all ignorant - sometimes innocently, sometimes wilfully - of what is the true state of the city. They base policy on calculations that have little to do with what the city needs. The 'wires' that are the focus of investigations in all five series represent desperate attempts to make up for the ignorance that authority has of life in West Baltimore. The necessity for a 'fake' wire in season five to disguise the real/illegal one is a telling indictment of the refusal of those in authority to truly listen to what is happening in their city. Ironically, those who try to narrow the disconnect such as McNulty (through the fake wire) and Bunny Colvin (through the creation of 'Hamsterdam') have to resort to creating their own disconnection from their bosses.

Ignorance and disconnection is the function of a process in which whole neighbourhoods are not simply deprived, but systematically evacuated of a viable future. The post-industrial vacuum made worse by the evisceration of the education system and welfare state, is now filled with a drug trade that the police and city hall cannot and will not engage in through anything but ineffective short-term punitive measures. West Baltimore (and of course parts of East Baltimore too, although they are not portrayed with the same detail in *The Wire*) is a reality completely segregated from the rest of Baltimore. This is not the same though as the segregation of the pre-civil rights era. If pre-civil rights segregated communities were by no means 'separate but equal', there were at least similar values persisting across the communities. In series three, detective Bunk Moreland meets with Omar to ask for his help in the shooting of his associate Tosha. Omar tells him that no one will talk to him and that in any case the police feel that if no 'tax payers' are killed there is 'no victim to speak of'. Bunk responds:

I was a few years ahead of you at Edmonson, but I know you remember the neighbourhood, how it was. We had some bad boys for real. It wasn't so much about guns, so much as knowing what to do with your hands. Those boys could really rag. My father had me on the straight, but like any young man I wanted to be hard too, so I would turn up at all the house parties where the tough boys hung. Shit they knew I wasn't one of them. Those hard cases would come up to me and tell me 'go home schoolboy you don't belong here'. Didn't realise at the time what they were doing for me. As rough as that neighbourhood could be, we had us a community. No body, no victim, it didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies and predatory motherfuckers like you. And now where that girl fell I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name and glorifying your ass.¹⁴ Makes me sick motherfucker how far we done fell.

This portrayal of West Baltimore as a place that has come to be entirely removed from the rest of society is reinforced in the portrayal of the education system in series four. In episode seven Bunny Colin tries to explain to a sceptical teacher why the education system can no longer reach the children of West Baltimore:

You put a textbook in front of these kids, put a problem on the blackboard or teach them every problem in some state wide test it won't matter. None of it. 'Cos they're not learning for our world they're learning for theirs. And they know exactly what it is they're training for and what it is everyone expects them to be.

The post civil rights era may have led to greater interaction between 'races' and the growth of an African-American political and business class, but *The Wire* suggests that a new kind of segregation has emerged that is worse than racial segregation. The degradation of West Baltimore represents a kind of nightmare in which an alternative universe has been created whose values are totally disconnected from the rest of Baltimore. That West Baltimore is

African-American is not insignificant, but African-Americans in authority are no less disconnected from African-Americans from West Baltimore than anyone else is.

The Wire focuses relentlessly on West Baltimore in its portrayal of the city. It is the frame through which Baltimore is viewed and found wanting. The radical point being made is that no matter what good things happen in Baltimore - the regeneration of the harbour area for example - if West Baltimore is invisible and disconnected the city remains infected with a kind of pathological disconnection. This perspective, while it may recall politically radical discourses, lacks the kind of framework that would suggest any hope of change. The residents of West Baltimore have no more insight into the condition of the city than anyone else has - this is no idealised proletariat endowed with the 'slave's' greater knowledge of the 'master' than the master has of himself. *The Wire* has a profoundly dystopian and postmodern view of the possibilities of knowledge within the post-industrial city, in which a cacophony of partial perspectives add up to something that is less than the sum of its parts.

The question of the significance of Jews on *The Wire* must be viewed through the shows 'West Baltimore perspective'. For West Baltimore, the vibrancy of Baltimore Jewish life is a complete irrelevance. There is only the haziest idea of what Jews are and what they do. At one point in series four Namond's mother asks his excuse is for 'why you ain't at school?'; she then asks if the reason is that it is 'one of them Jew holidays'. David Simon has said of his time in West Baltimore while writing *The Corner*:

I was the only Jew these guys have seen in the last 20 years, since the Koreans took over the corner groceries. There's no connection. [Jews] don't exist for them.¹⁵

In a 2005 interview with the *Baltimore Jewish Times*,¹⁶ Simon placed the principle responsibility for ending black-Jewish disconnection with the Jewish community, castigating most of organised Baltimore Jewry for its failure to engage in West Baltimore:

I really resent it - why was David Simon with his little notepad the only representation of American Judaism down there? This is your city! This is Baltimore! Here are the worst problems in your city-and where the [expletive] are you?"

In *The Wire*, as in 'real life', Jews only enter West Baltimore life as authority figures (Landsman, Pearlman) or as those mediating that authority (Levy). In an interview with a Jewish newspaper,¹⁷ Simon explained why Levy was made into a Jewish character:

Why did we make this guy Jewish? Because when I was covering the drug trade for 13 years for the [Baltimore] Sun, most of the major drug lawyers were Jewish. Some of them are now disbarred and others are not but came pretty close. Anyone

who is anyone in law enforcement in Baltimore knows the three or four guys Maury [sic] Levy is patterned on.

Levy acts allegedly in the interest of West Baltimore residents but he does not relate to them as anything other than clients and his work helps to sustain the drug trade . Viewed from West Baltimore, Levy is a rapacious and sinister figure, to be used and respected but never to be treated as one of their own. The presence of anti-Semitic tropes in *The Wire* is a result of the lack of other Jewish figures for West Baltimore to base its view of Jews on. *The Wire* demonstrates how in a city in which meaningful connection between individuals and communities is destroyed by the open wound of West Baltimore, representation becomes mere stereotype. *The Wire*'s failure to adequately represent Baltimore's Jews and other religious and ethnic groups is in fact a powerful statement that representations of urban multicultural diversity are an irrelevance if parts of the city have become so degraded. Through their disconnection from West Baltimore, Jews on *The Wire* become either sinister stereotypes or a barely differentiated part of an entirely 'other' world that is homogeneous in its ignorance of the wound lying in the heart of the city.

Notes

1. Thanks to Conrad Ege, Michael Wegier, Neil Rubin and Deb Weiner for their help in researching this article. [↔]
2. *Mishpocha* means family in Yiddish. However, it also implies a clannish sense of a wider Jewish family. [↔]
3. In addition, one of the Greek's 'employees' in the second season is an Israeli called Eitan of whom we are told little. There may also be other minor characters that might have been portrayed as Jewish had the size of their roles been extended. [↔]
4. Landsman's father was the first Jewish district commander in the Baltimore police department. Landsman himself plays Lieutenant Dennis Mello in the series. [↔]
5. Interview with David Simon 'Totally Wired' Guardian Guide. 13 January 2008
http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theguide/archives/tv_and_radio/2005/01/totally_wired.html . Accessed 24 June 2008. [↔]
6. For more on the history of Baltimore Jewry see the Jewish Museum of Maryland's 'Baltimore Jewry: A Historical Timeline'
http://www.jewishmuseummd.org/html/cr_timeline.html . Accessed 24 June 2008 [↔]
7. The latest reliable figures come from the Associated Jewish Federation of Greater Baltimore's 2001 'Jewish Community Study of Greater Baltimore'
http://baltimore.ujcfedweb.org/local_includes/downloads/10221.pdf . [↔]
8. p. iv [↔]

9. Unlike most other American cities, Baltimore County, which surrounds the city of Baltimore, does not include the city itself. [↔]
10. The history of Baltimore Jewry and its evolving relationships with both 'white' and 'black' Baltimore has been memorably drawn on in Barry Levinson's films *Avalon*, *Tin Men*, *Liberty Heights* and *Diner*. [↔]
11. Brodtkin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1998. [↔]
12. At one stage David Simon and the other writers discussed the possibility of a sixth season focusing on Hispanic East Baltimore. However, the idea was rejected as 'none of us is fluent in Spanish; none of us is intimately connected to the lives of Hispanics in Baltimore. None of us could do it with the degree of verisimilitude we demand of ourselves. We don't have that world in our pocket' (Quoted in an interview with David Simon by Meghan O'Rourke, *Slate*, 1 December 2006 <http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/#>) [↔]
13. 'David Simon Q&A' *What's Alan Watching* 9 Match 2008 <http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2008/03/wire-david-simon-q.html> [↔]
14. One of the boys turns out to be Kenard, who shoots Omar in series five. [↔]
15. Curt Schleier 'Wire' creator finds a muse on the streets of Baltimore' *J. The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 6 October, 2006. http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/30533/edition_id/573/format/html/display_story.html [↔]
16. Judy Oppenheimer 'Wired Up: Writer David Simon captures the gritty side of Charm City' *Baltimore Jewish Times* 13 May 2005, pp50-3. [↔]
17. Curt Schleier 'Wire' creator finds a muse on the streets of Baltimore' . *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 6 October, 2006. http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/30533/edition_id/573/format/html/display_story.html [↔]

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