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Baltimore Mobility: *The Wire*, Local Documentary, and the Politics of Distance

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by

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Abstract

Extending scholarship on Baltimore's media landscape, I observe how two moving-image texts, HBO's *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008) and *12 O'clock Boys* (Lotfy Nathan, 2013), figure space and, by extension, mobility in the city. Specifically, I articulate how both figures of mobility relate with each other and to the mobility inequality that has historically and disproportionately plagued communities along the city's east-west axis. Overall, in both texts, I read a shared anxiety toward sources of distant mediation. Through its sober audio-visual style and serial organization, I find *The Wire* fatalistically figures Baltimore mobility as conditioned by omnidirectional flows of power. These nefarious flows inevitably stymie any attempt at improving mobility inequality in the city, rendering distant sources of mediation as frustratingly inescapable. In contrast, I find *12 O'clock Boys* implicitly critiques *The Wire*'s fatalistic figuration. Relying heavily on cinéma vérité aesthetics, such as handheld cinematography, this film figures mobility inequality as the product of corrupt institutional mediation. By coding institutional mediation as intrinsically alienating, this film implicitly advocates for exclusively immediate sources of mediation when representing east-west communities. Furthermore, the film suggests that escape from distant sources of mediation is both possible and desirable. Employing Iris Marion Young's critique of the *ideal of community* and Scott Ferguson's theory on care, I find *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys'* figures of mobility to be overly contractive and problematic, due to their mutual eschewal of vital sources of care that always already mediate from a distance.

Baltimore Mobility: *The Wire*, Local Documentary, and the Politics of Distance

Introduction

Mobility in Baltimore, along with the politics that have and continue to shape it, bear a complicated history. On one hand, Baltimore is a notable site for mobility achievement; it was, for instance, the first city in the United States with a passenger railroad (Philipsen, 7). On the other, Baltimore is also a notorious site for mobility inequality; it is a city that has largely provisioned mobility for select residents based on their gender, race, and class. Contemporary social science studies of mobility are known as the "new mobilities" paradigm, which, in a variety of disciplines, analyzes social relations that produce physical movement in the world (Sheller, Urry). Outside this paradigm, mobility is also a key term in economics. From this angle, mobility refers to the movement of people from one social class or economic level to another. Still, physical and socioeconomic mobility need not be mutually exclusive; they are frameworks that must be understood relationally. In other words, one's ability to move between socioeconomic strata is linked to one's ability to move through geographic space. And, as this paper analyzes Baltimore's history of mobility inequality through its contemporary moving-image media, I also prove it is vital to show how moving-images, as mobilities themselves, shape and are shaped by physical and socioeconomic mobilities in the city.

In this study of Baltimore media, I first point out how the city's media history is also troubling. In 1946, the *Baltimore Sun* published a newspaper graphic mapping outbreaks of

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syphilis in primarily low-income, African-American neighborhoods. According to Robert Gioielli, this graphic, motivated by racist and classist aims to clear out "blighted neighborhoods," ended up having a lasting impact on how residents understood specific areas of the city. More recently, after the death of Freddie Gray, many, including local activists, condemned news media coverage for unjustly documenting the protests, given their tendency to negatively label African-American protesters by terms like criminals and thugs. All in all, these examples show that media and space are inextricably linked because media are inarguably spatial forms. Therefore, to properly study movement through space, one must attend to how media shape and are shaped by conceptions of space and movement. This paper uses Baltimore as a case study for the interrelation of movement and media because of its complex, troubling history with both. Within and between two moving-image representations of Baltimore, HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008) and Lotfy Nathan's *12 O'clock Boys* (2013), I map a topology of how movement through space and socioeconomic strata are aesthetically figured. From these topologies, I identify the implicit political positions informing their aesthetic construction and relate them to how mobility inequality in Baltimore fails to be addressed. Overall, while aesthetically divergent, with *The Wire* featuring a sober audio-visual style and *12 O'clock Boys* utilizing more stylistic variance, both moving-image texts share an anxiety and frustration toward sources of distant mediation. In their convergent suspicion towards distant sources of mediation, I find an embracement of immediacy that risks eschewing vital sources of care that inevitably mediate from a distance.

To further explicate Baltimore's politics of mobility, I contextualize how mobility in the city has been shaped by local and national policy. Mobility is conditioned by the spaces people occupy because access to vital resources, such as employment opportunities and transportation, often determine how people move through geographic space and socioeconomic strata. In the

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United States, neighborhood disadvantage, especially in urban areas, is largely multigenerational (Sharkey, 26). Historically, the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Baltimore are located along the city's east-west axis and extending corridor. For decades, east-west mobility has been contained by segregation practices, such as redlining in the mid-twentieth century, which inhibited predominantly African-American residents from purchasing homes in other areas of the city. Baltimore's racist containment of residents in east-west neighborhoods is also found in the city's public transportation history. In a formal complaint responding to the cancellation of the Red Line Light Rail project, the Baltimore Regional Initiative Developing Genuine Equality (BRIDGE) wrote, "The Red Line would also have served as the necessary link connecting West Baltimore's predominantly African-American neighborhoods to job centers" (8-9). Ultimately, this line was designed to connect with the city's already existing mass transit infrastructure, which almost exclusively serves affluent, white neighborhoods. Local scholar Lawrence Brown cartographically labels these spatial inequalities the "White L" and "Black Butterfly" of Baltimore, explaining "white neighborhoods on the map that form the shape of an 'L' accumulate structured advantages, while Black neighborhoods, shaped in the form of a butterfly, accumulate structured disadvantages." Tom Conley argues that film itself is a map, and "like a topographic projection, can be understood as an image that locates and patterns the imagination of its spectators" (1). This in mind, I choose *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys* for my study because both texts map mobility in east-west space, but they do so on their own aesthetic terms.

In terms of its topology, I argue *The Wire* renders Baltimore space as a figured totality of global containment. Created by David Simon and Ed Burns, HBO's *The Wire* is a fictional police procedural that ran for five seasons from 2002 to 2008. Thwarting associations with conventional police procedurals, which generally fixate on an individual's justifying actions, each season of

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The Wire focuses on a different Baltimore institution and how that institution, along with the individuals that form it, relate to local law enforcement. Within *The Wire*'s global container, omnidirectional flows of power mediate all mobility in the city, maintaining the east-west inequalities that have been generationally passed down. Implicitly frustrated by these uncontrollable, yet contained flows, *The Wire* evinces a desire for de-distanced relationships to fix problems of mobility in the city. As I demonstrate, however, this desire continually and fatalistically fails, prohibiting any type of initiative for social change and neglecting to offer a vision forward.

Sharing *The Wire*'s anxiety toward distance, I argue *12 O'clock Boys* aesthetically figures Baltimore mobility inequality as a condition of unjust institutional mediation, which always mediates from a distance. By determining institutional mediation as intrinsically alienating, this film advocates for more contracted, immediate sources of mediation when documenting east-west space. A locally produced documentary, *12 O'clock Boys* documents a notable group of city dirt bike riders through the coming-of-age story of Pug, a local teenager eager to one day ride with the pack. Pug and the "12 O'clock Boys" were filmed from 2010 to 2012, two years after the final season of *The Wire* aired. While converging on a shared anxiety toward distance, these two moving-image texts diverge in how they try to rectify alienation by distant sources. While *The Wire* offers no explicit solution, *12 O'clock Boys* implicitly gestures towards contracted community-based politics as the best possible solution for fixing east-west mobility inequality. Therefore, *12 O'clock Boys* conversely desires a container as form of protection and escape from nefarious institutional mediation. Unfortunately, I find the film's exclusively community-based approach to addressing Baltimore mobility inequality exacerbates, rather than ameliorates,

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current mobility conditions. By implicitly advocating for protection from institutional mediation, the film rejects vital forms of care provided by institutions.

While many popular review outlets consider *The Wire* one of the best television programs ever made for its narrative depth, scholarly discourse on the series is not as universally convinced. Scholarship on *The Wire* mostly bifurcates into one affirmative and one critical arena. The first, primarily concerned with how institutions structure experience, favors the series for registering how contemporary conditions of urban space have been destructively shaped by neoliberal policies. In *On the Wire*, Linda Williams argues the series functions as an innovative melodrama that implicitly calls for state-sponsored institutional care (126). For her, *The Wire* rejects conventional melodramatic impulses that center on a clash between individual victims and villains, and instead, features a melodrama of both victimized and villainous individuals and institutions. Through this relation, Williams writes, "it is the meshing of the individual and the institutional that allows [*The Wire*] to picture the political and social totality of what ails contemporary urban America and to imagine what justice could be" (5). Overall, I agree with Williams' claim that the series innovatively constructs a political and social totality and implicitly gestures toward a need for state-sponsored institutional care. However, her argument neither articulates the dimensions of this totality and nor observes how the series' anxiety toward distance potentially undermines its desire for care. Through my own topological articulation, a container of omnidirectional flows, I find what *The Wire* ultimately desires is an escape from distant sources of mediation, which, as I demonstrate, is an escape from vital sources of care.

In the second discursive arena, scholars critique *The Wire*'s politics of representation of Baltimore space and identity. From this angle, many argue the series risks alienating local space, and by extension, individuals and communities that occupy that space. For instance, local

ethnographers Matthew Durington, Samuel Collins, Niajea Randolph, and Logan Young claim "the perception of Baltimore City is guided by a set of stereotypes about urban residents that emanate from a variety of media but most problematically through a reliance on *The Wire*" (25). For these scholars, *The Wire* problematically represents Baltimore because it narrowly centers on city problems, such as the drug trade, thereby eschewing representations of positive community work being done throughout the city. This paper does not seek to vindicate *The Wire* of this critique. Many accusations surrounding the series' perpetuation of problematic stereotypes and absence of initiatives for change are completely warranted. Instead, my deviation from this arena relates to the politics of media production within local space that often arise from these critiques. Many of these critiques advocate for media production of local space to occur solely within the confines of that space. In other words, media of east and west Baltimore communities should be produced exclusively by and for east and west Baltimore residents. Ultimately, I find this media advocacy problematically mirrors the anxiety toward distance and care found in *The Wire* and thus risks maintaining and exacerbating mobility inequality in the city because it resists embracement of forms of care that mediate from a distance.

As far as I know, scholarly articles written on *12 O'clock Boys* do not exist, but there are plenty of popular reviews of the film as well as scholarship on the politics of documentary aesthetics. Numerous popular reviews written on the film explicitly link its focus on disadvantaged communities and location in Baltimore with that of *The Wire*. In a review subtitled "Like 'The Wire,' but real. And with dirt bikes," Jonah Bayer writes, "As someone who stalled out on the second season (of *The Wire*) where they spent forever on the docks, this reviewer thinks the documentary was far more compelling." Bayer favors this documentary over the HBO series for capturing the reality of Baltimore and for revealing the life or death quality of

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dirt bike riding in the city. Nevertheless, his claim that *12 O'clock Boys* is any more real than *The Wire* neglects to consider the aesthetic forms on which the film depends to construct a sense of reality. Rather than claim one text more real than the other, I find it is better to identify how both texts aesthetically shape Baltimore space and mobility in relation to the need for institutional care in the city's disadvantaged neighborhoods. In terms of scholarship on the politics of documentary aesthetics, Pooja Rangan critiques aesthetic conventions frequently used in participatory documentaries aimed at giving voice to marginalized subjects. She writes, "I call these tropes immediations in order to emphasize the mediated quality of their emphasis on immediacy. The neologism is a call to theorize the medial frames that are at work precisely when mediation seems to disappear or cease to matter" (4). For Rangan, aesthetics of immediation are meant to de-distance the relationship between documentary subject and spectator so as to construct a spectatorial phenomenon of "being-there," aligning the spectator with the marginalized subject. Nathan's affirmation of immediate sources of mediation and criticism of those that are distant and institutional establishes an aesthetics of immediation in the film that I critique as being overly contractive.

Now, given this is primarily a study of movement and mobility, I must outline how those terms are deployed in relation to the politics of Baltimore media. A geographer and prominent scholar of the "new mobilities" paradigm, Tim Cresswell defines movement as "the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered" (3). Thus, to analyze mobility, one must identify movement, but also the various social, political, and economic conditions informing movement. In other words, mobilities are movements understood with the conditions that produced them. That said, mobility and movement are not physically and materially bound concepts. For example, many scholars have,

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quite obviously, theorized how moving images also move. From this perspective, Baltimore's moving-image texts function as mobilities. And, as mobilities, they mediate and are mediated by the physical and socioeconomic mobilities in Baltimore. To understand how *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys* function as Baltimore mobilities, I analyze how their aesthetic forms move and relate these forms to the physical and socioeconomic mobility inequality in the city.

Lastly, since this paper critiques anxieties toward distance and advocates for an aesthetics of care, I indicate how distance and care are interrelated concepts. Ariel Handel conceptualizes distance from two primary angles. First, there is "the geometry-mediated abstract distance," which is generally understood by measurable units and cartographic figures. Secondly, there are phenomenological distances, which are "constructed as part of human experience" (484). Distance from this angle is formed through embodied experiences in the world. For Handel, these frameworks for understanding distance shape one another such that measured distances inform phenomenological distances and vice versa. Later in her discussion, Handle argues how phenomenological distances are often subjugated by abstract distances through the process of distanciation, or "a technology-mediated...activity of stratifying and separating populations" (484). An example of this type of technological mediation would be how Baltimore has exclusively provisioned transit resources for the city's predominantly white, affluent areas, and by extension, distanced many low-income, African-American residents from these areas. To further Handel's discussion, I show how privileging phenomenological distances over abstract distances can be just as marginalizing, given the alienation that can take place from embodied anxieties toward distance. Rather than determining abstract distances and distanciation as inherently alienating, we must show how all distances and processes of distanciation can and should be used to care for communities.

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In terms of care, most associate the term with an embodied practice in the world. For instance, Christine Milligan and Janine Wiles explain, "Care is the provision of practical or emotional support" (737). From this angle, care can be practiced both in proximity to and at a distance from another person or other people or even for oneself. What interests me, however, are discussions of care as an abstract figure for collective maintenance and participation that everyone is anxiously indebted to. For instance, in *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Care*, Scott Ferguson writes, "Care...composes the mystery of collective interdependence and the riddling locus toward which every member of a society invariably leans" (79). For Ferguson, care is an abstract figuration that is always already there and mediating from a distance. Accordingly, care as the anxiety of inescapable interdependence, of which we are all a part, demands we prioritize social provisioning and collective maintenance, because ultimately, to neglect care for another is to neglect care for oneself, and by extension, the collective. I mobilize care as both a provision of support and abstract figure of collective interdependence in order to show how both *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys* fall short of demanding the need for institutional support by neglecting to imagine distant sources of mediation as potential providers of care.

Mapping this essay, I begin by close reading *The Wire* and illustrating its fatalistic topology of containment. Critiquing its anxiety and frustration toward distance, I suggest how the series could have envisioned Baltimore mobility in a more harmonious and holistic way. In the second section, I foreground *12 O'clock Boys'* interrelation with *The Wire* and move into a close reading of its own aesthetic topology. Arguing that it implicitly advocates for exclusively community politics, I introduce Iris Marion Young's critique of the *ideal of community* to show how community politics predicated on face-to-face interactions misconstrues distant sources of

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mediation for alienation, and thus also eschews vital sources of care. Finally, in my conclusion, the absence of an aesthetics of care based on the need for distant sources of mediation from both works is discussed more fully. From here, I advocate for Baltimore media to prioritize an aesthetics of care when addressing the generational disadvantage in neighborhoods along the city's east-west axis.

The Wire's Container

Mobility in *The Wire* is figured at both micro and macro scales. In its macro scale, Baltimore mobilities are collectively bound within a topology of global of containment. Inside this global container, omnidirectional flows of power mediate each other and all mobilities in the city. In its micro scale, *The Wire* figures local mobilities as limited and temporary in their movement. In other words, while local mobilities may improve at times or even act as unruly forms for other mobilities, they are ultimately stymied due to their position within and mediation by the macro container and its flows. I like to compare the figured container to when D'Angelo Barksdale teaches Bodie and Wallace how to play chess in Season One. While relating each piece's unique movement to a rank within the drug cartel, D'Angelo never loses sight that each piece is bound to the game. He even opens his lesson by saying, "Yo, why y'all playing checkers on a chess set."

Now, chess metaphor aside, I find this micro-macro relation is best articulated through *The Wire*'s narrative organization and aesthetic logic. Narratively, *The Wire* is organized via a linearly progressive serial format over five seasons. Micro mobilities, like scenes or episodes, are collectively bound within a macro container of seriality. While specific episodes may have temporary significance, they are all ultimately engulfed by the totality that is *The Wire* and

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rendered inconsequential. In terms of aesthetics, *The Wire* largely employs a sober audio-visual style that features languid camera movements and diegetic sound. Periodically dispersed throughout the series, there are brief moments of stylistic deviation; still, these deviations merely function as micro mobilities in relation to the dominant sober aesthetic. In this section, I identify how *The Wire*'s micro-macro figure of mobility registers an anxiety toward distance, and by extension, a desire for immediacy. Then, by close reading stop-and-frisk policing and drug decriminalization efforts in Season Three as micro mobilities caught up in the macro container, I show how desires for immediacy inevitably fail due to endless mediation by distant sources. From there, I claim the series' anxiety toward distance has informed more recent moving-image media of the city in an unfortunately troubling way.

In *The Wire*, the series' figured macro container and omnidirectional flows that move throughout it are rendered frustratingly distant and inescapable for Baltimore mobilities. Rather than being vertically sourced from institutions, or horizontally sourced from individuals and communities, these flows are figured as moving omnidirectionally from and to all types of sources throughout the globe. Whether it is a police officer trying to climb the ladder or a drug dealer moving to new territory, the series continually emphasizes that no mobilities in the city are able to escape mediation by these omnidirectional flows and global containment. That said, creator David Simon implicitly values micro mobilities for their ability to be temporarily unruly. While all mobility in the series is ontologically contained, Simon implies pleasure in mobilities that are able to temporarily disrupt distant micro flows of mediation. These moments of temporary micro embracement establish a desire for immediacy, because they suggest, even though impossible on his own terms, escape from distant flows and containment is required to improve Baltimore mobility inequality. Overall, I find *The Wire*'s container of omnidirectional

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flows produces a fatalistic image of Baltimore that risks maintaining and exacerbating mobility inequality in disadvantaged communities because it fails to imagine mobility based in relationships of care. In other words, rather than figuring Baltimore mobility as a troubling micro-macro relation predicated on flowing abuses of power, Simon could have envisioned city mobility in more harmonious way, embracing sources of care that inevitably mediate from a distance.

Narratively, mobility in *The Wire* is structured via a linearly-progressive serial format, totalling sixty hour-long episodes over five seasons. Each season focuses on a different city institution and how that institution, along with the individuals that form it, relate to local law enforcement. Linda Williams claims *The Wire*'s serial organization produces "world enough and time," meaning seriality implies a total image of Baltimore and the world (15). For Williams, *The Wire*'s multi-institutional focus and "in real time" progression create a total spatial imaginary; however, she does not fully articulate the dimensions of this spatial imaginary. I extend Williams' argument by claiming *The Wire*'s spatial imaginary operates as a bounded global container. This container is largely figured by its serial organization, but also by its dominant audio-visual aesthetic choices. Etymologically, the word serial stems from "in regular succession," which if considered as a type of mobility on its own, connotes one that is stable and orderly in its movement. Yet the Baltimore represented in *The Wire* is far from this stable and orderly description. Instead, Simon presents a fatalistic image of the city overrun with drugs, corruption, and narcissistic careerism. That said, these moments of disorder are also merely micro moments within the stable and orderly macro serial logic. To further illustrate how this micro-macro relation relates to mobility in the city, consider how the police department tries to immobilize the drug trade in west Baltimore in Season Three.

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Season Three of *The Wire* focuses on the War on Drugs and how it is administered across city institutions. Rightly so, Simon is highly critical of the War on Drugs for its deployment of racist and classist stop-and-frisk procedures. He sees these measures as exacerbating neighborhood disadvantage rather than improving it. The first episode of the season features a stop-and-frisk scene that evokes his criticism and sets the stage for the season's primary mobility interest: the drug trade in west Baltimore. In the scene, Sergeant Carver and his squad plan an operation to swarm a west side drug corner. While the police unit eventually "get their man," a teenager who merely flees the scene, the process by which they do so emphasizes failure rather than success for Carver and his squad. In *The Wire*, Elizabeth Anker argues "dysfunction becomes a counterintuitive and unpredictable tactic for thwarting the statistical micromanagement of public institutions" ("Thwarting Neoliberal Security," 768). In other words, while we might presume institutions like the police have power over individuals; in reality, individuals are very often able to disrupt institutional aims by being deliberately unruly. This corner drug team, whether intended or not, depends on a dysfunctional organization to disrupt police efforts to arrest them. In the scene, Carver and his team plan their operation in a back alley. He then announces there will inevitably be a runner from the corner, but that the squad should let him go and arrest everyone else. When they arrive, the officers tell everyone on the corner to put their hands up and get against the wall. Next, as Carver expects, a teenager flees the scene, but he unexpectedly picks a bag off of the ground before leaving. This action, which leads the entire police unit to abandon the other arrests, in fact allows the drug team to return to operation with the actual stash, which was in the nearby garbage. After letting the corner go, a rapid police chase ensues in the back alleys for the one teenager. Carver calls for backup, mobilizing more police cars and even a helicopter. Ultimately, all of the units end up in the same

west side lot with the teenager unable to be found. Thus, the police fail in their operation, due to the unruly mobility of one teenager.

Aesthetically, visual and auditory form in this scene contradicts the overall content. Rather than parallel the clear failure of institutional mobility, Simon paradoxically and ironically shapes the scene with form that connotes success. He employs dynamic mobile framing techniques, rapid juxtapositions, and the *Shaft* theme song to register the crime-fighting badassery evocative of conventional police procedurals. After the failed indictment of the corner, Simon maintains this content-form paradox to highlight the squad's meaningless arrest and further criticize stop-and-frisk measures. Back at the police station, light is shown projected through venetian blinds on the wall behind the innocent teenager that fled. This lighting technique, a convention of film noir, provides additional ironic flare. While visually associated with the iconic hard-boiled detective figure, Carver and Herc, given their failed operation, are really just inept officers who depend upon toxic and counterproductive police brutality.

In relation to the dominant audio-visual aesthetic featured in the series, the stylistic stop-and-frisk sequence is rather uncommon. Many scholars of the series, including Charlotte Brunsdon, have written on *The Wire*'s often style-less arrangement, explaining how "*The Wire*'s use of camera and editing is much more like Roland Barthes's notion of 'writing degree zero.' The image, instead of being flashy and busy, is often carefully and elegantly framed within the already old-fashioned 4:3 ratio" (147). In other words, the dominant style features a sober and meditative tone that employs languid camera movements and seamless cuts through space and time. Thus, relationally speaking, brief stylistic deviations like the stop-and-frisk sequence, are ultimately engulfed in and forgotten by the series' macro sober tone. This lack of aesthetic heterogeneity in the series attests to the insignificance of the particularity of each micro mobility.

Put another way, the intensity, speed, location, and direction of each mobility do not ultimately matter because even an individual teenager is able to successfully thwart institutional mobilities "greater than him." Instead, what matters in *The Wire* is that everything flows and the macro containment of these mobilities renders each individual mobility as simultaneously insignificant and consequential. In this immobilization of aesthetic deviation and, by extension, immobilization of stop-and-frisk policing, *The Wire*'s frustration toward sources of distant mediation and desire for immediacy is revealed. Simon embraces micro mobilities, like the unruly teenager, for their ability to thwart unjust institutional mobilities, but he constructs these moments as only temporary, emphasizing their inevitable mediation by unruly distant sources. For Simon, escape from unruly distant flows is desirable, but unfortunately, unattainable.

To parallel the stop-and-frisk scene, I also read Major "Bunny" Colvin's solution for addressing the drug trade in western communities as further articulation of the series' troubling micro-macro relation and anxiety towards distance, given its institutional, rather than individual focus. Disappointed by the constant failure of stop-and-frisk policing, Major Colvin formulates a plan to decriminalize drugs in a few vacant areas of his district. With goals to reduce rising crime percentages and improve the overall livelihood of western residents, he attempts to construct his own geographic container for drug dealers and users. When introducing the operation to his team, Colvin asks, "Would you rather shoot a fish in the ocean or would you rather gather them up in a few small barrels and open your clips on them?" In his metaphor, the ocean is vast, ever-flowing, and uncontrollable, while the barrels are immediate, stagnant, and manageable. In relation to my argument, his metaphor suggests that by collecting unruly micro mobilities into one contained area and keeping them proximate to his team, other mobilities in his district will inevitably improve. However, Colvin's micro attempt at containment neglects to consider its

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inevitable subjection to distant unruly flows. That is, the barrels never actually escape the ocean. When Hamsterdam, the nickname for one of the decriminalized drug zones, starts up, there are many relative improvements to other western mobilities. For instance, in one scene, residents are shown sitting on their front stoops, playing basketball, and gardening in a neighborhood that used to be ridden with the drug trade. Unfortunately, though, these improvements are only temporary and are dependent upon the unjust immobilization of other mobilities in the city, specifically within Hamsterdam. At the end of the season, Colvin's illegal containment experiment is ultimately uncovered by both the local media and his commanding officers. This leads to a scene covering the breakup of the decriminalized zone, which is shaped by further ironic aesthetic deviation from the macro sober tone.

In this scene, with final approval from Commissioner Burrell, Deputy Commissioner Bill Rawls mobilizes a Quick Response Team into each of the decriminalized drug zones in the western district. Mobilizing another intertextual reference, Rawls amplifies Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* from his police car and announces to his team, "Over the top, gentlemen." This moment, meant to allude to the inhumane napalm strike scene from *Apocalypse Now*, emphasizes an abuse of power by the police, rather than the heroic, mythical qualities associated with the original musical piece. Not surprisingly, before Rawls' units arrive, the bigger players in Hamsterdam have already left, leaving only low-level dealers and users to arrest. Thus, the breakup of the space does little to nothing to address the drug trade or improve mobility. When the units do arrive, Simon cuts to low-quality helicopter footage of Hamsterdam, which arguably functions as the series' most aesthetically divergent moving-image moment. This helicopter footage is juxtaposed with shots of swarming police cars. Again, paralleling the stop-and-frisk scene, this institutional attempt at immobilization primarily features rapid juxtapositions and

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mobile framing techniques to capture the overtly unethical and abusive arrests. In the end, while Colvin and his team had brief moments of success with their experimental operation, their attempted container of drug dealers and users failed due to distant mediation by city flows. In *The Wire*, Simon continually suggests only temporary micro mobilities are afforded, making one doubtful that mobility inequality will ever be improved. The micro-macro relation of mobility in the series renders escape from distant flows desirable, but ultimately, impossible.

Overall, I claim *The Wire's* figured container of mobility shows that any type of initiative directed at improving mobility in the city for marginalized groups, whether conventional or experimental, is inevitably doomed for failure. It is not surprising then that I also find future moving-image media of the city, such as *12 O'clock Boys*, implicitly criticizing the series' fatalistic figuration, for it provides little to no direction for addressing Baltimore's mobility inequality. In the beginning of season three, during a western community meeting, one resident laments, "I can't even walk up my front steps anymore," responding to the toxic drug trade in their neighborhood. Conversely, at the end of the season, during a relatively positive western community meeting, one resident playfully complains, "Sergeant, you know them little mini-motorcycles? They keeping me up at night." While most of the assembly laughs off his claim as insignificant in relation to the mobility problems addressed at the beginning of the season, this explicit reference to dirt bike riding in the city reveals how unruly mobilities still loom large in the community. Furthermore, it raises the question as to how these mobilities are mediated by more recent moving-images of Baltimore. Even though their aesthetic arrangements differ considerably, as I show, an anxiety toward distant mediation and, by extension, an eschewal of vital sources of care, still looms large in these texts.

12 O'clock Boys and Community Contraction

To properly explicate the relationality between contemporary Baltimore media, I move from *The Wire* to its figurative wake, or more clearly, more recent moving-images of the city. I do this in order to better understand how this cultural behemoth has informed other spatial understandings of Baltimore. Specifically, I observe an implicit interrelation between *The Wire* and Lotfy Nathan's locally produced documentary, *12 O'clock Boys*, due to their shared anxiety towards sources of distant mediation. However, the forms by which distant mediation is figured differs considerably between the two texts. In *The Wire*, mediation by distant sources is rendered as frustrating, but also fatalistically inescapable. The series' topological container of omnidirectional flows reveals that any temporary micro mobility in the city is always ultimately stymied and rendered inconsequential by the macro spatial totality. In contrast, *12 O'clock Boys* condemns and critiques distant sources of mediation, specifically through local institutions, seeing escape from them as desirable and potentially possible. The film aesthetically implies that by embracing aesthetic forms predicated on immediacy and community, alienation by distant sources of mediation can be successfully thwarted and avoided. Thus, the film figures its own topological container for disadvantaged communities, but it does so as a form of protection from unjust institutional mediation. In what follows, I show how the film critiques distant sources of mediation by institutions and advocates for mediation predicated on immediacy and proximity. I then argue that exclusive advocacy for political organization based on community fails to reckon with the need for institutional care. Finally, I outline how failure to recognize the need for institutional care maintains, and potentially exacerbates, Baltimore's mobility inequality.

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In *12 O'clock Boys*, institutional mediation is rendered distant and unjust from the very start of the film. As Pug stands in the back of a van, a recording from a local radio station plays over the images. Condemning the rider's presence in the city, a radio host says, "I want to know what we're doing about these little scumbags on these dirt bikes in our downtown...I don't care if they get hurt. Frankly, I don't care if one of them dies." The host's perspective on the riders is incredibly inhumane, especially when paired with a medium close-up shot of the film's main subject. This initial in-real-time, face-to-face visual between spectator and Pug undermines the belligerent radio account clearly recorded at a different place and time. In other words, institutional mediation is immediately coded as distant and alienating for Pug and his community.

Later in the film's opening, Nathan also contextualizes how the riders are misrepresented by television news via a montage of archival footage. A medium close-up of CBS news anchor Kai Jackson opens the montage. Speaking on the "12 O'clock Boys," he states, "It's a dangerous and illegal Baltimore tradition: dirt bikes on city streets." Many television scholars have identified how broadcast news stations use form to establish institutional authority. Political theorist Elizabeth Anker claims "the television format itself provides a sense of control over events on the screen by reducing overwhelming events to lilliputian size" ("Orgies of Feeling," 50). In line with Anker's claim, Jackson's initial comments are visually paired with form that evokes a sense of control. He directly addresses the camera and is symmetrically positioned within the frame, creating a composed authoritative voice. In real-time, this type of framing and direct address would create a sense of immediacy between spectator and anchor; however, since this footage is archival and largely manipulated, this sense of immediacy is ultimately rendered distant.

After Jackson's comments from the studio, we are shown police helicopter footage of the riders, which is used by the news as in-the-field evidence. This aligns city institutions as working together to exploit local communities and thereby validates Nathan's implicit criticism of institutions as a whole. Using optical zooms, police helicopters are able to shoot the riders from long distances; however, this distant footage renders the riders in very low quality, especially when positioned against the studio footage. After revealing how the news station exclusively uses low-quality images to document the riders, Nathan starts to manipulate and undermine their forms. Specifically, he overlays multiple tracks of anchor commentary to construct the television station as intrusive and biased towards the community. The audio overlay technique subverts the news' conventional media forms, but more importantly, it shapes their institutional mediation as unethical and misrepresentative. To further elucidate how distant, institutional mediation is rendered alienating, I compare it with other moving-image aesthetics in the film.

12 O'clock Boys' embracement of immediacy and, by extension, figured desire for a protective community container, is communicated through its employment of hand-held cinematography and slow-motion footage of the riders. To properly explicate how these aesthetics of immediacy operate, I move back to the beginning of the film. The film's dominant aesthetic, which features vérité-like handheld cinematography, mainly functions to reveal the spectacular yet dangerous qualities of the "12 O'clock Boys." In an early scene, Nathan and former rider, Stephen, follow the riders in a van as they interact with local police. In the background, we hear someone in the van say, "They say you don't get chased down there," as a police car proceeds to drive into a grassy area and chase a rider. This moment is immediately juxtaposed with another montage of archival television news footage detailing how the police department is not legally allowed to chase the riders in the city because it is too dangerous for

city residents. Given his choice to document police not following the law and juxtapose it with the news commentary, Nathan once again subverts institutional authority and mediation by revealing it to be unjust and contradictory.

The vérité footage also effectively establishes an aesthetic base for Nathan to deploy other aesthetic choices that affirm immediacy and thereby critique unjust distant forms. For instance, in the opening, Nathan uses a sandwich editing technique, positioning aesthetically beautiful slow-motion footage of the riders before and after the opening television news montage. In the first high-definition, slow-motion segment, Pug narrates, "They call 'em the 12 O'clock Boys because they drive the bike straight back, like the hands on the clock," while various riders wheelie through the streets, declaring their right to be there. Shots of the riders are then juxtaposed with a slow-motion close-up of Pug. Nathan then cuts to the previously discussed television montage. Finally, another slow-motion shot closes out the opening, sandwiching and rendering institutional forms of mediation as distant and undesirable. This "good-bad-good" logic, especially considering the latter "good" portion featured in the film's title reveal, establishes the argumentative framework for affirming immediacy and critiquing distance that is maintained throughout the rest of the film.

In terms of the slow-motion sequences themselves, they are, from a visual standpoint, quantitatively the richest images in the film. These slow-motion cameras shoot video at frame rates up to 22,000 frames per second. Most importantly, though, these sequences imply a sense of hyper-immediacy, since we are able to see so much more imagery than a normal frame rate camera. Writing on slow-motion in film, Vivian Sobchack argues, "Through cinematic technology, the extremity of slow motion suddenly reveals to us not only the radical energies and micro-movements of movements we live yet cannot grasp but it also interrogates, reveals, and

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expands the extremely narrow compass of our anthropocentric orientation and habitual perceptions of 'being in the world'" (344). Here, Sobchack claims slow-motion reveals movement outside the range of our normal optical abilities, showing us more than we are normally able to see. From her perspective, seeing the micro-movements that produce macro movement evokes a sense of understanding movement in its essence. That said, we must not forget that these images still depend on complex processes of mediation and are no more immediate than others. Ultimately, I argue Nathan's choice to use slow-motion in these sequences is intended to construct a space that only Pug and the riders are allowed to occupy. In other words, slow-motion is an aesthetic container reserved only for the community. By also including an ethereal sound track during these slow-motion moments, he further amplifies the quality of privileged hyper-immediacy. These slow-motion sequences encourage the spectator to embrace the slowed-down, fluid, and hyper-immediate mobility of the riders. In this embracement, we are meant to condemn the distant and inherently alienating institutional mediation because it is never provided any positive aesthetic quality. With community mobility on the ground rendered fluid and expansive and institutional mobility from up above and at a distance rendered intrusive and unethical, Nathan implicitly suggests institutions are neither needed nor wanted.

While quite brief, Nathan also includes a montage of archival YouTube videos of the riders created by members of the community. In the middle of the film, Pug nostalgically recounts the first time his older brother showed him the first "12 O'clock Boys" highlight tape. In a montage of highlight videos, Nathan overlays voice-of-god narrations from notable "12 O'clock Boys" members praising the international recognition accumulated over the years. Surprisingly, given its many distant forms of mediation, Nathan and the riders embrace YouTube

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as a form of democratic media distribution. It, along with other social media platforms, have been idealized by many as a utopian model for participatory culture. However, recent studies in media infrastructure are much more critical of these participatory assumptions. Deconstructing claims that this platform provides the "democratization of cultural production," Christine Wolf explains YouTube "algorithms enact narrow experiences, privileging notions of preference and predictive "satisfaction," while eliding opportunities for the generative potential of serendipity, de-familiarity, difference, or even distaste" (4). From this quote, Wolf argues YouTube's algorithmic organization constructs media "echo-chambers," or more clearly, video catalogs in which consumers are only provided content that corroborates their already held opinions, interests, and viewpoints. Thus, when Nathan figures YouTube by false participatory assumptions, he neglects to consider how these highlight videos are being distributed on narrow terms, thereby maintaining his contractive and contradictory impulses. He, along with the riders, neglect to account for the seemingly invisible elements shaping the distribution of these videos. What Nathan and the riders assume to be immediate, local, and democratic is ultimately, much like the local institutions that are condemned within the film, very much manipulated and mediated by sources distant from them. Ultimately, their claim that YouTube is more egalitarian than television news is deeply misguided. Yet, this is not the only misunderstanding Nathan has about mediation.

Given *12 O'clock Boy*s' exclusive valuation of moving-image form predicated on immediacy, I find Nathan implicitly advocates for political organization predicated on the *ideal of community* to address Baltimore's mobility inequality. Diverging from *The Wire*'s fatalistic figure of containment, Nathan aesthetically advocates for a community container as a form of protection for marginalized east-west communities. In her early writings, Iris Marion Young

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critiques the *ideal of community* for its denial and devaluation of difference and misconstrual of mediation for alienation. I find her arguments vital for critiquing Nathan's implicit aims. She states, "Insofar as the ideal of community entails promoting a model of face-to-face relations as best, it devalues and denies difference in the form of temporal and spatial distancing. The ideal of a society consisting of decentralized face-to-face communities is undesirably utopian in several ways" (2). Nathan problematically subscribes to this utopian impulse, because he, along with other local actors in the city, fails to understand that mediation is always already a distant process, even in face-to-face encounters. To this point, Young further explains "there are no conceptual grounds for considering face-to-face relations more pure, authentic social relations than relations mediated across time and distance. For both face-to-face and non-face-to-face relations are mediated relations, and in both there is as much the possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus" (16). Accordingly, Young deconstructs the notion that immediate, face-to-face encounters should be privileged over non-face-to-face encounters because each set of encounters involves a process of mediation that is intrinsically distant from us. Thus, the abstract measure or embodied understanding of that distance does not make a difference, rendering Nathan's condemnation of distant sources of mediation as lacking credibility. But not only does his implicit political framework lack credibility; it also actively perpetuates east-west mobility problems by thwarting the need for vital sources of distant mediation, such as institutional care. Young also makes the claim that politics oriented around the *ideal of community* run the risk of exacerbating already existing social inequities. She writes, "racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation…grow partly from a desire for community, that is, from the desire to understand others as they understand themselves and from the desire to be understood as I understand myself" (12-13).

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Many anthropologists and ethnographers have identified the ethical implications of speaking about another culture different from oneself. Local Baltimore anthropologists from Towson University and activists of the non-profit, Wide Angle Youth Media, argue that images of the city's historically disadvantaged neighborhoods, should exclusively be produced by members of those neighborhoods. By extension, they argue that non-community members wanting to support these communities should merely "pass along media content to one's followers without calling attention to oneself" (Collins, et al. 33). Unfortunately, this media advocacy falls right into the same problematic utopian impulse of the *ideal of community*. To contract to one's utopian conception of place is to negate the already existent mediating forces constructing those conceptions. That said, there are important ethical considerations for filmmakers not local to a specific place. For example, Nathan does not originate from the Baltimore area. Even if he did, given Lawrence Brown's cartographically figured "White L" of affluence and "Black Butterfly" of historic marginalization, we know that there are very different Baltimore experiences within the various neighborhoods of the city. The fact that both the film's source of production and primary site of exhibition are positioned within the affluent neighborhoods of the city is troubling. Nathan's implicit advocacy for a political framework predicated on the *ideal of community* is unethical because it neglects to consider the underlying racist and classist implications of generational disadvantage. To expect historically marginalized east-west neighborhoods to revitalize and sustain themselves on their own, or even worse, by the decentralized philanthropic "care" of "White L" neighborhoods, does not solve mobility inequality; it actively perpetuates it and makes it worse.

Years after *12 O'clock Boys'* release, Nathan has been advocating for the creation of a city dirt bike park to house the riders so that they do not stir up anymore controversy in the city.

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He claims, "It just needs to be tried...If it doesn't work, scrap it" (Rodricks). While I have no problems with developing more public, recreational space within the city, Nathan's solution fails to address what his film's subject, Stephen, sees as the true problems in the area. At the end of the film, Stephen explains, "This is what the ghetto produces: hostile environments, anger, stress, depression. Dealing with all this day-to-day on a regular basis, you're gonna have a negative outcome. It's a recipe. To jump on a dirt bike and leave all that behind, all of that don't mean nothing. Yeah, we're gonna ride" (*12 O'clock Boys*). Pug, the "12 O'clock Boys," and everyone else living along Baltimore's east-west axis should be able to ride dirt bikes if they want. But, more importantly, they should have access to multiple modes of transportation. They should have access to meaningful employment opportunities. And they should definitely have access to lead-free, affordable housing. These are the vital resources being withheld from disadvantaged communities in the city. Distant, institutional mediation, in the form of state care, must be provided.

In 2003, after decades of planning, Baltimore City officially identified the need for a light rail transit connection on its east-west axis. This project, labeled the Red Line, began with both the Federal Transit Administration and Maryland Transit Association issuing a Notice of Intent for development. The Red Line set its goals to improve "mobility to major employment centers," and provide transit-oriented "community revitalization," and "economic development" for east-west axis neighborhoods (BRIDGE). In June 2011, the FTA agreed to fund the Red Line through its New Starts Capital Investment Program. The Red Line was one of a limited number of transit projects nationwide to receive approval and federal funding from the FTA. Unfortunately, in the Summer of 2015, after twelve years of planning, Governor Larry Hogan, citing cost concerns, cancelled the Red Line altogether. To be sure, any claim that the Red Line would have been a

singular, quick fix to Baltimore's mobility inequality. Nonetheless, its explicit goals for improving mobility within the city offered a potential mend to neighborhood disadvantage. In a film focusing on the simultaneous assertion and suppression of mobility, I find it surprising that the planning of the Red Line project is completely absent, given the crossover between the film's release and the project's stage of development at that time. This was a clear example of an institutional source of mediation that should have been embraced. Future Baltimore media makers must learn from this misconstrual of mediation for alienation and demand the need for state care.

Conclusion

When I write about an absence of care in *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys*, I do so using two primary understandings of the term. First, there is care as defined as an embodied practice in the world. Many scholars writing on care from this angle, such as Nancy Fraser, refer to care by the term social reproduction. According to Fraser, "Struggles over social reproduction encompass...community movements for housing, healthcare, food security and an unconditional basic income; struggles for the rights of migrants, domestic workers and public employees; campaigns to unionize service-sector workers in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals and child-care centres; struggles for public services such as day care and elder care, for a shorter working week, for generous paid maternity and parental leave" (116). For her, these struggles over social reproduction are informed by the subjugation of reproduction by production in today's macroeconomic structure. In other words, she argues our contemporary global economy privileges production over the maintenance of the infrastructure needed and used to produce. Fraser's work is vital for elucidating the crisis of care in our contemporary moment, but there are

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also more theoretical understandings of care that need to be considered. For instance, Scott Ferguson speaks on care as a practice, but also as an anxiety toward being in the world. For him, "Care expresses an omnipresent indebtedness" (82). Put another way, as a figure of inescapable interdependence and participation, care is the never-ending debt we owe to each other and needed in order to survive as a collective. Therefore, when I critique both *The Wire* and *12 O'clock Boys* for failing to imagine a spatial topology and figure of mobility in Baltimore predicated on care, I am pointing to how both texts neglect to affirm this inescapable collective interdependence through their narrative organization and aesthetic constructions.

In *The Wire*, I observe a problematic micro-macro relation informing the series' topology. Specifically, the series figures Baltimore mobility as mediated by a macro global container of omnidirectional flows, which render micro mobilities as insignificant. Now, one could interpret this global container as affirming collective interdependence, but this would be a mistake, because care, as an abstract figure, cannot be contained. Indeed, for Ferguson, care is a boundless center of mediation that always already mediates from a distance, thereby rendering the series' understanding of contained global space inadequate. Additionally, when *The Wire* exhibits a frustration toward distant sources of mediation, including the macro totality of global containment and unruly flows, it establishes a frustration toward care itself. What *The Wire* desires is an escape from global containment and, by extension, sources that mediate from a distance, but this also entails an escape from forms of care that mediate from a distance. Consequently, David Simon aesthetically constructs a fatalistic image of Baltimore that neglects to affirm collective interdependence. Furthermore, he narratively falls short of imagining a solution for improving mobility inequality in the city. This fatalistic representation of the city has unfortunately had a lasting impact on Baltimore's spatial imaginary, both locally and across the

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globe. I find this impact is best articulated through more recent moving-images of the city, which I argue are informed by *The Wire*'s figure of mobility.

While *12 O'clock Boys* similarly critiques distant sources of mediation as intrinsically alienating, its aesthetic logic diverges from *The Wire* by suggesting that escape from these sources is desirable, but also potentially possible. Director Lotfy Nathan exclusively frames local institutions, such as news media and police, as intrusive and unjust by subverting their authoritative forms. He then subjugates these unjust institutions by favoring immediate sources of mediation through handheld cinematography and slow-motion footage. From here, his logic implicitly advocates for a topological container predicated on protection from distant, institutional mediation. However, being influenced by *The Wire*'s fatalistic figure, he misconstrues mediation for alienation. Therefore, by thwarting the need for institutions and trying to escape distant sources of mediation by contracting into face-to-face interactions predicated on the ideal of community, *12 O'clock Boys*, too, fails to embrace vital forms of care that mediate from a distance. Care, both as a social practice and figure of collective interdependence and participation, must be embraced in order to formulate solutions for mobility inequality in the city.

Given my claims, in order to help improve mobility inequality in the city, I find it vital for future moving-image media of Baltimore to not only demand the need for institutional care, but also aesthetically affirm collective interdependence and participation in their representations by recognizing the need for distant sources of mediation. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of documentary productions of the city, such as *Rat Film* (Theo Anthony, 2016), *Baltimore Rising* (Sonja Sohn, 2017), and *Charm City* (Marilyn Ness, 2018). *Rat Film* adopts experimental and essayistic qualities to figure a dystopic image of Baltimore, while the latter two

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films feature more conventionally expository forms emphasizing the positive impact of local community work. And yet, none of these texts seem to advocate for state-sponsored institutional care in the form of distant mediation. All in all, Baltimore's generations of mobility inequality will not improve without institutional support from distant sources. Thus, any media representation addressing neighborhood disadvantage in the city that avoids this need must be thoroughly critiqued for maintaining the status quo.

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