Blue Satin Pajamas: Omar Little and Hegemonic Masculinity in The Wire

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A serialized television show that aired from June 2002 to March 2008 on HBO, *The Wire* examines the city of Baltimore, Maryland, and its many interconnected threads through the lens of race and class in the post-9/11 United States. While its first season focuses primarily on the dynamic between street-level police officers and predominantly Black drug dealers and addicts, it adds additional layers with each subsequent season, eventually confronting the issues faced by labor unions, schools, local and state governments, and the media. By methodically expanding the scope of its argument, the show presents its central thesis that racism and economic inequality are endemic to the systemic failings of governmental and social institutions, even in majority-Black cities like Baltimore.

While the show’s plot grows larger season after season, its street-level narrative is threaded throughout, remaining the primary touchstone for the myriad interconnected plots and character dynamics; the illegal drug trade (or “the game”) and the policing efforts against it are the central points around which everything else in *The Wire’s* universe revolves. The show effectively argues that almost all of the failings that it depicts are in some way connected to the racist War on Drugs. The
show resists painting either side of this war in broad strokes, instead choosing to highlight the similarities between the police and those “in the game.” For actors in both groups, ascension to the top of their respective hierarchies requires kowtowing to the dominant structures: for the police, this means adhering to the “chain of command” while those in the game compete for dominance through shows of power ranging from legitimate business practices to murder.

Omar Little, played by Michael Kenneth Williams, takes his place in the spaces between these warring parties. While Omar is part of The Wire’s street-level narrative, he is unique in the world of the show. He expertly engages in the violence and criminality of the dealer-run Baltimore streets, but he also operates outside the boundaries of the various criminal organizations as a vigilante antihero. Omar makes his living as a stick-up artist, robbing those in the game while operating as a folk legend, a sort of shotgun-wielding Robin Hood. While on the surface he appears to be just another gangster profiting off of the drug trade, Omar operates within a strict moral code that sets him apart from his competition in some key ways, including his distaste for profanity and his refusal to harm “civilians” who are outside of the game.

The Baltimore streets depicted in The Wire revolve around particular conceptions of masculinity that hold reputation and strength in the highest regard; the distribution of power in “the game” is ever-shifting and obtained and asserted through acts of hypermasculine dominance. Likewise, Omar’s role in the game is one that is predicated on this same brand of masculinity: his strength is based on the local legend that surrounds him and expands as he asserts his dominance over the drug dealers whom he robs. Though he operates on the fringes of the structured hierarchy of the various drug-dealing organizations, he has ascended to the top through familiar avenues.

However, while Omar utilizes masculinity to reach similar ends, he differs from his competitors in one distinct regard: he occupies this space as an openly homosexual man. In her essay “Keeping Sex in Bounds: Sexuality and the (De) Construction of Gender,” Abby Ferber invokes Judith Butler in writing that “It is the regulation of compulsory heterosexuality...that produces the illusion of coherent gender identities... [and that] [t]hose who do not partake in the heterosexual performance are seen as not properly gendered” (Ferber 138). With few exceptions, The Wire’s drug trade is a male-dominated space. While operating in the streets, Omar
performs his masculinity in largely the same way as others in the game. However, because of his homosexuality, he is not seen as properly male by those who more strictly adhere to this dominant (and heterosexual) conception of masculinity. Because of their inability to fit him neatly into gendered confines, Omar represents something truly terrifying to his competitors.

Throughout the show’s five seasons, viewers get glimpses into Omar’s life that highlight the ways in which his gender performance separates him from others in his world. In the chapter “No Storybook Romance: How Race and Gender Matter” from her book Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins discusses how differences in identity such as this lead to social stratification: “These belief systems encourage individuals to grant humanity only to those in their own segregated boxes and to dehumanize, objectify, and, upon occasion, commodify and demonize everyone else” (Collins 249). By exploring the dominant conception of masculinity in the show’s street-level narrative, we begin to see that Omar constitutes not just a competitor in the drug trade, but an existential threat to those he robs. Omar’s brutal efficiency as a stick-up artist gives him a reputation and notoriety in The Wire’s Baltimore, but it is the othered status of his sexuality that creates his near-mythical Boogeyman hold on the game’s consciousness.

The Inescapability of Hegemonic Masculinity

In The Wire’s version of the Baltimore streets, public perception is tantamount to identity for those in the game. The way that those in the drug trade hierarchy are seen by others determines their value and is ultimately decided by normative ideas about masculinity such as strength and honor. While this is not representative of all conceptions of masculinity in American society (or even in The Wire’s Baltimore), it is the dominant ideal in this setting. Law professor Frank Rudy Cooper writes in his essay “The King Stay the King: Multidimensional Masculinities and Capitalism in The Wire” that “The hegemonic man is the dominant image of what constitutes the ideal form of masculinity in a given context” (Cooper 97). In a scene from The Wire’s first season, D’Angelo, a lieutenant in his cousin Avon Barksdale’s drug-dealing organization, teaches two of his younger subordinates to play chess while they work their territory in a West Baltimore housing project. Their
conversation provides the viewer with an understanding of what constitutes Hegemonic Masculinity (HM) in their world. D’Angelo explains the rules of the game:

See this? This the kingpin. A’ight? 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 damn direction he choose ‘cause he’s the king...the rest of these motherfuckers on the team, they got his back and they run so deep, he really ain’t gotta do shit...See the king stay the king. A’ight? (The Buys)

As he explains the rules, the younger boys analogize the game pieces to people in their organization, asserting that the king is like Avon, who occupies the highest rank in the criminal enterprise. Though they work for Avon, the boys are located far enough down the ladder of the organization’s hierarchy that they rarely, if ever, hear from him directly. Their allegiance is to a cultivated image of Avon that the organization works to uphold and expand, one whose equation with monarchy we can assume makes it the game’s hegemonic ideal.

In The Wire, the viewer is given many examples of characters who aspire to this conception of HM, but two in particular help to establish its ubiquity in this world as well as its fragile nature. Avon Barksdale and his right-hand-man, Stringer Bell, share similar and rigid views of what constitutes HM, but it leads each to a different end. Avon, played by Wood Harris, occupies the top spot in the game in the early seasons of The Wire, with his territory extending over significant portions of West Baltimore. He is ruthless and commanding, using fear to control people and stake his claim. In the first season, he controls his organization from the anonymity of his office, his name carrying with it enough ethos that he need not dirty his hands or work to further prove himself: he is an established entity before the show begins and, as such, does not often need to showcase his masculinity in direct ways, opting to have subordinates handle things for him. Because of this, Avon provides viewers with an understanding of the way things operate in the game and showcases the traditional conception of HM in the world of The Wire’s streets.

Avon’s notoriety extends far enough that when he is jailed for the entirety of season two, his organization carries on with him dictating orders to Stringer Bell from the sidelines (though, as we will see, Stringer also asserts his own control). As he prepares for his release from prison at the beginning of season three, he approaches Dennis “Cutty” Wise in the prison yard, a former soldier in the game who has been
jailed for the past fourteen years to ask Cutty to come work for him upon their release. In his pitch to Cutty, Avon tells him,

You know, them towers came down now, huh? The Terrace, the Murphy Homes—all that shit go man. A lot of things are different now since you been up in here, you’ll see...But I mean, you know, shit some things just stay the same. I mean, the game is the game. (Time After Time)

To Avon and Cutty, this sentiment holds deep truth. While Cutty is a generation older than Avon, they share a world and an understanding of their place in it as men. Cooper writes that “The hegemonic man is an ideal of manhood that tries to set the norm by which all men will tacitly agree to be judged” (Cooper 100). Avon serves as the street’s hegemonic man in The Wire’s view of Baltimore, and on this level, he can relate to anyone who agrees to be judged by this same standard.

Though Avon occupies this position in the early seasons of the show, he spends the majority of the show’s five seasons serving prison sentences for his illegal activities. While he obviously yearns to be free so that he might more thoroughly enjoy his power and wealth, his sentences also do not seem to bother him in the way that the viewer might expect—as Avon often says in the show “You only do two days. The day you go in and the day you come out.” Because of the injustice of the racially stratified Baltimore depicted in The Wire, prison time for Avon is not drastically different from his life on the outside. His seemingly carefree attitude while incarcerated stems from the fact that he does not need to, in any way, alter his identity; his standing in both places is directly determined by his gender identity and presentation of masculinity. His world both inside and outside of prison is governed not by law, but by the same static and rigid conception of HM that has remained unchanged for decades.

Stringer Bell, played by Idris Elba, serves as Avon’s right-hand man in the Barksdale Organization. The two are best friends and grew up together in the game, though they approach it in largely different ways. While Avon rides his success as a fighter and soldier to the top, Stringer gets to the same place through his intelligence and cunning nature. In the first season, Avon runs the organization as a military force, focusing his resources on territorial expansion by way of gunfights and muscle-flexing, and attempts to continue this strategy from his prison cell in season two. However, when Stringer is left to his devices, he begins to transition their
organization into the world of more “legitimate” business. He dresses the part of a business owner, his reading glasses, button-down shirts, and pressed trousers standing in stark contrast to the street attire of his associates. In order to enact his vision, he enrolls in economics courses at the local community college, invests in local real estate, and operates small businesses to act as money laundering fronts for their drug income. He institutes business-minded change in the day-to-day operations of their organization and creates a mutually-run co-op between Baltimore's warring drug dealers that slows down the violence of the game.

However, despite his obvious acumen, Stringer is ultimately unable to use these talents to realize his dream of graduating to the level of a legitimate businessman because of his inability to shed his narrow conception of the masculinity that dictates his identity. After he bribes Clay Davis, a state senator, to help him secure federal housing grants for his real estate ventures, he is enraged to find out that Davis faked their business connection and simply pocketed the money that Stringer gave him. Stringer’s immediate course of action is to try to have the senator killed, and he goes to Avon to help coordinate the hit. The scene that follows shows a man who is trapped between the world he is trying to leave and the world that he wishes to enter.

Standing in Avon’s hideout, Stringer’s suit and tie look woefully out-of-place among the assorted weaponry strewn about the tables. When he commands Slim Charles, a subordinate, to carry out the hit, the man responds with incredulity, saying “The Clay Davis? Downtown Clay Davis? ... Murder ain't no thing, but this here is some assassination shit, man.” Charles sees clearly what Stringer is unable to: the rules of their world are not the same rules as the world that Stringer aspires to. Avon enters and takes Charles’ side, telling Stringer that “You a fuckin’ businessman. You wanna handle it like that--you don’t wanna get all gangster wild with it and shit, right?” (Middle Ground). Though Stringer has a different vision for his future than does Avon, they were raised in the same system; Stringer’s aspirations are doomed to fail him in his new world because his identity was formed by this specific conception of HM, one that is built around

What sociologists Dov Cohen and Joe Vandello call the culture of honor. In a culture of honor, one's reputation for manliness determines how one is treated...Because protecting one’s honor is so important, one treats insults as grave threats to one’s identity and livelihood. (Cooper 105)
Davis’ actions are not just criminal, they constitute an affront to the honor that is so central to Stringer’s identity. However, they occur in a world with a different conception of masculinity that operates in largely different ways. Ultimately, Stringer’s masculine identity is too fragile to adapt to these new circumstances, leaving him unable to gain a footing in this new world.

Both Avon and Stringer adhere to an HM that demands they continually prove themselves and which naturally pits them against Omar. Cooper writes that

Masculinities theorist Michael Kimmel defines a central tenet of the hegemonic masculinities approach...that masculinity is fundamentally anxious... The attempt to prove one’s masculinity leads to attempts to distinguish oneself from other, less masculine, figures. The primary contrast figure is women, but in the United States, dominant men also have used racial minorities, Jews, and gay men as contrast figures. (Cooper 101)

Omar’s open homosexuality represents an affront to the masculinity of people like Avon and Stringer; he is the realization of their masculine anxiety. Because of Omar’s ability to use their brand of HM against them, he is a threat that is perfectly tailored to them and which subverts their own fragile manhood. When Omar robs the Barksdale Organization, as he does on multiple occasions throughout the show, it constitutes a usurpation of the very ideals around which Avon and Stringer have crafted their gendered identities.

“Omar Comin’”: Performative Gender

On the surface, Omar carries himself in much the same way as Avon and Stringer. His success as a stick-up artist is inextricably linked to the hypermasculine facade that he wears while carrying out his business. Unlike Avon and Stringer, however, Omar’s masculinity is adaptable to his circumstances. Omar was raised by a grandmother who instilled in him a moral code to which he strictly adheres; his understanding of HM was filtered through this matriarch and, as such, it is not central to his sense of identity but rather a tool to be used when needed.

Omar’s masculinity is a flexible one that challenges both the game’s HM and stereotypical conceptions about Black and gay men. Throughout the show, Omar is shown only in committed monogamous relationships with other men of color and is always portrayed as a tender and loving partner, contrary to the historically
hypersexualized image of Black men in the United States. In a scene from the show's fourth season, Omar wakes up one morning to discover that he is out of his favorite Honey Nut Cheerios cereal and takes a stroll through the neighborhood in his pajamas to buy some at a local corner store. While the scene sounds and appears humorous, it encapsulates the subversive qualities of Omar's character better than perhaps in any other in which he appears.

The scene opens on Omar sleeping naked next to his boyfriend Renaldo. Omar is awoken from his sleep by a metallic bang that comes from outside of his apartment; he quickly grabs a large revolver from his nightside table before moving to the window so that he can determine the source of the noise. He pulls back the curtain to see garbagemen tossing bags into the back of their truck, the noise that woke him made by the cans as they are tossed back to the sidewalk. Satisfied with their safety, Omar turns back to admire Renaldo sleeping naked in their bed. In his rush to get to the window, Omar fails to put on any clothing and tosses the revolver aside as he dresses in a matching blue satin bathrobe and pajama bottoms. Moving to the kitchen of their small apartment, Omar calls to Renaldo in bed about their being out of his favorite cereal and decides to walk to the store to buy another box. He grabs another pistol from a kitchen shelf before he leaves, but unable to find a place where he might comfortably hide it in the waistband of his pajamas, he sets it aside and leaves, unarmed.

Out in the alleys and streets of the neighborhood, Omar strolls to the corner store, seemingly carefree. However, despite the harmless nature of his errand, the world around him reacts in the same way that it does throughout the series. As he winds through the neighborhood, shouts of “Yo, it’s Omar!” and “Omar Comin’!” ring out over the frantic shuffle of shoes on pavement as men and boys scatter to make way for the vigilante. After a brief stop in the store (which is all out of his favorite Honey Nut variety of Cheerios cereal), Omar turns back, stopping briefly to light a cigarette in front of one of the row houses that line the Baltimore streets. After standing there for a few seconds, a plastic shopping bag dropped from an upper-story window thuds to the ground beside him and, slightly surprised, Omar picks it up and heads for home. In the final shot of the scene, Omar empties the contents of the plastic bag, hundreds of vials of heroin, onto the middle of the kitchen table in front of
Renaldo before taking out the cereal and setting it down beside the drug stash. Nonplussed, Renaldo asks Omar about the store’s lack of Honey Nut Cheerios.

The scene operates on the surface as an amusing look into the everyday life of a man known for his careful nature and meticulously cultivated image; the juxtapositions of the carefree approach to his errand to the patient planning of his robberies and of the blue satin pajamas to his trademark duster jacket and body armor are as funny as they are meant to be. However, when viewed through the lens of gender, the scene is indicative of a much deeper truth about Omar’s performance of masculinity. This scene is particularly powerful because of the ways in which it highlights Omar’s various performances of his gender.

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” theorist Judith Butler discusses this phenomenon, writing that gender is,

In no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 519)

Because Omar is excluded from the category of male based on his homosexuality, he only nominally occupies the gender during specific acts of performance. While lying naked in bed next to his sleeping lover, Omar is ungendered in the eyes of the heteronormative dichotomy. When Omar is awakened by the garbagemen and grabs the revolver from his nightside table, it constitutes his first performative act in the scene and can be read as him “putting on” his masculinity to confront the outside world, the phallic nature of the gun representative of this constructed identity. Standing naked at the window, Omar’s two phalluses represent the two distinct spaces that he simultaneously occupies: his bare penis in the presence of Renaldo signifies his othered sexuality while the revolver in his hand indicates the mask he wears while operating in the game.

Though he briefly occupies both of these spaces while at the window, they are often fundamentally incompatible, evidenced by the moment in the kitchen where he tries in vain to hide the second gun on his person before heading to the store. As
previously mentioned, the blue satin pajamas stand in stark contrast to the clothing that Omar typically wears on screen. Despite his openness about his sexuality, his sartorial choices being the most overt, his profession demands adherence to certain masculine performances. The most notable (and consistent) pieces of Omar’s standard outfit are his bulletproof vest and the black duster that helps him hide his trademark shotgun. While both read as the same brand of hypermasculine that color the characters of Avon and Stringer, for Omar these are simply practical choices that aid him in the success of his work. The pajamas, on the other hand, are a glimpse into Omar’s life when he eschews this gender performance: there is nothing practical about them, highlighted by the vain attempts to conceal a pistol in the waistband.

When Omar leaves his apartment to walk to the store, he does so not under the guise of performance, but as his unveiled gay self. It is for this reason that the reactions of the people around him are so important despite this being a standard example of Omar’s notoriety. All of the people shown in these shots are men and boys and they all have the same reaction to his presence; they wear their fear of him publicly, shouting out to others in the area as they run away. However, in this instance, they are running not from his weapons as they might normally, but from his more “true” self. When the drug stash drops at Omar’s feet, he is surprised that it does so. This is a regular occurrence over the course of *The Wire’s* five seasons, but it always happens at Omar’s weaponized behest. In this scene, Omar does nothing to initiate the stick-up.

On the surface level, this of course happens because of his reputation and the respect that his presence demands. A deeper reading indicates, however, that these reactions are, in part, *because* of his flamboyant outfit rather than in spite of it. In the same way that his shotgun is a threat to the livelihood of the men whom he robs, his unveiled self is a threat to their own fragile masculinities. Patricia Hill Collins writes that,

*The politics of “coming out” have very different consequences for Black Americans than for Whites. The visibility of Black LGBT individuals is doubly jarring in the context of a racialized history that constructs homosexuality as White. In this context, visible ‘out’ Black gays and lesbians...challenge heterosexist and racial norms adhered to by Whites and Blacks alike. In essence, ‘out’ LGBT African Americans are*
inherently rebellious, regardless of their choice of love interest, the sexual practices they prefer, and/or whether they are sexually active at all. (Collins 269-270)

In his blue satin outfit, Omar is (literally) wearing his homosexuality on his sleeve. Even without his normal facade of hypermasculinity, Omar’s mere presence is a challenge to the masculinity of the boys and men that he encounters on his way to the store. His ability to beat these men at their own game is frightening to them in the normal context of street masculinity, but in this scene, he reminds them that he is able to do it while also moving fluidly between multiple gender performances. In the hypermasculine world of the game, Omar’s sexuality functions in the same way as does his sawed-off shotgun; he is equally terrifying to them in his capacities as a stick-up artist and a gay man.

Over the course of The Wire’s first four seasons, Omar acts in largely the same ways, adhering strictly to his code and remaining in the shadows so that he can make best use of his talents. He flashes his masculinity when it is required of him, but he is just as quick to shed it when it no longer is of benefit. The conclusion of season four finds Omar pulling off his largest stick-up to date, stealing an entire shipment of heroin meant for the drug co-op that Stringer helped to create before selling it back to them at a markup. As a result of the heist, Omar had unimaginable wealth but also a heavy reward for his capture. Rather than trying to lie low in Baltimore, he moves to Puerto Rico with Renaldo, a seemingly fitting end for the antihero.

In the fifth season, however, Omar is drawn in by a new threat that forces him to change the way that he operates. In the aftermath of the heist, Butchie, Omar’s mentor and confidante, is killed by Marlo Stanfield, the new kingpin who has taken control upon the imprisonment of Avon Barksdale and the death of Stringer at Omar’s hands. When Marlo tortures and kills Butchie in an attempt to get Omar’s attention and the plan works, it draws Omar back to Baltimore and into the fold once more. This time around though, Omar is more desperate in seeking his revenge than he had been in the past. He tries to lure Marlo out into the streets by harassing lower-level members of his organization so that he can deal with Marlo directly, but the information fails to reach him. Marlo’s subordinates worry that the call-out will successfully draw Marlo out of hiding because of his headstrong nature. Marlo’s character is reminiscent of Avon’s, both raised as “soldiers” in the game who value strength above all else in their shows of masculinity. In the context of their brand of HM, Marlo’s masculinity is only
as strong as his reputation and Omar's taunts would require Marlo to take action in a fight that his subordinates seem to think he might lose to Omar.

**Conclusion**

As a result of his inability to find Marlo, Omar grows increasingly desperate in his actions, ultimately leading to his downfall. While in pursuit, Omar locates Savino, a mid-level worker under Marlo, and holds him at gunpoint in an attempt to get information. Savino tries to bargain with Omar, telling him that he had nothing to do with Butchie’s death, but Omar shoots him in the head. Though Omar has killed before in the course of the show, this is the first murder for which he is responsible that violates his personal moral code. While Savino is in the game, he has no direct involvement with the killing that Omar is trying to avenge. Rather than spare Savino’s life as he normally would, Omar lets HM dictate his actions, killing Savino for his association with those responsible. This change of character leaves Omar vulnerable to the ramifications of HM from which he is usually immune.

In his final scene, Omar enters a corner store, followed by a young boy named Kenard who is desperate to make a name for himself in the game. Kenard pulls a gun and shoots Omar, killing him instantly. Omar’s unceremonious death is indicative of the shift that he made by killing Savino. Omar no longer operating outside of the confines of HM, his killing becomes a mark of honor for the young boy who looks to build his masculine image in its tight confines.

For the majority of the show, Omar Little functions as a subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity—the exception that proves the rule. Ultimately, however, Omar succumbs to the same pressures that guide and constrict the other men in *The Wire’s* street-level narrative. As long as Omar was able to use HM in a way that conformed to his guiding moral code, he remained outside of its walls and unharmed by its repercussions. However, in the end HM’s dominance is enough to draw Omar in and pull him down to its level; his death is one that underscores the inescapability and destructive nature of this rigid gender identity.
Works Cited


