Crossin’ Somebody’s Line: Gay Black Men in HBO Serial Dramas

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Crossin’ Somebody’s Line: Gay Black Men in HBO Serial Dramas

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ABSTRACT

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Crossin’ Somebody’s Line: Gay Black Men in HBO Serial Dramas

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This thesis examines the roles of gay black men in three HBO programs: *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, and *True Blood*. Whereas such characters have always been stereotyped and ridiculed in the past, HBO has made strides forward thanks to its commitment to being on the cutting edge of narrative television. Drawing on Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages*, the thesis argues that Omar Little of *The Wire*, and to a lesser extent Lafayette Reynolds of *True Blood*, add new dimensions of representation by presenting their queerness as an assemblage of diverse factors, rather than an intersection of discrete categories. Keith Charles of *Six Feet Under* is presented as a counterexample—a positive representation, but safer and less groundbreaking than those who came after.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the campaign trail in 2008, then-candidate Barack Obama spoke more than once about his favorite television series, HBO’s *The Wire*.1 The idea that a presidential candidate—especially a black candidate—would openly discuss his love of a violent series revolving around the drug trade might once have been shocking, but this hardly raised eyebrows. At this point, HBO programs have already become a central part of American televisual culture, and to be a fan of an HBO series is to position oneself as a discerning connoisseur of media. HBO, as a premium cable station, has done this deliberately, of course—hiring creators to build top-quality series, and then marketing those series as socially and artistically significant.

HBO, although owned by global conglomerate Time Warner, sells direct to customers by subscription, thus the HBO stable’s “Unique Selling Product,” or appeal, is creative, quality TV with a critical edge, an elite brand in a mass market industry.2

In so doing, HBO has created a unique televisual space in which what is relevant and interesting is valued over that which is simply unobjectionable. Thus, the future first black President can watch a show about drug dealers, female viewers can embrace a show about women having promiscuous sex (*Sex and the City*), most of Middle America

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can obsess about the adventures of amoral mobsters (*The Sopranos*), and no one is obligated to feel guilty or ashamed about these choices.

This freedom allows for a wide variety of unique characters to emerge from these programs, including some who represent groups that have rarely been portrayed in a serious manner in the past. In the pages that follow, I will examine three characters in particular, each of whom comes from a separate HBO series, and each of whom represents the same cultural category, historically disparaged and seldom depicted positively: black male homosexuals. The characters in question are Keith Charles of *Six Feet Under*, Lafayette Reynolds of *True Blood*, and Omar Little, who happens to be President Obama’s favorite character from *The Wire*. By examining these three characters, I hope to illustrate what makes them unique in relation to everything that has come before, and discover what they have to say about the cultural construction of queerness in our current historical moment. Before that can happen, however, I must introduce the texts in question.

*Six Feet Under*, which ran from 2001 until 2005, was created by Alan Ball, who had previously made his name as the screenwriter of the successful theatrical film *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999). He used his first television series to explore some of the same issues raised by that film: mortality, manhood in crisis, the closet, and the emotional desolation of a “normal” American family. The series is particularly daring in its form and its play with genre, as Sally Munt explains:

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3 Portrayed by Mathew St. Patrick.
4 Portrayed by Nelsan Ellis.
5 Portrayed by Michael K. Williams.
Generically *Six Feet Under* is a hybrid: elements of family saga/soap opera, romance, American gothic, supernatural fiction, ribald tragi-comedy, Magical Realism, the grotesque, farce and pathos, experimental or avant-garde can be identified in the formal structure. The series is notable for both its intertextuality, and its “knowingness,” evident in the obvious dexterity of its makers to play with narrative and formal conventions, and expectations.6

The hybrid tone that makes the show unique is hard to maintain, and there is a noticeable dip in quality in the Seasons Three and Four, although it returns to form in time for its conclusion in Season Five.

The central characters of *Six Feet Under* are the members of the Fisher family, who own Fisher and Sons Funeral Home in Los Angeles. In the first episode, family patriarch and veteran undertaker Nathaniel Fisher is killed in a traffic accident, widowing his wife Ruth, who spends the rest of the series wrestling with loneliness and the prospect of over-50 romance. As the name of the business implies that he always intended, he wills the business to his two sons. The elder, Nate Jr., moves back to L.A. from Seattle, where he moved precisely to avoid the family business which he must now take on. The younger, David, has already been working for his father and learning the ropes, and is dismayed to share the business with his prodigal brother. The brothers are painted as opposites—Nate is an irresponsible New Age type with a habit of womanizing, while

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6 Munt 263
David is uptight, dutiful, Christian, and gay (though initially closeted). They also have a much younger sister, Claire, a high school student in the early seasons, who resembles their mother physically as much as she does Nate in personality.

Keith Charles, although not initially a member of the family, becomes an important part of the series by virtue of his lasting romantic relationship with David Fisher. They are already a couple in the first episode, although David is keeping their relationship secret, to Keith’s chagrin. Keith is extremely open about and at ease with his sexuality, despite his job as a police officer. Later in the series, he loses his LAPD job after a controversial shooting, and goes to work in private security, first as a low-paid rent-a-cop, and eventually as a bodyguard to celebrities.

Keith’s appearance is the perfect contrast/complement to David’s. Whereas David is thin, white, and clean-shaven with short, meticulously groomed hair, Keith is black, muscular, bald, and mustachioed. Keith’s attractiveness comes up frequently—for example, when David finally introduces him to Nate and Nate’s girlfriend Brenda, the straight couple has this exchange as they walk away:

NATE: Oh my God, I think David is gay!

BRENDA: I think David is lucky! Did you get a look at that guy he was with?7

Keith is never cocky about his appearance, but he is always confident in his interactions with others. He does have his shortcomings, which the chapters to come will explore, but

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he ultimately proves to be an ideal match for David, and the last episode’s unique epilogue reveals that they are destined to stay together until Keith’s death in his sixties.\textsuperscript{8}

Figure 1. Keith Charles (Mathew St. Patrick) with David Fisher (Michael C. Hall).

(Image Source: HBO.com)

*True Blood*, the second series Alan Ball created for HBO, began in 2008 and continues in its fourth season as of this writing. The show is loosely adapted from a series of books by Charlaine Harris. Whereas *Six Feet Under* had occasional moments of

\textsuperscript{8} The final sequence of *Six Feet Under*’s finale, “Everybody’s Waiting” (2005), flashes forward to reveal the deaths of all its principal characters, including Keith being gunned down on the job. I find it somewhat unfortunate that the show’s only black lead is also the only one who dies by violence, but given his career it does make narrative sense.
magical realism, True Blood is firmly within the genre of fantasy horror. It takes place in
a world in which Japanese scientists have created a fully functional synthetic version of
human blood. While this discovery was intended for medical purposes, it has led to the
world’s population of vampires “coming out of the coffin,” revealing their existence to
humanity. The vampires present themselves as a minority struggling for acceptance and
equal rights, while making the case that they are no longer pose a threat to humanity,
since the synthetic “TruBlood” meets their nutritional requirements. While the series
focuses primarily on vampires and their interactions with humans, various other fantastic
beings also appear, including psychics, shapeshifters, and werewolves. True Blood is
similar to Six Feet Under in its genre mixing and unapologetic use of melodrama, but it
particular tone and the elements it brings to the table are quite different, as J. M. Tyree
describes:

True Blood owes something to the Anne Rice/Neil Jordan
vision of Interview with the Vampire (1994), especially the
bayou mansion settings and the sexed-up vamping of
Southern aristocrats. True Blood also contains a crossover
element of B-movie softcore, and it shares Rice’s embrace
of gay relationships and open bisexuality among vampires.
The show often has the flavor of a pole-dancing kit bought
at a “sex positive” boutique for private, monogamous use,
like the tame, bisexual S&M of Interview with the Vampire.

9 True Blood: “Strange Love” (2001)
True Blood wears its sexual liberalism on its sleeve. The resistance movement to vampire rights is formed out of the ideological dregs of fundamentalist Christianity—“God hats fangs,” reads a sign in the credits.\(^\text{10}\)

The series is set primarily in a small Louisiana town called Bon Temps, and focuses on a young waitress named Sookie Stackhouse, who was born with the ability to hear other people’s thoughts (but not those of vampires). In the first episode, she meets a vampire named Bill Compton, and the two begin a romance which provides the main through-line of the series. The town is full of colorful characters, however, and the series is something of an ensemble. Most of the cast is connected to one of two nightspots: Merlotte’s Bar, where Sookie works, or Fangtasia, a vampire nightclub in nearby Shreveport. The character under discussion here, Lafayette Reynolds, works as a cook at Merlotte’s Bar.

Lafayette is black, openly gay—seemingly the only gay person that most of the human characters know in their small town—and flamboyant in his presentation. In addition to cooking at Merlotte’s, he also works on a road crew with Sookie’s brother Jason, as well as dealing drugs, running his own erotic website, and occasionally having sex for money. He is friendly and generally reliable, but also irreverent and a bit unpredictable. Like Keith Charles, he is extremely attractive, but Lafayette’s confidence in his appearance frequently bleeds into cockiness—he makes frequent reference to how sexy he is. His look is unique, combining a handsome face and muscular build with an

exceptionally colorful wardrobe and a fondness for women’s cosmetics. He is never shown in drag, per se, but he certainly wears his effeminacy on his lavender satin sleeve.

Figure 2. Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis). (Image Source: HBO.com)
In the show’s third and fourth seasons, Lafayette discovers his potential for magical powers, with the aid of his brujo\textsuperscript{11} boyfriend, Jesus Velasquez. However, for the purposes of my work here, I am primarily concerned with Lafayette’s place in human society, to which his increasing involvement with the *True Blood*’s fantasy elements are not particularly relevant. Furthermore, as of this writing, Lafayette is still coming to terms with his magical abilities, and has yet to label himself as a witch, brujo, or anything else. It is possible that this aspect of his life will eventually add something, metaphorical or otherwise, to his complexity as a queer black character, but it has yet to happen.

The most complex and interesting (as well as popular) queer black character of all emerged from a series that premiered during the run of *Six Feet Under* and ran for five seasons, ending just before *True Blood* began. *The Wire* was created by David Simon, a former journalist who had already built a career writing about crime and law enforcement in Baltimore, Maryland. Appearing after the huge success of network fare like NBC’s *Law and Order* and CBS’s *CSI*, *The Wire* was a deliberate (and successful) attempt at a new kind of cop show, in which nothing has an easy answer, no problem is fixed inside of an hour (or perhaps ever), and there are no morally pure heroes to be found.

Season One of *The Wire* gives equal time to the police and the criminals of Baltimore, letting the viewer in on the plans of drug lords even as it also depicts the efforts of the cops to discover and thwart those plans. Each following season continues those two threads while adding another layer: Season Two introduces the union men who run Baltimore’s waterfront, Season Three delves deeper into the political machinations

\textsuperscript{11} Jesus self-identifies as a brujo, the Spanish word for sorcerer or male witch.
within city hall, Season Four examines the problems facing Baltimore’s public school system, and Season Five spotlights the reporters on the *Baltimore Sun*’s city beat.

Consequently, the ensemble cast is extraordinarily large, as well as predominantly black (a reflection of Baltimore’s demographics).

Omar Little, the aforementioned queer black character, is introduced in the third episode and remains a memorable recurring character until the final season. Omar makes his living by robbing drug dealers of both their drugs (which he fences) and their money. His skill at this incredibly dangerous endeavor immediately reveals him as a particularly formidable character, and over the course of the series he became a fan favorite. Omar is openly gay, but unlike any gay character—indeed, any character—viewers have ever encountered. He is immediately recognizable by his prominent facial scar, meticulous cornrows, and long coat, as well as the primary tool of his trade—an intimidating shotgun.

Omar disappears for long stretches, as he lays low between jobs or occupies himself outside of Baltimore. He always returns, however, appearing in all five seasons and remaining central to the narrative arc of the series. His adversarial relationship with the city’s drug dealers occasionally leads to an unusual alliance with the police, but their

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12 I should mention at this point that Omar is not the only gay black character of note in *The Wire*. One of the main characters within the police department is Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs, an out black lesbian. Her performance of gender is also fascinating in its own way. Perhaps as a strategy for gaining respect as a woman within a male-dominated field, or perhaps by her nature, she always acts as “one of the guys” within the police force. For example, in the first season, during a round up of drug suspects, one of the young dealers punches a cop. All of the male police officers immediately descend on the man and begin beating him. Kima, who had been occupied some distance away, runs toward the conflict in a desperate manner that leads the viewers to think that she might stop the beating. Instead, she beats the dealer even more savagely. (*The Wire*: “The Buys” [2002]) As the series progresses, she displays the same problems with infidelity and alcohol abuse that trouble many of the straight male cops. Kima is a character worthy of her own in depth analysis, to be sure, but that analysis is outside the scope of this paper.
disdain for his violent and illegal activities keeps the mutual affection to a minimum. Omar does follow his own ethical code, however, which keeps him from enacting violence against those who are not themselves involved in criminal activity. This unique moral outlook positions him as an anti-hero that viewers can root for, as he goes after criminals far viler than himself with a degree of directness and brutality that the police can never match.

Figure 3. Omar Little (Michael K. Williams). *(Image Source: HBO.com)*

Omar Little, Lafayette Reynolds, and Keith Charles have little in common beyond being black gay men (and appearing on HBO, of course). Omar and Lafayette are both criminals with ties to the drug trade, but Omar is a master thief in a large city, while
Lafayette is a small time dealer in a tiny town. Geographically, the three could not be more separate without leaving the U.S.—Omar lives on the East Coast, Lafayette in the Deep South, and Keith on the West Coast. Even their looks are dissimilar, with Keith’s middle class assimilated look resembling neither Omar’s street gear nor Lafayette’s colorful flamboyance. Still, as gay black male television characters, they all represent a group too often ignored in media.

Certainly there have been gay black men on television before, most notably the character of Carter Sebastian Heywood on the sitcom *Spin City*, which ran on ABC from 1996 to 2002. The show centers on the inner workings of the mayor’s office of New York City, and Carter presides over minority affairs. While including a gay black character is a progressive choice for a network like ABC, many of the jokes were at his expense. In particular, the show emphasizes ongoing sexual tension between Carter and a racist, homophobic white character. *Spin City* is more invested in creating its own hilariously mismatched odd couple than in respecting Carter Heywood’s identity or emphasizing the wrongness of the other character’s homophobic, racist position.

Sadly, the most prominent gay black television characters prior to *Spin City* were an even more overtly homophobic parody of the very concept of such an identity. On the Fox Network’s sketch comedy show *In Living Color* (1990-1994), Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier played the cartoonishly flaming Antoine and Blaine in a recurring talk show bit called “Men On…” Clad in ultra-femme attire, the two lisped and snapped their way through segments in which they discussed various aspects of pop culture on a level

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13 Portrayed by Michael Boatman.
that usually devolved into faux-lustful remarks about male celebrities’ butts. The central joke was right there in the title—these two might call themselves men, but anyone could see they were no such thing. Straight audiences may have been amused, but gay groups were not.\textsuperscript{14}

The late Marlon Riggs, one of the most prominent queer black voices of the 1980’s and ’90’s, wrote about \textit{In Living Color}, among other things, in his classic essay, “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen.”\textsuperscript{15} Riggs is insistent on the validity and compatibility of his sexual and racial identity, in the face of cultural pressure to be one or the other but never both (and ideally neither). These same themes also power his acclaimed film \textit{Tongues Untied} (1989), which combines documentary with poetry and performance to convey the experience of being a gay black man in America.

One of the other voices in \textit{Tongues Untied}, Essex Hemphill, was an essayist and poet in his own right with much to say about the gay black experience. He insisted on the relevance of sexual identity in discussions of luminaries such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, whose gay identities are frequently ignored in a misguided effort not to disrespect their blackness.\textsuperscript{16} “It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel,” he wrote, “Whom did he love? It makes a difference.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, as a pre-teen I was fascinated with this, the first depiction of queerness I’d ever seen on television. I knew they were being played for laughs, but I thought maybe gay men were really like this, and I envied their good-natured ease with their own freakishness.


\textsuperscript{16} This is also the theme of another genre-bending film released concurrently with \textit{Tongues Untied}. \textit{Looking for Langston} (Isaac Julien, 1989) reclaims and celebrates the sexuality of Langston Hughes while extrapolating to the experiences of other gay black men, including the filmmaker.

Charles Nero also discusses media depictions of gay black men, including Keith Charles and Carter Sebastian Heywood, in a section of his essay on the problem of racism in the gay community, “Why Are the Gay Ghettoes White?” Drawing on Hollywood films as well, Nero emphasizes how frequently gay black men are portrayed as frauds and pretenders. As with Hooper X in *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997), whose political militancy is just a front to sell comic books, and Paul in *Six Degrees of Separation* (Fred Schepisi, 1993), who gains the trust of rich white people by pretending to be Sidney Poitier’s son, there is always something fundamentally inauthentic about these characters, and an “unmasking” moment at which that inauthenticity is revealed and shamed, whether for drama or laughs. The implication is always that the identity itself is invalid, and therefore the characters should never be trusted.\(^{18}\)

In addition to these examinations of gay black representation, I also intend to draw upon critical work dealing with the HBO network specifically. There are two excellent anthologies on this subject: *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era*\(^{19}\) and *The Essential HBO Reader*.\(^{20}\) The most interesting critical discussions of HBO revolve around its rhetoric of “quality.” The network has branded itself as a cut above normal television, which obligates it to treat its series, in both production and marketing, as something like art objects, and encourages viewers to do the same:

Safely quarantined from the distractions and interruptions of commercial television, the viewers of HBO dramas are

permitted to detach themselves from typical modes of television viewing, to approach the state of disinterested contemplation idealized in Kantian aesthetics, a disposition instantly adopted by patrons in a museum gallery or a symphony concert hall, but one seldom achieved in the family room.\(^{21}\)

A critical anthology has also appeared dealing specifically with *The Wire.\(^ {22}\)* Most of the essays within it deal with the economic and law enforcement aspects of the series, and as such have little connection to my project here. One essay is extremely relevant, however. In a study of discussions on the official HBO.com *The Wire* message board, Kathleen LeBesco examines fan reception of Omar Little in the wake of the character’s onscreen death, and reveals how little has changed in the two decades since Marlon Riggs wrote of the lack of acceptance for gay black identities.\(^ {23}\) LeBesco notes that many self-identified fans offer specific disclaimers, making clear that they can only enjoy Omar in spite of his sexuality. A fan using the handle “Prophetessroxy,” for example, writes, “I loved Omar because even though he was a homosexual, he wasn’t a ‘stereotypical flamer’…. he liked his boys, but he was gangsta to the bone…”\(^ {24}\) Even as she acknowledges Omar’s status as a nonstereotypical gay character, Prophetessroxy finds it necessary to contrast him with the expected “flaming” gay man who appears nowhere in


\(^{24}\)Ibid. 223
The Wire. This sort of ambivalent attitude was apparently widespread on the message boards, as LeBesco notes:

Not a single fan in the ‘Omar Little R.I.P.’ thread admits enjoying Omar’s sexuality or discusses his/her desire to see Omar be affectionate with his lovers, but, at the very least, most fans here are not trafficking in the worst, most reductive stereotypes about gay people.25

LeBesco’s telling use of “most” rather than “all” is necessitated by the rhetoric of a few vehemently intolerant fans:

“Damn shame when society comes to a point where someone like Omar can be considered a ‘real nigga.’ I mean, FUCK—he’s a fuckin FAG! Does that make him any less of a man!? HELL YES IT DOES!”26

Harvey Cormier also writes about Omar in his essay “Bringing Omar Back to Life,” but he is interested specifically in the character’s unique ethics, rather than his sexuality.27

Six Feet Under has not been written about as widely as The Wire, but some relevant scholarly essays and articles do exist. In “Telepistemology of the Closet; or, The Queer Politics of Six Feet Under,” S. A. Chambers writes about David Fisher’s coming out story, and how it painstakingly dramatizes the closet for straight viewers.28 Sally Munt, in “A Queer Undertaking: Anxiety and Reparation in the HBO Television Drama

25 Ibid. 221
26 Ibid. 221
Series *Six Feet Under,*’ examines issues of race and masculinity within the series.\textsuperscript{29}

As the newest series discussed herein, and the only one still ongoing, *True Blood* has thus far received the least scholarly attention of the three. The only essay of note that I drew upon was J. M. Tyree’s “Warm-Blooded: *True Blood* and *Let the Right One In,***\textsuperscript{30} in which the series shares space with a Swedish vampire film released shortly after its premiere.\textsuperscript{31}

The scholarly text most central to my work here by far is *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* by Jasbir Puar. Puar works to reinvent queerness as we have known it, and completely upend the idea of intersectionalism, which has dominated discusses of race and sexuality for decades, and replace it with the Deleuzian notion of assemblage. Puar argues that the time has come for such a reassessment:

> Queer times require even queerer modalities of thought, analysis, creativity, and expression in order to elaborate upon nationalist, patriotic, and terrorist formations and their imbricated forms of radicalized perverse sexualities and gender dysphorias.\textsuperscript{32}

The era in which Puar is specifically interested began after September 11, 2001 (although the roots stretch back much farther), when racial and religious minorities (most specifically brown Muslims) became the culture’s villain of choice, allowing gay people

\textsuperscript{29} *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2006. 263-279.
\textsuperscript{30} *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 2. 32.
\textsuperscript{31} *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008) also has a fascinating perspective on queerness, which Tyree’s essay barely touches on. Vampires have always represented the larger culture’s fears of the queer other, and this film features a transgender child as its vampire, at a time when transgender children are emerging as a new site of cultural conflict and discussion.
(or rather, those gays who do not themselves belong to hated ethnic or religious minorities) to become more accepted into the cultural mainstream by adopting a nationalistic, neo-liberal stance against those considered a greater threat to the nation.

Puar uses the word “homonormative” to describe these gays and lesbians who adopt a normative cultural perspective in exchange for greater enfranchisement. She takes this term from Lisa Duggan’s essay “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in which Duggan specifically focused on a movement of gay and lesbian conservatives, who argue against the wisdom and necessity of any sort of radical queer politics. Duggan conveys eloquently that any notion that one is automatically rebellious or progressive by virtue of being a sexual minority must be abandoned in these strange, fractious times.33

The chapters to come will use the above texts to examine Keith Charles, Omar Little, and Lafayette Reynolds, as well as the works in which they appear. Chapter One looks at their performances of sexuality. Chapter Two examines the wider fictional contexts in which they exist. Chapter Three explains how Jasbir Puar and Lisa Duggan’s ideas are embodied in these narratives, and what perspectives are to be found therein. Finally, the Conclusion will look at what forces have lead to this phenomenon, and what it means for the future.

CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING SEXUALITY WHILE NAVIGATING RACE

This chapter will examine the unique ways that Keith Charles, Omar Little, and Lafayette Reynolds break new ground in representing gay black men, in terms of their performance of queerness, and how that performance interacts with their black identities.

On *Six Feet Under*, Keith Charles performs his gay identity openly and without shame. When he encounters homophobes, his reaction is to be aggressively out and in their faces until they back down and/or apologize. Unlike his partner David, Keith is already entirely uncloseted when the series begins. Indeed, his personality is so forthright and anti-shame\(^{34}\) that it is impossible to imagine him keeping his sexuality a secret once he came to terms with it himself. He is even out at his job as an LAPD officer, where he responds aggressively to the slightest hint of prejudice.

Although Keith does his best to act thoughtfully and ethically, aggression is actually an important aspect of his character. He has a strong sense of what is right and proper, and when other people—including his husband and children—violate that, he frequently responds with anger. The writers make clear over the course of the series that Keith's anger management problem grows out of a lifelong conflict with his father, who doled out harsh punishments to his children and who has never accepted Keith's sexual identity.

\(^{34}\) I use “anti-shame” rather than “unashamed” here because Keith not only refuses to be ashamed of his sexuality, he actively opposes shame in others as well, even becoming angry when anyone around him shows a hint of it.
Keith's aggressive personality, tellingly inherited from his father\(^35\), marks him as a particularly masculine gay man. His relationship with David Fisher puts this into stark relief, as David resembles his mother and shares with her a tendency to acquiesce to unpleasant circumstances rather than incite conflict. This combination of inherited traits, along with other aspects of their personalities, mark Keith and David as the sort of gay couple that straight onlookers (and those queers who have adopted a straight worldview) tend to divide into “the man” and “the woman.” That is, David (“the woman”) is sensitive, emotional (to an almost histrionic degree), involved in the arts, and avoids conflict. Keith (“the man”) is direct, aggressive, athletic, and quick to anger. Visually, Keith’s muscular build, shaved head, and facial hair give him a more masculine appearance than the slender, clean-cut David.

In early seasons, plot lines dealing with the couple's inability to unite their groups of friends make their differences in gender performance especially apparent. Keith belongs to an organization of gay cops and firefighters, and enjoys sports and paintball. David, on the other hand, is a member of the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, and attends cocktail parties where the attendees play “Leading Ladies.”

Keith strikes a balance throughout the series between his aggressive outness and his desire to remain part of the key institutions of the straight world. In addition to his job as a Los Angeles cop (a career choice that would seem bound to lead to conflicts of interest for even a straight black man), he also attends church regularly. Even his attendance at a gay-oriented church in West Hollywood marks him as a member of the

\(^{35}\) I have no interest in a “nature vs. nurture” argument in this context, but whether Keith’s aggression is a genetic trait or a learned behavior, the show makes clear that his father is the source.
larger Christian community, furthering his mainstreaming project. Although we're never told the exact autobiographical details, it seems indicative of Keith's character that he presumably sought out a more gay friendly church than the one he was raised in, rather than abandoning Christianity altogether.

This tendency toward traditionalism, combined with his active insistence that traditions can be adapted to include those who were previously disenfranchised, also goes a long way toward explaining his interest in monogamy and marriage. Even as Keith and David break up and get back together during the first half of the series, it remains clear that Keith's ultimate goal is to find a man to spend the rest of his life with—that is, a husband. When they commit to each other and to getting over their problems and making it work, he and David begin referring to each other as "my husband." The epilogue reveals that they are destined to marry legally when the option becomes available.36

Keith's commitment to traditional notions of family also extends to his desire to have children. Initially, he insists on seeking a surrogate to carry a child that is genetically his own. Only when this idea fails does he warm to David's interest in adoption, and the couple become fathers to a pair of brothers who they find through the foster care system. As with so many heterosexual narratives, this establishment of a nuclear family is treated as a culmination of both characters' arcs, and is presented as a "happily ever after" ending.

Keith’s worldview and ethics mark him as a particularly homonormative gay man—meaning that he embodies the sort of gay man who buys into the dominant

36 Interestingly, although the series ended in 2005, the wedding seems to take place about three years later, judging by the ages of the children, which would likely place it within the period in 2008 when same sex marriage was legal in California.
culture’s worldview and who most straight people—those that are not virulently homophobic, anyway—are likely to find acceptable. He is interested in monogamy and family values. He expresses disdain for the inclusion of drug use in the gay club scene. As a cop, he proves himself an upstanding member of society. His subsequent work as a bodyguard makes him quite wealthy. He never has an opportunity to express solidarity with lesbians or trans people (and in the latter case it is not entirely clear that he would). Keith sees his community as comprised of other gay men.

Unlike Keith, The Wire’s Omar Little associates with no larger gay community at all. From his description—an openly gay black man who makes a living by robbing drug dealers—one might imagine a typical portrayal of a black “street thug” type with the twist of a gay identity, but Omar is far more complex than that. His performance of masculinity is particularly fascinating. His clothing and appearance are quite masculine and intimidating—in fact, his long coat, facial scar, and ever-present shotgun call to mind a cowboy image. His bearing contrasts with his aggressive look, however. Although he is nothing like the stereotypical swishy queen, he moves with the grace of a dancer and tends to speak, frequently with a smile, in a casually soft-spoken manner that is entirely unlike the constant blustering braggadocio or paranoid anger that most of his criminal colleagues display.

Omar’s fluid grace comes out primarily when he is enacting violence—strolling briskly down the street and pulling his long shotgun out of his coat with one hand. This association of traits creates a sense that his queerness contributes to his prowess as a criminal. He is marked as different, both physically and socially, than all those around
him, and his near-invincibility implies that the difference may in fact be superiority. A further advantage is created directly by his alienation from the dominant heterosexual paradigm of the criminal underworld. While most gangsters are concerned about proving themselves according to a harsh standard of manhood, Omar ignores that standard and instead devotes his time to activities which lead directly to his success at criminal endeavors. His formidability gains him no small amount of respect, but the masculinity that he performs is entirely his own, rather than that laid down by the culture that surrounds him.

The same delicate touch that makes Omar a great thief is also on display in his romantic relationships. Omar has three boyfriends over the course of the series, and he is devoted and affectionate toward all of them. He clearly views himself as a person worthy of love, and makes a space for it within his harsh and violent lifestyle. In fact, his boyfriends also serve as his partners in crime, despite lacking his outsized skill. He seems to be monogamous by nature, although he never expresses interest in marriage (legal institutions and tax breaks being largely outside his field of concerns).

His lack of interest in marriage reflects a larger disinterest in queer/LGBT politics as they are usually performed, which seems directly related to his alienation from any cohesive gay community. After all, Omar’s lifestyle transgresses laws and societal norms in far more severe ways than who he might want to marry. For that matter, hospital visitation can hardly be much of an issue for someone who dares not go to a hospital for

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37 “Love” is a loaded word, but here I mean simply that he seeks out not just sex, but sex in tandem with a long term commitment, emotional support, and companionship. On *The Wire*, most of the criminal characters seek out sex wherever they can find it, while the police attempt to maintain committed relationships but inevitably self-sabotage and destroy them, frequently through infidelity. Omar, meanwhile, is a serial monogamist, always with someone who holds his full attention.
fear of imprisonment or gangland retribution. Despite an apparent lack of activist consciousness, however, he is always open about his sexuality, refusing to closet himself thanks to his general devotion to authenticity and fearlessness. He can only ever be who he is and refuses to try to do otherwise, even in environments where who he is might be completely unacceptable to everyone around him.

On *True Blood*, Lafayette Reynolds is far less alienated from the Louisiana community in which he lives. Although he comes into conflict with various “redneck” characters and is labeled a “faggot” by his mother, his friends and those he works with seem entirely at ease with his identity. His job as a cook at Merlotte’s Bar and Grill, in particular, places him in a diverse and supportive environment. The owner, Sam Merlotte, is a straight white man, but also a closeted shapeshifter, and the latter leads him to be accepting of those who most citizens of Bon Temps might consider freakish or at least socially unacceptable. His other employees include an outspoken single mom, a veteran with an intense case of PTSD, a psychic in a controversial “interracial” relationship with a vampire, and a hostess who is a vampire herself. As this list makes clear, fantasy is woven into the world of *True Blood* in such a way that it creates new categories that could be read as queer, which indeed becomes a central metaphor of the show.

Lafayette is portrayed as human but nevertheless recognizably queer. Like Omar, he has a unique take on masculinity, but Lafayette’s version is more immediately recognizable as that of a particularly flamboyant gay man. His clothing is always

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38 In Season Three of *True Blood*, Lafayette discovers a latent potential for magic, inherited through his family. Prior to this, however, he was always dealt with as one of the show’s fully human characters, and even his possible emergence as a sorcerer does not call his humanity into question in the same way that being a werewolf, vampire, or fairy does for other characters. No one questions Harry Potter’s humanity, after all.
colorful, and he is usually wearing make-up and nail polish. He refers to everyone, male and female, by pet names, although his favorite pet name is “hooker.” He also has a tendency to flirt with every attractive man, greeting heartthrob Jason Stackhouse, for example, with, “Well hello, hotness.”39 However, he is also visibly muscular and athletic, and willing to stand up for himself and others whenever necessary. He has no patience for homophobes, as revealed in an early scene when one of the waitresses at Merlotte’s hesitantly tells him that a redneck sent back his burger, knowing that Lafayette had cooked it, saying that “the burger might have AIDS.” Lafayette immediately removes his earrings and storms toward the table.

LAFAYETTE: Excuse me, who ordered the hamburger with AIDS?

REDNECK: I ordered the hamburger deluxe.

LAFAYETTE: In this restaurant, a hamburger deluxe come with French fries, lettuce, tomato, mayo, and AIDS! Do anybody got a problem with that?

REDNECK: Yeah! I’m an American, and I got a say in who makes my food.

LAFAYETTE: Oh baby, it’s too late for that. Faggots been breedin’ your cows, raisin’ your chickens, even brewing your beer long before I walked my sexy ass up in this motherfucker. Everything on your goddamn table got AIDS.

REDNECK: You still ain’t makin’ me eat no AIDS burger.
LAFAYETTE: Well, all you gotta do is say “Hold the AIDS.” [Picks up the top of the burger bun and licks it, then shoves it in the redneck’s face.] Now eat it.
[The redneck and his two friends attempt to attack Lafayette, but he’s quicker and fends them off.]
LAFAYETTE: Bitch, you come in my house, you gonna eat my food the way I fuckin’ make it! Do you understand me? Tip your waitress.40

This scene is particularly fascinating because even as Lafayette physically intimidates the redneck, he never takes on an aggressively masculine persona—he remains the “bitchy queen” even as he makes clear that he is nobody’s bitch.

For the most part, all three of these characters manage to avoid the various pitfalls that have troubled the representation of gay and queer black men in the past. The negative stereotypes that have dominated such roles are hardly surprising since they represent the intersection of two groups who have each tended to be negatively portrayed individually. As Marlon Riggs explains, gay black men have usually been represented as swishy queens in the In Living Color style, or as aggressive, AIDS-spreading prison tops. Riggs points out that these stereotypes are themselves descendants of previously existing stereotypes of black men: the shuffling emasculated Sambo and the brutal black rapist. Riggs continues:

What the members of this pantheon share in common is an extreme displacement and distortion of sexuality. In Sambo and the Snap queen sexuality is repressed, arrested. Laughter, levity, and a certain childlike disposition cement their mutual status as comic eunuchs. Their alter egos, the brute black and the homo con, are but psychological projections of an otherwise tamed sexuality run amuck, bestial, promiscuous, pathological.\(^4\)

Of the three characters under discussion, Lafayette is clearly the closest to the Snap Queen, and one can even imagine him self-applying the label. However, there is nothing arrested in his sexuality or childlike in his disposition. He may wear hoop earrings and eye shadow, but he is both mature and assertive, and more than willing to stand up for himself and those he cares about even in the face of violence. He also has the muscle to hold his own against such violence if necessary, assuming his opponents are human.

Omar, on the other hand, could be mistaken at first glance for the homo con. In fact, one of the homophobic drug dealers he opposes says specifically that Omar became gay while in prison. However, we never hear Omar’s version of this story. He may well have discovered his preference for men behind bars, but his sexuality was clearly not entirely situational, and of course “conversion” tends not to happen the way homophobes think it does. Regardless of this narrative, whether it holds true or not, Omar’s

monogamy, gentleness, and loving demeanor toward his partners differentiates him strongly from the prison top. While he does fill the butch role in his relationships (particularly in his doomed Season One romance with the larcenous-but-effeminate Brandon), his own complex performance of gender is entirely unlike the animalistic brute of legend.

Keith completely avoids both stereotypes with his careful combination of conventional masculinity and upstanding citizenship. As a devotedly monogamous police officer, as he is at Six Feet Under’s start, or a married bodyguard with two kids, as he is by its end, Keith is in little danger of being called a negative representation. If anything, he is such a positive character that it almost feels too deliberate—like the gay character Sydney Poitier might have played. Even his biggest character flaw—his temper—marks him as more similar to straight men (and indeed to a negative stereotype of straight black men) than to negative stereotypes of gay men.

As Riggs has discussed at length, being a gay black man is presented from all sides as an untenable identity. “Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black.” writes Riggs of the messages he receives from black culture, “A strong, proud, ‘Afrocentric’ black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual.”

Heterosexuality is presented as a prerequisite for strength, and strength is a requirement for black manhood. We see this in The Wire, when drug kingpin Avon Barksdale is shocked and appalled that Omar, who has just robbed his stash house, is gay.

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

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42 Ibid. 471
AVON: A faggot?

STINKUM: Mmhmm.

AVON: Get the fuck outta here.

WEEBAY: Said he had a whole stable of boys down in Jessup. This punk motherfucker got even less use for pussy now that he home.

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

AVON: Yo yo yo, we doubling down on Sweet Lips, all right? We make it four motherfucking thousand dollars on him. Six if I get the chance to holler at him before he get got.43

Avon had already put a price of two thousand dollars on Omar’s head, but the revelation that the thief is a “faggot” necessitates doubling that amount.

On *True Blood*, Lafayette’s mentally ill mother employs the same word to reject his identity, as revealed in this exchange with her nurse (later Lafayette’s boyfriend).

JESUS VELASQUEZ: [as Lafayette enters] Can I help you?

RUBY JEAN: No. That's just my son, Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE: Hi Mama.

JESUS VELASQUEZ: You told me your son passed away.

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RUBY JEAN: He did. God killed him, 'cause he's a faggot.

But he keeps comin' back.\textsuperscript{44}

The combination of \textit{True Blood}’s small town setting and his own status as a supporting character allows Lafayette few chances to interact with black characters who are not members of his family, but his mother’s casual statement that he might as well be dead as far as she is concerned gives the viewer a powerful sense of the kind of environment in which he was raised.

Keith Charles also had a troubled home life, as discussed above, but otherwise never encounters black homophobia. Considering his constant and angry opposition to any instance of homophobia, it is interesting that he never deals with its racialized aspect.

Riggs goes on to attempt at explanation of this particular demonization of queerness within black communities:

What lies at the heart, I believe, of black America’s pervasive homophobia is the desperate need for an Other within the community, yet not truly of the community, an Other onto which blame for the chronic identity crises afflicting the black male psyche can be readily displaced, an indispensible Other that functions as the lowest common denominator of the abject, the base line of transgression beyond which a black man is no longer a man, no longer black, an essential Other against which black men and boys maturing, struggling with self-doubt, anxiety, feelings of

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{True Blood}: “Beautifully Broken” (2010)
political, economic, social, and sexual inadequacy—even
impotence—can always measure themselves and by
comparison seem strong, adept, empowered, superior.\textsuperscript{45}

Because these characters are openly gay, they are forever alienated from the larger black community, whether law-abiding or criminal. Although The Wire never reveals what led Omar to take up a career in robbing drug dealers, the homophobia of Avon and associates makes clear that he could never have found a place in their hierarchical world of organized crime, despite his dual talents of strategizing and gun fighting, which ought to make him valuable to such an enterprise. “The black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers,” explains Essex Hemphill, “even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions.”\textsuperscript{46} While they are not as profoundly alienated as Omar, Keith and Lafayette also display a complete lack of black friends outside their families.

As Marlon Riggs also points out, however, the homophobia of mainstream black culture is not the only obstacle standing between black gay men and self-actualization; the racism of mainstream gay culture is equally troubling. Riggs refers to San Francisco’s gay Castro Street district as “a sea of vanilla,” and describes his trouble fitting into that world:

I avoided the question “Why?” Pretended not to notice the absence of black images in this new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, my own fantasies. I tried not to

\textsuperscript{45} Riggs, “Black Macho Revisited” 471
notice the few images of blacks that were most popular:

joke, fetish, cartoon caricature, or disco diva adored from a
distance.\(^{47}\)

Interestingly, The Wire features no openly gay white characters, but it is difficult to imagine Omar coexisting in the same bar scene with professionally closeted white Police Commissioner William Rawls, who spends most of his week oppressing and devaluing the lives of Baltimore’s people of color. Omar is marked—literally, thanks to his sizable facial scar—as a member of the underclass and the underworld, and as such there is no room for him in the swank dance clubs and pride parades that comprise mainstream (read: white/middle class) gay culture.

Similarly, despite his comfortably middle class identity, Keith is profoundly alienated at David’s friends’ cocktail party. In addition to being the only black man there, he lacks their interest in white female movie stars and thus fails at playing “Leading Ladies.”\(^{48}\) He does seem more comfortable in racially mixed gay dance clubs, but the extent to which he fits into mainstream gay culture seems dependent on the extent to which he can let go of his black cultural identity.

None of these characters has found a perfect way to overcome the problems that Marlon Riggs and others have explicated. Indeed, they would seem far less realistic if they did. However, each of them has his own method of navigating this maze, and all of them are far more complex than any black gay characters that have come before.

\(^{47}\) *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989)

CHAPTER 3: CHARACTERS IN THEIR CONTEXTS

This chapter will explore the roles that Keith Charles, Omar Little, and Lafayette Reynolds play in their respective worlds, beyond the performances of sexuality discussed in Chapter 2. To fully understand what makes these characters unique, we must look at the parts they play in the larger stories that surround them.

On Six Feet Under, Keith is positioned primarily as a love interest. The central focus of the show is the Fisher family—three grown siblings and their aging mother. Keith’s role, first and foremost, is to date one of those siblings, David Fisher. Like the other Fishers’ long-term love interests, Keith is a well-developed character and has some side-plots of his own, but he’s always secondary to the Fishers. Of course, by the end of the series, with Keith and David married with children and taking over the funeral home, Keith becomes an undeniable part of the family, which positions him more centrally.

Because Six Feet Under is something of a soap opera, emotional conflict is a constant element of its storytelling style, which means that all the relationships portrayed within have their share of strife. Early in the series, David is still in the process of coming out and learning to perform his sexuality—and indeed most other aspects of himself—without the shame that has plagued him since childhood. Keith has been out for much longer, and has little patience for David’s lingering self-hatred. This leads to them breaking up and attempting a platonic friendship, while Keith finds a serious (black) boyfriend and David has a string of unsatisfying (white) hookups. The narrative leaves no room for doubt that the two will come back together—indeed, that they are “meant for” each other—and the drama grows out of David’s attempt at first to move on, and then to
become someone worthy of Keith’s affections, which primarily seems to depend on becoming a forthright and unashamed gay man.

Of course, once David gets over his issues and Keith breaks up with his boyfriend, the two get back together for good. Naturally, for the rest of the series, the drama between the two refocuses on whether or not they'll be able to stay together in the long term. In the world of *Six Feet Under*, long-term monogamous commitments are presented as a positive ideal, even as all of its characters struggle with them. Much of the conflict between Keith and David grows from the standards of behavior to which he holds everyone around him.

In Season Two, Keith's drug-addicted sister Karla kills a homeless man in a hit-and-run accident. Karla's daughter, having promised her mother she would keep it a secret, tells the story to David, who tells Keith later that night. Keith is angry at David for not telling him sooner, and immediately turns Karla in, which puts him and David in the position of caring for the child. Similarly to many of the police story lines in *The Wire*, Keith's behavior demonstrates that being dedicated to morality and the law does not lead to a more peaceful life or more happiness for those around you; in fact, the opposite is more frequently true.

Keith's problems with family are ultimately resolved, at least for the purposes of the series, when he and David adopt two brothers in the final season. At first Keith finds himself in constant conflict with the older boy, Durell, as if to repeat the dynamic between himself and his father. David sees this happening, however, and encourages Keith to avoid that path. Realizing that Durell acts out because he assumes that, like
previous foster placements, the situation is only temporary, Keith reassures him by including the boys in a discussion about a family vacation for the following year. This brings peace to the family and enables the happy nuclear family ending that the series requires-- in fact, in the final episode the four move back into the funeral home where David grew up and restore it to a thriving family business, while returning it to its original name: Fisher and Sons.

On True Blood, Lafayette Reynolds is no less an integral part of his family and local community, despite his relatively public status as a criminal. In fact, he might be less alienated than Keith, because Lafayette supports those he cares about even when they break the rules or the law. On a show that deals with constant chaotic supernatural violence, Lafayette is usually presented as someone who can always be counted on—someone the other characters turn to for help and support.

In Season 3, his cousin Tara is left severely traumatized after her boyfriend turns out to be in the thrall of a murderous supernatural being (whose power also takes over Tara for a time) and is then shot and killed. After preventing her from committing suicide, Lafayette reveals a secret, taking her to the mental hospital where his psychologically unbalanced mother, Tara’s aunt, is cared for. Tara is taken aback at first, that she’s been thus shut away from the world:

TARA: Why didn't you tell me?

LAFAYETTE: She made me promise not to. Didn't want nobody seein' her like this.
TARA: But six months, Lafayette? Alone in this place?
Even she didn't deserve that.

LAFAYETTE: That's right. She don't deserve it. You know much it cost keepin' her here? More than two legal jobs worth. That's how much.49

As Lafayette has two legal jobs—cook and road crew worker—the clear implication of this line is that his drug dealing and other illegal activities are necessitated by his mother’s problems and his need to care for her. This could just as easily be rationalization on his part as truth, but either way it says something about where his priorities lie.

After Lafayette and Tara visit his mother, they have another exchange:

TARA: You think I could end up like her?

LAFAYETTE: There's some darkness in this family, Tara.

My momma, your momma. But they ain't strong enough to beat it. We are!50

This remark displays Lafayette’s support of his cousin and his determination to help her through her strife, but it also reveals something new. Despite his confidence and bravado, Lafayette clearly sees this potential for “darkness” in himself as well. His tireless juggling of multiple (legal and illegal) streams of income, his refusal to be dragged down by the things that make his life difficult (racism, homophobia, endemic poverty, kidnappings by vampires) are not merely ambition; they are his struggle against something within him. Lafayette has seen his mother, his aunt, and perhaps other

50 Ibid.
relatives lose their grip on reality and their ability to function in the world, and he is determined to have a better life than that.

Lafayette is also a valued part of the larger community around him, especially among those he works with at his two legal jobs. He makes no attempt to hide his sexuality, or even to appear less flamboyant, and everyone seems to have gotten over any serious objections long before the series begins. Fellow road crew worker Jason Stackhouse—straight, white, conventionally masculine, and none too intelligent—turns to Lafayette both for drugs and for help dealing with the unforeseen side effects of those drugs. He also high-fives Lafayette after witnessing the “burger with AIDS” confrontation recounted in Chapter 2, making his allegiance entirely clear. Their connection is summarized in two simple lines:

JASON: You're my dog.

LAFAYETTE: Well, I love you right back.51

Lafayette is just as out and accepted among his coworkers at Merlotte’s Bar. In the first episode, this dynamic is used to introduce both him and the waitresses through a mostly lighthearted exchange about sexuality:

LAFAYETTE: You look like a porn star with that tan and pink lipstick. You gotta date?

SOOKIE: No. When I wear makeup, I get bigger tips.

LAFAYETTE: [laughing] Yes, girl. Let's hear it! These damn rednecks are suckers for packaging.

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SOOKIE And I get even bigger tips when I act like I don't have a brain in my head. But if I don't, they're all scared of me.

LAFAYETTE: They ain't scared of you, honey child. They scared of what's between your legs.

SOOKIE: Lafayette! That's nasty talk. I won't listen to that!

ARLENE: Do you even know what's between a woman's legs, Lafayette?

LAFAYETTE: I know every man, whether straight, gay or George mother-fucking Bush is terrified of the pussy.

ARLENE: Hey listen, not everybody is gay, okay? Not everybody wants to have sex with you.

LAFAYETTE: You would be surprised, Arlene. People you know. That's all I'm sayin'.

DAWN: Well, I don't want to have sex with you.

ARLENE: Huh uh, me neither.

LAFAYETTE: Ya bitches just don't know what you're missin'. I got six gears on these hips.

DAWN: No, baby. You don't know what you're missing. You can watch her walk away... make you wanna slap it? Ooo, you wanna slap it?

[slaps her butt as she walks away]
LAFAYETTE: Everybody know that. Everybody been there. Ain't that right John's been there!

ARLENE: [hands under her breasts] I'm slapping it. Take these, baby. Peaches and cream.

LAFAYETTE: I'll give you a little cocoa.

ARLENE: Peaches and cream.

LAFAYETTE: Little cocoa.⁵²

Even though Arlene’s accusations (not knowing what is between a woman’s legs, thinking all men are gay and attracted to him) are based on negative stereotypes of gay men, the entire sequence is light-hearted and demonstrates how comfortable these people are with each other. Sam Merlotte, the owner and boss, is also accepting of Lafayette, even hiring him back after he disappears for weeks due to being kidnapped by vampires. Lafayette is presented as an excellent cook, of course, but there are doubtless many establishments in the Deep South where that fact would not be enough to make him employable.

Despite his illicit practices, Lafayette rarely comes into conflict with the police. The show’s small town setting means that, like the other characters, he knows all the police officers by name. Eventually, in fact, his aforementioned ally Jason Stackhouse becomes a sheriff’s deputy, which puts Lafayette in an even better position in relation to the law. However, the fact that he sells vampire blood (a popular narcotic in the world of True Blood, nicknamed “V”) brings him to the attention of the local vampire leader, Eric (also called a sheriff), who is responsible for the aforementioned kidnapping, holding him

in an underground dungeon for weeks while attempting to get information from him. Gravely injured and fearing his death at the vampires’ hands, Lafayette offers to work for Eric:

    ERIC: You are aware there's a gaping hole in your leg?
    You're damaged goods.
    LAFAYETTE: Not if you turn me. I'd be good as ever.
    Look I'm already a person of poor moral character. So, I hit the ground running, and I damn near glamour people already. Gimme what ya'll got. Not only will I be a badass vampire, but I'd be your badass vampire.53

Playing the long game as immortals are apt to do, Eric ultimately releases a still-human Lafayette, as long as he agrees to sell the V that Eric supplies himself.

    At the beginning of the series, Lafayette displays little interest in lasting monogamous relationships. Other than a single one night stand, all of his early sexual activity on the show consists of acts of prostitution, sleeping with a state senator for money and with an uncommonly unattractive vampire in exchange for vampire blood, which he can then sell. However, he repeatedly refuses to be defined as a prostitute, insisting to Tara, “I’m an entrepreneur.”54 When one of the vampires who hold him captive attempts to pigeonhole him, Lafayette defines himself in more detail:

    PAM: I thought prostitutes were good at keeping secrets.

53 *True Blood*: “Keep This Party Going” (2009)
LAFAYETTE: Oh, don't get it twisted honeycone. I'm a survivor first, capitalist second and a whole bunch of shit after that. But a hooker dead last! So if I've got even a Jew at an Al Qaida pep rally's shot at getting my black ass up out of this motherfucker I'm taking it!\textsuperscript{55}

After his release by the vampires, he seems to lose all interest in prostitution, or at least it remains unmentioned.

In Season 3, Lafayette finally gains a lasting love interest in the form of Jesus Velasquez, his mother’s nurse. Jesus initially objects when he learns that Lafayette uses and deals drugs, but the two work through it and become a lasting couple anyway. Season 4 picks up a year after the end of Season 3, and finds them still together. Through the combination of this relationship and the fallout from his captivity by vampires, Lafayette becomes a somewhat softer and less challenging character. He is still a black gay drug dealer, but now he is monogamous, only deals a bit to support his ailing mother, and seems to have abandoned prostitution entirely.\textsuperscript{56} Although his criminal behaviors never entirely alienated him from the society around him, they have decreased as he has formed more attachments.

\textsuperscript{55} True Blood: “Keep This Party Going” (2009)

\textsuperscript{56} This change in Lafayette’s character represents a larger shift in True Blood toward less interesting characterization and more cookie cutter arcs. For example, Lafayette’s cousin Tara began the series as an energetic, smart-mouthed, cynical firebrand and has devolved into a histrionic emotional mess. Jason Stackhouse has gone from being cocksure and morally gray to more of a bumbling do-gooder, not to mention a cop. These unfortunate changes have coincided with an expansion of the supernatural mythos, as a series once focused on vampires, a psychic, and a shape shifter has come to regularly involve witches, werewolves, fairies, and cat people. Needless to say, critical and fan reaction to these changes has been less than entirely positive.
Omar Little, on *The Wire*, has as little interest in abandoning his criminal lifestyle as he does in forming attachments to the society around him. In a show that deals primarily with the limitations that people must accept in return for being part of larger institutions (the police department, criminal empires, city hall, labor unions, etc.), Omar is the only major character who has no allegiance, and therefore the only one free to make his own choices in life. Although he leads a devotedly criminal lifestyle, he actually maintains better relationships with the show’s police detective characters than with any of the gangsters. The cops certainly do not approve of his actions, but they would rather keep him as a source for information on the city’s drug rings than arrest him for robbing and killing people that they regard as worse than him. Similarly, Omar does not see the cops as his friends, but as a tool that he can use against his enemies.

Omar’s strange alliance with the police, in the aftermath of his boyfriend Brandon’s death, leads him as far as testifying in court against a member of the gang that killed Brandon, who is on trial for the murder of a witness in a previous case. Omar does not witness this crime, but he knows, as do the cops, that the defendant is guilty, so he lies without hesitation. Interestingly, this false testimony, which results in conviction, also leads to one of the most powerful moments of honesty in the series, when Omar calls out defensive attorney Maurice Levy for being at least as culpable as Omar is for his role in the drug trade:

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57 Another favorite *Wire* character, Bubbles the junkie, could also be defined as unaligned, since he is neither a cop nor a member of a criminal gang. However, for most of the series, Bubbles’ primary income stream is informing for the police (something that Omar only does when it serves his own purposes), so he seems to have picked a side of the fence. Furthermore, drug addiction could be defined as its own sort of institution, and it certainly hobbles Bubbles’ life and choices. Even when he turns things around, he is still defined by his history of addiction.
LEVY: So, you rob drug dealers. This is what you do.

OMAR: Yes sir.

LEVY: You walk the streets of Baltimore with a gun, taking what you want when you want it, willing to use violence when your demands aren’t met. This is who you are.

Omar nods.

LEVY: Why should we believe your testimony? Why should we believe anything you say?

OMAR: That’s up to y’all, really.

LEVY: You say you aren’t here testifying because of any deal you made with police.

OMAR: True that.

LEVY: That you’re here because you want to tell the truth about what happened to Mr. Gant in that housing project parking lot.

OMAR: Yep.

LEVY: When in fact you’re exactly the kind of person who would, if you felt you needed to, shoot a man down on a housing project parking lot and then lie to the police about it, would you not?

OMAR: Look, I never put my gun on no citizen.
LEVY: You are amoral, are you not? You’re feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You’re stealing from those who are likewise stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off the culture of drugs…

OMAR: Just like you, man.

LEVY: —excuse me?

OMAR: I got the shotgun; you got the brief case. It’s all in the game though, right?58

In a narrative filled with characters who lie and misrepresent themselves constantly, regardless of where they stand with regard to the law, Omar may not be honest, but he is authentic. As this scene reveals, he not only refuses to hide who he is, he refuses to go along with the willful ignorance that enables the splitting of society into good and bad on the basis of racial and class lines.

This bit of dialogue also reveals an important aspect of Omar’s character, through his line, “I never put my gun on no citizen.” “Citizen” here refers to someone who has no part in criminal activity. It is extremely important to him that, however violent his actions may be, they never result in the death of someone who did not choose a violent lifestyle—someone, that is, who is not “in the game.” This rule that Omar has set for himself is central to other characters’ understanding of him, particularly the cops who would deal with him far more harshly if he displayed the same disregard for innocent

lives as most of the violent criminals they deal with, including the drug dealers who
Omar so gleefully victimizes.

Detective Bunk Moreland, a cop who went to high school with Omar, begins to
rethink Omar’s role in things while investigating the death of Tosha, a female member of
Omar’s gang. After speaking with the dead girl’s family, he encounters a group of kids
fighting over who gets to be Omar in their game of pretend. Later, Omar implies to Bunk
that Tosha’s death must be meaningless to the cops, since she was a criminal, which
makes the detective angry:

OMAR: Shoot, the way y'all looking at things, ain't no
victim to even speak on.

BUNK: Bullshit, boy. No victim? I just came from Tosha's
people, remember? All this death, you don't think it ripples
out? You don't even know what the fuck I'm talking about.
I was a few years ahead of you at Edmondson, but I know
you remember the neighborhood, how it was. We had some
bad boys, for real. Wasn't about guns so much as knowing
what to do with your hands. Those boys could really rack.
My father had me on the straight, but like any young man, I
wanted to be hard too, so I'd turn up at all the house parties
where the tough boys hung. Shit, they knew I wasn't one of
them. Them hard cases would come up to me and say, “Go
home, schoolboy, you don't belong here.” Didn't realize at
the time what they were doing for me. As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody, no victim, who didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies, and predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell.  

In spite of the show’s tendency to portray Omar as a Robin Hood-esque antihero, Bunk reminds viewers that even a criminal who only attacks other criminals still contributes to the cycle of violence that ravages the poor black neighborhoods of Baltimore.

Even after this exchange, Omar maintains his complex relationship with the police. There is no trust between them, but there is an acknowledgment that they frequently share the same enemies. Those enemies, the drug gangs, lack even that degree of tolerance for Omar. In their worldview, anyone who attacks or steals from them must die or their own reputations are damaged. Thus, both of the gangs that figure prominently in the series, Avon Barksdale’s and Marlo Stanfield’s, waste untold time and resources trying to have Omar executed. Ultimately neither is successful, and Omar is shot down by one of the kids who Bunk had seen pretending to be him years earlier, thus embodying the downward spiral of violence that the detective described.

Outside of his boyfriends, who were discussed in Chapter 2, the only person who really seems to love and trust Omar is his grandmother, who he accompanies to church.

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60 *The Wire*: “Clarifications” (2008)
once a month. After Avon Barksdale’s men attempt to kill him, injuring his grandmother and also violating a tradition that no violence is to be done during church time, Omar gets upset and reveals that his grandmother is also the person with whom he has been least honest with about how he makes his living:

OMAR: I damn near got that woman killed, yo. Y'all should've seen me in Sinai Hospital while they stitching her up, lying about why somebody wanna shoot me down the street. That woman think I work in a cafeteria.

KIMMY: Cafeteria?

OMAR: At the airport, yeah.

KIMMY: The airport? Why the airport?

OMAR: 'Cause I know she ain't gonna never go down there to go dining, that's why! Hey, yo, Kimmy, this ain't funny, yo! That woman raised me! And for as long as I been grown, once a month I been with her on a church Sunday, telling myself ain't no need to worry, 'cause ain't nobody in this city that lowdown to disrespect a Sunday morning!\(^1\)

Omar’s rage stems not only from the attack on his grandmother, but from the reminder that most criminals are not as tightly bound by ethical codes of behavior as he.

The only other elder who figures prominently in Omar’s life is a blind bar owner named Butchie, who serves as an advisor and confidant. Butchie is the only person who both has a stable address and knows how to get in touch with Omar as needed. This is helpful when people need to talk to Omar, but naturally it leads to Butchie’s downfall, when two vicious members of Marlo Stanfield’s gang torture and murder him to bring Omar out of hiding. Predictably, Omar abandons his idyllic retirement in Puerto Rico and returns to Baltimore with revenge on his mind, which leads to his own death.

Other than his love interest, the only other people Omar works with on more than an incidental basis are the aforementioned Kimmy and Tosha, a pair of skilled lesbian stick up artists who he finds robbing one of his own targets and takes under his wing. Along with Omar and his boyfriend Dante, they form an all-queer team of bandits, which stays whole until Dante accidentally kills Tosha during a shoot-out. When Kimmy reacts to her girlfriend’s death by recklessly abandoning cover to shoot at their opponents, Omar saves her life by pulling her to safety. Kimmy then stays with Omar for another year, before vowing to retire from thievery after a particularly lucrative heist.

In the context of *The Wire*, Omar’s relative lack of allies may be another factor that works to his advantage. The cops, gang members, and other characters trade their total freedom of choice for the support of the organizations behind them. For some of the central characters, this is the major conflict of their arc within the narrative. Jimmy McNulty, for example, is a brilliant detective, but always gets in trouble because he

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62 Butchie is also possibly Omar’s relative: fan sources online, as well as Wikipedia.org, list Butchie as Omar’s uncle, but I have yet to find direct evidence within the series that they are related.


doesn’t follow orders. Stringer Bell, consigliere to druglord Avon Barksdale, has a brain for legitimate business, but is constantly pressured to do things the way they are done on the streets. While these men are squandering their full potential under the thumbs of the institutions to which they belong, Omar is making his own choices, which always play to his particular talents. Being unaffiliated, he has the freedom to succeed where others are held back.

While the success he finds does not preclude him from remaining a loner, it does gain him a sort of celebrity on the streets of Baltimore. In addition to the children who pretend to be him, the lookouts for street dealers call out, “Omar comin’!” when he approaches. He is also particularly popular among junkies, who view him as a Robin Hood figure for his habit of giving away some of the drugs he steals, which keeps them from revealing his location to his enemies in exchange for drugs or money.

Of the three characters under discussion here, Omar is the only one with a measure of celebrity within his fictional world, and also the only one with a sizable fan following among viewers. Omar’s face appears on tee shirts and posters, and his catch phrases—“Oh, indeed,” and “It’s all in the game,”—are quoted frequently. Lafayette certainly has devotees among True Blood fans, but nothing compared to Omar’s following. Keith Charles, meanwhile, is nobody’s favorite Six Feet Under character.

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65 The Wire: “Game Day” (2002)
66 This fandom has become increasingly visible to me as I work on this paper. If I tell people, “My thesis is about gay black men in HBO serial dramas,” they nod politely, but if I say, “My thesis is mostly about Omar from The Wire,” they’re more likely to say, “Oh, awesome,” and want to discuss their favorite Omar moments. A fellow MA candidate even suggested facetiously that I bring Honey Nut Cheerios (Omar’s favorite food) to my defense. Leaving aside the distinction between fandom and scholarship, the volume of widespread enthusiasm for the character is a powerful force.
Keith’s relative lack of fans relates directly to the distinction I want to draw between him and the other two. Certainly, it surprises nobody that television fans frequently find criminals more interesting than cops, but there is more to it than that. When Keith angers other characters on Six Feet Under, as well as its fans, it is because he is invested in laws and rules. Lafayette and especially Omar appeal to people precisely because of their disregard for those same laws and rules. Even Keith’s character flaws (and he has many) come from his dedication to upholding what he views as right, as well as his conformance to conventional masculinity. Omar and Lafayette, on the other hand, represent a new sort of queer character, freed from any concerns about positivity and therefore able to occupy the moral shades of gray in which HBO specializes.
CHAPTER 4: HOMONORMATIVITY AND QUEER ASSEMBLAGE

Even when Keith Charles is not a likable character,\(^{67}\) there is always a sense in which he is a safe character. His out and proud status provides a counterpoint to David Fisher’s struggle to exit the closet, which not only serves a story function but enables *Six Feet Under* to steer clear of the tired “all gay men are conflicted and ashamed” trope that would otherwise be unavoidable with such a storyline. His conventional masculinity similarly deflects charges of stereotyping, which the slightly effeminate David would also be open to were he the only central gay character on the show. Keith’s law and order personality and LAPD job illustrate the fact that gay men are just as capable as straight men of being upstanding members of mainstream society. His ease with masculinity and homosexuality, as well as his attractiveness, create a lens through which viewers can look positively at the more problematic David. As Sally Munt explains:

Keith's large, sculpted body affords the viewer with an uncomplicated erotic spectacle, but Keith's desirability is enhanced by his almost continuous self-ease. He is the “gay icon” of *Six Feet Under*, and the viewer his voyeur. But his main function in the series is to be the lover-of-David,

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\(^{67}\) To be fair, *Six Feet Under* as a series never seems particularly interested in likable characters. Of the principles, Nate Fisher is a selfish narcissist, David Fisher is an uptight emotional mess, Claire Fisher is a petulant child, Ruth Fisher is impulsive and judgmental, and Brenda Chenowith is a pretentious, amoral liar. Keith, as we’ve discussed, is rigid and quick to anger. The creation of a successful narrative series in which the viewer invests emotionally without ever necessarily liking anyone might be the subject for a separate in-depth analysis.
rather than a character in and for himself, so not only do we look at Keith, we look through Keith, to David.\textsuperscript{68}

Munt argues that the men of color on \textit{Six Feet Under} represent an unproblematized masculinity that contrasts with the white leads, David and his straight brother Nate, who display a “problematically insecure, but dissimilar, masculinity.”\textsuperscript{69} I cannot entirely agree, as Keith’s masculinity is frequently problematized through his anger issues and his problems with both his father and his adopted sons.\textsuperscript{70} However, Munt does an excellent job of exploring the contrast between his ease with himself and David’s shame and anxiety.

Keith fully inhabits the space to operate as a gay person in the world. Hence, in the economy of repression, Keith is coded as physically and psychically “freer” than David, his body movement is more fluid and graceful, his progress through social space more assured.\textsuperscript{71}

Even here, I would add the caveat that while Keith is by far more assured in straight and masculine social spaces, he is uncomfortable with David’s femme white friends from the Gay Men’s Chorus. While he has no problem being gay in public, he seems to have a hard time when gay spaces get “too gay.”

\textsuperscript{68} Munt 274.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 266
\textsuperscript{70} Munt also argues for the straight Puerto Rican character Rico Diaz as a foil for Nate’s troubled masculinity. This makes even less sense, as the series eventually reveals Rico to have the same problems with infidelity and obsession that afflict Nate. Although Munt’s essay was published after the series ended, it only seems to engage with the early seasons.
\textsuperscript{71} Munt 269
As I touched on in Chapter 2, Keith is a perfect example of a homonormative figure—a gay man whose life and actions reaffirm mainstream values rather than challenging them. He only wants to marry his boyfriend, have kids, and live a happy, assimilated life. It is difficult to imagine him using the word “queer” unironically, let alone aligning himself with radical queers who are interested in upending social and economic norms. While he is not white (as the homonormative archetype would ideally be), there is virtually nothing in his dialect, manner of dress, or attitude toward authority (the LAPD, for example) that could be described as culturally black. His lily-white boyfriend/husband only adds to this sense of assimilation. Keith is a character that straight white audiences, still getting used to gay characters on television, are unlikely to find threatening. He’s a perfectly normal guy, after all, and he only wants what “everyone” wants.

Lisa Duggan describes the problem with the politics of homonormativity, as embodied by conservative gay writer Andrew Sullivan, succinctly:

There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or of an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics. Instead we have been administered a kind of political sedative—we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever.72

72 Duggan 189
This assimilationist attitude does more than create a rift within the gay/queer community.\textsuperscript{73} In addition, it allows straight people to reassure themselves that they and the culture at large are becoming ever more “pro-gay,” without any need to engage with radical queer ideas and anti-assimilationist individuals. While Keith and David, and more recent gay TV couples like Cam and Mitchell of \textit{Modern Family}, are accepted in straight America’s living rooms, queer socialists, non-passing trans folks, homeless gay youth, and lesbian Muslims remain out in the street.

Jasbir Puar, in her groundbreaking book \textit{Terrorist Assemblages}, extends this argument further, putting forward the idea that Muslims and other cultural outsiders are now queered in the eyes of the culture to a degree that assimilationist gays no longer are. She therefore looks to redefine queerness “as not an identity nor an anti-identity, but an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent.”\textsuperscript{74} Like other queer theorists before her, she works to free the concept of queerness from its immediate association with what any given subject may do in the bedroom. Instead, queer becomes an affect which marks those so labeled as outside society’s norms of acceptability. By this standard, no matter how proudly gay he might be, there is nothing queer about Keith Charles.

Where does this leave my other two subjects, \textit{True Blood’s} Lafayette Reynolds and \textit{The Wire’s} Omar Little? As previous chapters discussed at length, Omar and Lafayette are queer in ways that Keith is not. Omar, after all, is a complete outsider from both the law-abiding and criminal societies around him. He has no place in the larger gay

\textsuperscript{73} There are always plenty of those, and the community endures.

community and is even more unacceptable in the straight world. He could even be called a revolutionary if, as Marlon Riggs said, “Black men loving black men is THE revolutionary act.”\textsuperscript{75} This last is something that, it should be mentioned, separates Omar from both Keith and Lafayette—Omar only dates and sleeps with other black men.

Despite his white sex partners and Latino boyfriend, Lafayette is also queer by any definition. His presentation is unabashedly effeminate in both dress and manner. His relatively public status as the local drug dealer makes him that much more of an outsider than he otherwise would be as an openly gay man. Other factors, such as his family’s very public tendency toward psychological imbalance and even his emerging magical abilities push him further into queer territory. Perhaps most important is his complete lack of interest in assimilation. Unlike Omar, Lafayette lives in a community that accepts him (more or less) as a black gay man, and even offers him legal employment. Were he willing to suppress his flamboyant affectations and abandon his criminal schemes, he could become just as much a part of the mainstream as Keith Charles.\textsuperscript{76} Instead, he chooses to be fully himself, even if that leaves him alienated from much of society.

In my attempt to draw lines between and around these characters, however, I am still not engaging with the full thrust of Puar’s argument. I said that Omar and Lafayette were queer while Keith is not, but since Puar frames queerness as a situational assemblage instead of an ongoing identity, this is not necessarily always the case. For example, when Keith and David are called “fucking fags” by a stranger in a parking lot,

\textsuperscript{75} *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989)

\textsuperscript{76} Within his cultural context, that is. Obviously, the life of a gay black man in a small Louisiana town is never going to look like that of a similar man in Los Angeles, but the point that he could be fully assimilated and chooses not to be still stands.
they are both queered in that moment—framed as sexual outsiders to be scorned. However, Keith draws on his position as an LAPD officer to intimidate the bigot into submission:

KEITH: The next time you call someone a fuckin' fag, you make sure that fag's not an LA police officer... You got that?

[Shoves badge into homophobe's face]

KEITH: Understand me?

HOMOPHOBE: [whimpering] Yeah.

KEITH: Now you got my badge, file a complaint, I dare you. Now get your punk ass outta here, fuckin' bitch.  

While an interracial gay couple being called faggots certainly seems queer, an off-duty cop using his badge and his physical formidability to terrify someone does not read as queer at all. His use of homophobic language—“punk ass,” “bitch”—only makes the sudden shift more dramatic. This kind of complication inevitably arises from the temporality that Puar adds to our understanding of queerness—one can literally be queer one second and not at all the next.

Querness as an assemblage moves away from excavation work, deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects, and, instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of

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77 *Six Feet Under*: “Familia” (2001)
which queerness importantly is and does), it underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations.\textsuperscript{78}

In discussing queerness as an assemblage, Puar attempts to move away from the discussion of intersectionalism, which has previously dominated much queer and feminist analysis.

As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space.\textsuperscript{79}

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter: For all that I have described the characters of Omar Little and Lafayette Reynolds as gay black men (which of course they are), they

\textsuperscript{78} Puar 205
\textsuperscript{79} Puar 212
cannot be said to exist at the intersection of three discrete roads labeled “Gay,” “Black,” and “Man.” Even if you add more roads to this imaginary intersection—“Criminal,” “Poor,” etc.—it will never become a real description of either character or his particular queerness. Thanks to the nuance with which they are written, these characters embody the complexity of queerness-as-assemblage. I can list all the ways in which they are queer (and clearly at this point, I have), but ultimately they are queer not because of their membership in this or that group, not because of who they have sex with, but because of the totality of who they are and how they fit (or fail to fit) in the society around them at any given moment.

In contrast, Keith Charles lacks this complexity of identity. He seems to have been written with an intersectional model in mind. Keith is a gay man and a black man, but he never grapples with what it means to be a gay black man. Other than his own family, he never interacts with the black community, and the closest he gets to acknowledging the difficulty of being a black man in the gay community is a brief exchange with David’s sister Claire, in which he explains how David is different from his previous partners:

KEITH: Most guys I meet, they kinda just want me to be one thing.

CLAIRE: What? Like, big black sex cop? ‘Sorry I was speeding, officer, I guess you'll have to punish me now?’

KEITH: Yeah, and I don't want to be that. Rent a video.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} Or with which they were originally written in Lafayette’s case. See footnote \#25
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Six Feet Under}: “The Foot” (2001)
Other than these few lines, he avoids the issue entirely. Even his difficulty in meshing with David’s choral friends is never presented as a difference in race, but as a difference in masculinity. Keith moves through the world in his homonormative manner, as a “normal man” who just wants to live his life without his race or sexuality getting in the way, and he largely gets his wish. Conventionally, his gay identity would be enough to mark him as queer, but Puar moves to take identity out of the equation:

There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melting, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics—by control theorists. The assemblage, as a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces.82

Omar Little, by contrast, becomes queer not so much by sleeping with men, but by existing in opposition to society due to his sleeping with men, his blackness, his poor upbringing, his scarred thuggish appearance, his habit of robbing drug dealers, and other factors of which the viewer may never be made explicitly aware. In the courtroom scene

82 Puar 211
quoted in Chapter 3, Omar is queered by his insistence on living by his own rules rather than those handed down by society, as well as his related disregard for courtroom decorum and his directness in dressing down the attorney questioning him. Other modes of queerness related to his appearance and demeanor may also be in play, and indeed the impossibility of cataloging them all exactly is an element of the kind of queerness that Puar constructs. Regardless of their reasons and their overall opinion of him, everyone in that courtroom views Omar as other—as fundamentally different from everyone who surrounds him—as queer. Omar himself seems always aware of this, and finds ways to use it to his advantage.

Lafayette Reynolds exists in a similar space, particularly in the first season of *True Blood*, before his edge was softened. In keeping with his endlessly adaptable survivor’s nature, how he deals with others in balance to their modes of dealing with him. When rednecks are aggressive towards him, he is aggressive back without ever abandoning his flamboyant persona. When the straight waitresses make fun of him, he makes fun of them back. When people are attracted to him, he plays off his attractiveness. Importantly, even as he adapts to each interaction, he never does so by downplaying or apologizing for his own queer nature. He knows he will never be acceptable to most of straight, white Southern society, and he has found ways to work around that. As Lafayette says, “It ain't possible to live unless you crossin' somebody's line.”

Displacing queerness as an identity or modality that is visibly, audibly, legibly, or tangibly evident—the seemingly queer body in a “cultural freeze-frame” of

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sorts—assemblages allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivity’s, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities. Intersectionality privileges naming, visuality, epistemology, representation, and meaning, while assemblage underscores feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information.\textsuperscript{84}

Puar’s assemblage model of queerness is as mercurial as Omar, as adaptable as Lafayette. It cannot be pinned down or divided up. It resists the kind of systematic categorization of elements reflected in the portrayal of Keith Charles—in both his own worldview and his construction as a fictional character. In contrast, Lafayette and Omar—particularly Omar, whose character is never watered down over the run of \textit{The Wire}—encapsulate this new model of queerness and invite us into a future in which gay characters of color, and other characters belonging to multiple oppressed or underrepresented groups, are fully formed people with identities that cannot be divided into a series of checked boxes on a form.

\textsuperscript{84} Puar 25
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

If *The Wire* and *True Blood* are harbingers for a new sort of representation, as I have argued that they are, we are left with a new question—why? Why these shows, and why now? The answer can be found, in part, by looking at the network that airs them, as well as *Six Feet Under*. Sally Munt explains:

> The US television channel Home Box Office (HBO) has produced a new kind of critical drama program, recognized by its high quality production, innovative scriptwriting, original complex structure and plot, explicit sex and violence, a liberal/democratic ideological tendency, clever narrative and characterization, and fairly serious political contemporary themes. Typical HBO products are aimed at adult entertainment audiences on cable or satellite television. These televisual units are coded as writerly texts, programs that require competent readers versed in a range of genres and institutional forms.\(^5\)

Beginning in the late 1990’s with the shows *Oz* and *The Sopranos*, HBO has worked hard to brand itself as a producer of cutting edge television. The network’s slogan since 1995 has been, “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” This rhetoric is frequently used to flatter HBO’s subscribers. By choosing to pay for HBO, the network tells them, they have revealed themselves to have refined tastes that cannot be satisfied by mere TV. As Toby Miller says, HBO’s slogan could just as easily be, “You’re Not a Viewer. You’re a

\(^5\) Munt 263
To maintain this brand identity, HBO is obligated to keep its programming at the cutting edge of media culture. Lacking advertisers with cultural concerns of their own, and avoiding FCC content regulations, HBO has no trouble offering content that simply cannot be found on more conventional networks.

If traditional values coalition groups evoke fears about the exceptional vulnerability of certain television viewers to moral corruption, then HBO draws into this public debate another social grouping not so easily corruptible because, educated and sophisticated, they want something, “distinctive, high-quality [and] edgy,” something challenging, different from the usual television fare, and are prepared to pay for it.

The audience that HBO has cultivated is willing to fight for progressive, groundbreaking content. In fact, if we believe the network’s marketing, it is why they subscribe. They have been told they are an elite, cultured group, and as such have no patience for the same watered-down version of reality that free television offers.

Whatever the rest of television is doing, HBO is obligated to stay ahead of it. This impulse leads to the unique genre-blending of Six Feet Under, the long form realism of The Wire, and the self-consciously trashy sexual allegory of True Blood.

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Similarly, as gay and lesbian characters have become commonplace across the televisual landscape since the 1990’s, simply including a same-sex-oriented character in any given series no longer has seems edgy at all—if the cast is big enough, LGBT inclusiveness is practically a requirement. However, most shows limit their inclusiveness to the homonormative types that Lisa Duggan and Jasbir Puar discuss. That is, gay characters are generally acceptable on primetime television as long as they are just like everyone else. Conservative groups may still protest, but the tide has largely turned against the unapologetically homophobic.

Thus it falls to HBO, thanks to the niche it has deliberately created for itself, to introduce queer characters who do not fit into this small box of mainstream acceptability. This is not to say by any means that characters like Omar and Lafayette are nothing more than crass tools for HBO’s marketers. The Wire creator David Simon is passionately committed to a complex, realistic, and often troubling portrait of life in Baltimore, and claims that he based Omar on several actual stick-up men.89 True Blood creator Alan Ball, himself a gay man, elevated Lafayette, who is killed at the end of Charlaine Harris’s first novel, into an enduring and memorable supporting character after being impressed with Nelsan Ellis’s performance in the role.90 HBO’s unique place in the cultural landscape provides these creators with the opportunity to tell the stories they want to tell, and, in concert with talented actors like Nelsan Ellis and Michael K. Williams, to build characters that look like nobody else on television.

I have discussed Omar Little and Lafayette Reynolds as harbingers of the future, and I genuinely believe that they are. However, I certainly do not mean to imply that they represent a sea change. The forces of homonormativity are strong, and even they are overshadowed by the culture at large, which is still extremely heteronormative and tends to regard any positive depictions of alternative sexuality as gifts for which all queer people should be endlessly grateful. Still, there is reason for hope. Ten years ago, the intimate portrayal of Keith Charles and David Fisher’s relationship on television seemed groundbreaking, and now, as I have discussed at length, it looks quite safe and conventional compared to what has come after. In our current media environment, it is hard to imagine a time when Omar Little might seem safe and conventional, but perhaps what we are evolving toward instead is a time in which “safe and conventional” is simply not a concern in media representation. As Omar says to his public, “That’s up to y’all, really.”

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91 And even that leaves aside the elements of our society (still quite strong even as they pass out of favor) that view any deviation from conventionally gendered heterosexuality as something to be feared and hated.
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