Television today is inundated with reality programs, and formulaic sitcoms and dramas with very rare exception, and these shows are not only mechanical in their form and story development but in their depictions of social norms and cultural practices. This practice is particularly noticeable when applied to representations of homosexuality on screen, or more precisely the enforcement of heteronormative practices as a means of marginalizing homosexual relationships as somehow deviant or abnormal. This is not to say that the majority of television programs are overtly anti-homosexual, merely that heterosexual relationships are normalized and homosexual relationships are either absent or most often portrayed as sexually driven. Heteronormativity, obviously present in media depictions, is a reflection of a larger cultural mindset that places homosexuality as unnatural or undesirable.

Heteronormative cultures, like those of the Western world display and impose unseen social norms and customs upon institutions and individuals. These norms assume dimorphic sexual differences, biological essentialism which establishes clear and distinct sexual functions for both men and women, and mimetic gender and sex relationships that attach psychological traits to each gender. This structural framework is predominant in popular culture, which serve as visual support systems that reinforce heteronormative assumptions. Although there are programs on television that address homosexuality, very few subvert heteronormativity in the manner that one particular series, HBO’s *The Wire*, achieves.

In addition to challenging general assumptions about homosexuality, the series adds the element of racially specific stereotypes about homosexuality and traditional masculine and feminine roles. *The Wire*, in its portrayals of sexual diversity undercuts sexual expectations and shows that what can be considered sexual normalcy within a relationship is present despite sexual orientation. The characters of Omar, Kima, and Lieutenant Rawls all fall under a category of sexually deviant as dictated by the heterosexually normalized spectator, and yet the series is able to present these characters as more than simply a stereotype.

In an HBO special entitled *The Wire: Odyssey* Wendell Pierce, who plays Bunk Moreland on *The Wire* commented that all of his male friends, upon first seeing Omar Little exclaimed: I want to be just like Omar… until they found out he was a homosexual. Omar is presented as a gangster Robin Hood figure; he robs all of the major drug dealers on the show and distributes cocaine and heroin vials to the needy in exchange for amnesty and silence as to his whereabouts. He is fierce, ruthless, and incredibly masculine, and yet he maintains loving, monogamous relationships with three separate men throughout the series. Omar is interesting on a theoretical level because he challenges the traditional gender expectations for black men, expectations developed in images like the black oversexualized and sexually threatening ‘buck’ figure, through his stable relationships. On another level he complicates ideas of masculinity because he is ultimately pursuing relationships with men. Phillip Brian Harper discusses the place of the black male homosexual in saying that:
While the black gay man seems recently to have become a key figure of crisis that, at present, threaten the very foundations of institutionalized culture in the United States, this should not be taken to mean that his representations have not functioned to buttress (often specifically by challenging) normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identity since at least the Black Power era of the late 1960s.²

Omar is a rare example of a character that is able to reconcile these issues of masculinity and homosexuality on screen; he is groundbreaking in presenting the idea that black men can be gay, and masculine, and masculine without being purely sexually driven. That the two are not polar opposites is also manifested in the depiction of Reynaldo, Omar’s lover in Seasons 4 and 5, as he is depicted as equally masculine. One of the greatest strengths of Omar is the fact that he is universally feared by the neighborhoods of West Baltimore. Everyone knows him by name, and even though he theoretically could have been killed much earlier in the series, he maintains this image of immortality because he is talented at what he does. One of the most interesting images of Omar is towards the beginning of Season 4, where the audience watches as Omar leaves his house in turquoise silk pajama pants with a matching robe to walk to the corner store without a gun, and all of the boys in the neighborhood yell ‘it’s Omar’ and ‘Omar comin’ as they run away in fear.³

The idea that anyone would be afraid of a man in turquoise silk pyjamas is slightly comical, but is also telling in the sense that traditional expectations of masculinity are not necessarily dictated by sexual orientation. Patricia Hill Collins points to Omar as doubly significant because he is ‘dark-skinned, violent, and in no way appears to be the stereotypical ‘sissy.’ Moreover, the gay Black male relationship is between two working-class Black men, thus challenging the association of gay sexuality with Whiteness and/or with middle-class men.⁴ In this excerpt, she is referring to the relationship between Omar and Brandon, his boyfriend from Season 1 who is brutally murdered because of his association with Omar and the robbery of one of Avon Barksdale’s stash houses. She also points to the ways in which Omar subverts assumptions about gay populations outside of the black community; Phillip Harper, in his discussion of sexual politics confirms that ‘the ‘gay’ community… has been popularly conceived as white, wealthy, and male’,⁵ and the character of Omar serves to debunk two of those conceptions.

The audience is also able to see Omar as loving, while still maintaining sexual machismo; he is one of the few male characters to be seen entirely naked, yet he is not simply a body. Omar also serves as a counterpoint to the character of Major Williams Rawls, a white police officer who is not openly gay within his community. The only clue as to his true sexual preference is made in passing when the audience witnesses him in a gay bar while another character looks for Omar in Season 3. Rawls’ homosexuality is not particularly important to the trajectory of the show, but it is another way The Wire opposes stereotypical assumptions for homosexuality in that Rawls is no more traditionally feminine than Omar.

The character of Shakima ‘Kima’ Greggs is yet another subversion of sexual expectations for women. It is not necessarily the fact that she is a lesbian that makes The Wire’s depiction of Kima unique, rather the depiction of her home life and
relationships with women. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that: ‘On The Wire, the committed love relationship of the Black lesbian couple is treated as no different than any other relationship on the series. This ordinary treatment thus provides a mass media depiction of middle-class Black women that remains highly unusual.’

What Collins is referring to is the relationship between Kima and Cheryl; like other couples on the show they go through turmoil over the dangers of Kima’s job, Kima’s desire to quit law school, and the prospects of having a child together. They are pictured engaging in sexual activity as well as fighting; Kima seems no different that any of the male officers in her willingness to share problems about her ‘woman,’ and even goes so far as to take advice from McNulty on how to cheat on Cheryl when their problems become overwhelming. Like any other couple on the show, or any show for that matter, their relationship has ups and downs, yet audiences do not often see this type of relationship between two women, let alone two minority women.

This depiction of lesbianism is not presented as for the voyeur to watch the deviant, rather for the audience to watch a relationship unfold. Besides Cheryl, the only other significant lesbian character is Snoop, but her sexuality is only referenced once and she is mostly seen as entirely androgynous. Whereas Kima and Cheryl maintain certain traditional standards of femininity in dress and attitude, Snoop’s character does not dictate sexual expectations, instead she seems to represent a rare inclusion of the female into the world of the corner.

The characters on The Wire demonstrate a departure from heteronormative assumptions in television complicated by race. The prospect of seeing homosexual minority couples has remained largely untouched by major media outlets and it is therefore worth applauding. While the series may lack a strong female presence to challenge traditional heterosexual gender roles, the work that it has done involving homosexual partnerships serves as one of the sole examples of normalized homosexuality.

Notes

5. Harper, 392
6. Collins, 146

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