

The Wire

Urban Decay and American Television

edited by
Tiffany Potter
and
C. W. Marshall



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two networks—represented by Stringer’s Co-Op and Vondas’s global syndicate—most responsible for the corporatization of Baltimore’s drug trade. Through this final repetition of the inherent conflicts between corporate economies and the maintenance of traditional modes of social organization, which structure much of the five-season arc of *The Wire*, the show’s creators emphasize the significance of the familial and communal traditions that Avon, Sobotka, and now Slim represent as sources of potential resistance to the divisive practices of contemporary capitalism.

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Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the Production of Gender

Courtney D. Marshall

In *Ain’t I A Woman?*, bell hooks writes, “One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute” (52). She argues that the sexual logic which buttressed chattel slavery lives on in popular culture images and public policy. HBO’s *The Wire* challenges hooks’s cataloging of black female stereotypes on two grounds; it allows for women’s participation in crimes other than prostitution, and it invites us to see “fallen” women as complicated characters. On *The Wire*, black women are murderers, thieves, and drug dealers; they are also mothers, sisters, and girlfriends. By setting up black women vis-à-vis black men, the show examines gender variability within criminal networks. However, where hooks would see these depictions as detrimental to black women, I contend that these characters have a lot to teach us about black women’s economic and organizational lives. *The Wire* demonstrates the central importance of the practices and discourses of crime, law, order, and policing to the formation of black female power and identity.

This chapter argues that rather than depicting mothers as failures because they are unable to keep their male relatives from committing crimes, *The Wire* challenges the very language on which we deem mothers successful. By looking at three women in the Barksdale empire, Donette, Brianna Barksdale, and De'Londa Brice, I will argue that the show invests mothers with the job of teaching civic values, even if those values are criminalized.¹ As a result, crime produces gender within the Barksdale empire.² Capitalism imposes a sexual division of labor, and women are obliged to fulfill the mother role in order to ensure the system a steady supply of labor. The show sets up a striking distinction between the close-knit Barksdale organization with the new generation of drug sellers in Marlo's crew.³

Insights into the gendered workings of *The Wire* are encouraged by new insights in black feminist criminology. These innovations lead to a more nuanced way of engaging representations of black female criminals. Jody Miller, for example, looks at the ways poverty, crime, and sexual violence are mutually constitutive in the lives of young black girls living in St. Louis. She conducts extensive interviews with young black boys and girls in order to "investigate how the structural inequalities that create extreme—and racialized—urban poverty facilitate . . . social contexts that heighten and shape the tremendous gender-based violence faced by urban African-American girls" (3). She situates her project within a tradition of feminist criminology which has significantly shaped the ways we theorize women's participation in the criminal justice system, both as victims and offenders. She examines victimization as a precursor to offending, and emphasizes the "contemporaneous nature of victimization and offending by examining the impact of gender inequality on street and offender networks" (3). Miller implores us to expand our scope when it comes to female offending, looking at the ways that a society stripped of social services for women then criminalizes these very women when they participate in underground economies and criminal activity in order to care for themselves and their families. At the same time, we must work toward a more textured analysis of how patriarchy structures the economies in which they seek alternatives.

This new vision of female crime must come along with a more critical consumption of popular culture images of black female criminals.

In depicting black female criminals, *The Wire* walks a fine line between making them stereotypical and making them victims, and as viewers we also walk a line between glorifying and rejecting representations of criminal behavior. Patricia Hill Collins identifies four overarching stereotypes of black women: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the whore. She writes that "each image transmits clear messages about the proper links among female sexuality, fertility, and black women's roles in the political economy" (78). While the mammy is asexual and devoted to upholding white societal values, the other three stereotypes are built upon hypersexuality, and to varying degrees, disordered gender roles. Collins writes that "the matriarch represents the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as black patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized" (78). This particular stereotype of black womanhood serves a racist social order by implying that black communities, in their unwillingness to promote ostensibly proper gender and family relations, are thereby unfit for inclusion in the larger body politic. Margaret M. Russell argues that "Hollywood movies and television have served as the primary medium for the replication and reinforcement of stereotypes" drawing a critical genealogy which stretches from Sapphire of *Amos 'n' Andy* (adapted for television 1951–53) to contemporary television shows. As a result, black motherhood is a highly contested term in black cultural studies. Russell goes on to suggest that the black female viewer is caught in an ethical bond with a number of responses open to her: "stoic detachment, awkward ambivalence, derisive laughter, deep embarrassment, stunning rage" all buttressed by a need to distance oneself from the "detestable image on the screen" (137). This range of responses is interesting for what it shows about the limited ways we are asked to evaluate these images. Like Collins and hooks, Russell can find no oppositional space within depictions of female criminals and no virtue in the depiction of female vice. I'm not interested in vilifying or recuperating these characters, but critical reluctance to engage them is a problem, particularly given our voracious consumption of these images. While we can condemn these images of complicit mothers, a more useful approach would be to take their choices seriously and analyze why these fictional women seek refuge in crime for their families and what the criminal network offers them.

Donette, Brianna, and the Barksdale Code

While the first seasons center on the relationship between Avon Barksdale and Russell "Stringer" Bell, the two male heads of the Barksdale enterprise, the women of the Barksdale family play significant roles in its complicated sex-gender system. Donette is the girlfriend of D'Angelo Barksdale, a drug dealer and Avon's nephew. We first see her when D'Angelo brings her and their son to a neighborhood party organized by Avon. Stringer asks her to "C'mon, give us a twirl, let's take a look," and it is clear she finds this inappropriate (1.02). Avon asks Stringer to get some food for her and remarks on her skinniness. D'Angelo replies that she has a big appetite. The scene's awkwardness is based on her body's appetites being fodder for the men's conversation. Though neither Stringer nor Avon know her very well (when she and D'Angelo first walk in, Avon asks if this is their baby), they do not ask her any questions that would demonstrate that she has a life beyond D'Angelo. To them she is a body whose function at that moment is to be scrutinized and discussed, the result of her reproductive capacities evaluated and admired. When Avon and D'Angelo begin to talk, Avon hands the baby to a woman and tells her to be careful with his "little soldier, his little man" (1.02). While it can be argued that "soldier" is a term of endearment, in this context it also suggests that her son will be brought up to work for and defend the family business just like his father. While he will be loved and cared for, like all soldiers in Barksdale's army, eventually he will be a disposable pawn.⁴

D'Angelo is imprisoned for 20 years at the end of Season One, and Donette's role within the organization shifts. When she fails to visit him on a regular basis, Avon and Stringer decide to school her on jailhouse protocol. They first appeal to her loneliness and present themselves as viable social and economic alternatives to D'Angelo. When Stringer comes to visit her, she offers him one of D'Angelo's shirts, and when she bends over to place the shirt across his chest, she says, "You know it's a shame to let things go to waste" (2.03). While we can interpret the line to refer to her body, the line also connotes a sense that while she loves D'Angelo, anyone can wear his clothes. Stringer can replace D'Angelo both in his clothing and in his relationship. The show doesn't go so far as to imply that Donette is sexually indiscriminate. Rather, the exchange

suggests that her version of domesticity is constituted by the public side of Barksdale criminal dealings.

Stringer quickly lets Donette know that as D'Angelo's girlfriend she has a part to play in the Barksdale organization, namely giving comfort to her imprisoned boyfriend. He tells her that prison is very stressful on men and it is imperative that the women in their lives keep them tethered to the outside world. "Only one thing he needs to be secure about, and if not then he might start thinking he can't do that time and then we all got problems" (2.03). D'Angelo's personal relationship problems risk becoming a catastrophe for the entire organization. Donette is responsible for fulfilling a very different familial need than the men who work for Avon. In the scene, her feminine role within the organization is emphasized by her pink clothes and the ring on her wedding-band finger. Though she is not legally D'Angelo's wife, she is expected to fulfill the duties as if she were; she must be his sweet thing.⁵ This becomes even more interesting in light of the message *The Wire* sends about the affective bonds of law. The state structures family ties through the institutions of marriage; the modern family is constituted by the law. Stringer, Donette, and the other members of the Barksdale organization do not allow their economic gain to be bound by the law, just as they don't let the law determine who their family is. They sell illegal substances, use illegal weapons, and do not allow the law to dictate their affective ties. Though she and D'Angelo are not together anymore, Donette continues to fill a necessary function in the Barksdale organization through her domesticity.

In case Donette isn't moved by emotion, Stringer makes an economic appeal and shifts from treating her like a family member to treating her like the spouse of an injured employee. D'Angelo's hard work as a drug lieutenant has allowed her to have an apartment, car and money, and even though D'Angelo is in prison, Avon continues to support her as D'Angelo would. Stringer tells her, "We all got a job to do, and your job is to let D'Angelo know we still family" (2.03). Gender is central to the ways in which social relations are negotiated, built, and secured. Donette challenges these relations when she refuses to go to the prison, and Stringer must put her back in her place. The show highlights the interdependence of male and female gender roles as D'Angelo's continued cooperation relies upon Donette's feminized dependence on the masculine strength

of the crew. D'Angelo is constantly reminded of the good job that his family has done for his girlfriend and son. Donette is being paid for her important domestic functions.

This arrangement is not egalitarian, however. Certainly, if Donette wanted to leave D'Angelo and make a new life with another man, she would become a target for the organization. The danger of girlfriends on the show is that there is no telling how much their men have told them about the inner workings of the organizations. To remedy that problem, Stringer has sex with her. This is important because throughout the scene she flirts with him, but rather than call her actions inappropriate and admonish her for wanting to have sex, he gives in to her advances and acts as a sexual substitute. Stringer recognizes that if Donette is not satisfied sexually, there will be a greater likelihood that she will go outside of the organization to find another man, potentially passing on sensitive information. As the shot ends, the camera pans across the couch to the end table where we see a number of pictures of Donette and D'Angelo. If the show implies that she wants to move on from that relationship, her sexuality is made safe by having her be with Stringer. Stringer does not allow her to explore what split affinities could arise if she were to have a relationship with anyone outside of the Barksdale crew. Recognizing the danger of her sexuality, they want her to use her femininity on their terms, and they want to keep it contained within the organization.

Though Stringer sends her on a mission to keep D'Angelo feeling like he is a part of the organization, D'Angelo clearly wants out of the crew and disputes her claim that Avon and Stringer support their relationship and their desire to raise their son. By the end of her tenure on the show, Donette has mourned the deaths of both D'Angelo and Stringer, and in her last scene she cries alone on the couch while her son plays nearby (3.12). In a short time, she has had to bury two men that she loved, and with the fall of the Barksdale empire, it is unclear what her future holds. She is never depicted with other family members. She is not even given a last name; she is literally not a Barksdale. In her situation, black female sexual desire was used to crystallize the hierarchy of black masculinity and to maintain ties between them. Like a chess piece, she is moved from one man to another, and in the end she is abandoned.

While Donette represents the ways romantic ties are used to manipulate people within the organization, Brianna Barksdale represents a more successful negotiation of maternal ties. Brianna is Avon's sister, D'Angelo's mother, and a key player in the organization. We first see her when she brings a special lunch to D'Angelo while he is working in the Terrace. She gets the food from Sterling's, a local restaurant, and while D'Angelo is familiar with the restaurant, Wallace, one of the young men he supervises, is not. The show juxtaposes Wallace's limited exposure to the world outside of the Terrace with Brianna's easy movement in and out of the Terrace. Though the car she drives is a direct result of the work that boys like Wallace do, their labor allows her to not be bound to poverty like they are. Bringing food to D'Angelo places her squarely within traditional representations of motherhood.

When D'Angelo is arrested in the rental car with drugs, Brianna's maternal instincts cause her to challenge her brother. Like Donette, she is reminded that all of the material comforts she enjoys are dependent upon D'Angelo's cooperating with Avon and not sharing information with the police. Their reliance on D'Angelo puts them all in precarious relationships, but again, the men of the organization pretend that it is only the women who benefit and do not work. However, because Brianna is also Avon's sister and has been around the work all her life, she calls him on his lax supervision and is very angry that he would jeopardize her son's freedom so carelessly. Avon tells her that she needs to use her position as D'Angelo's mother to remind him of his commitment. Avon is able to manipulate D'Angelo's close ties to his mother in order to keep his empire strong. Brianna tells him, "You ain't gotta worry about my child. I raised that boy, and I raised him right" (1.12). While she knows that D'Angelo is being used as a pawn, she still demands that he be treated with respect. Her dual role provides an important context for understanding her cooperation and complicity with crime. Unlike Donette, whose influence remains limited to the domestic, Brianna can articulate motherhood and deploy it to sanction her own participation in the business. She successfully mobilizes the construction of motherhood to stake her claim in Barksdale politics.

Brianna is also regarded as a trusted leader within the organization, a role that is unusual in televisual depictions of female criminals. When Avon is

released from jail, she tells him that she and Stringer will rebuild their earnings while he sits back. Until the police stop watching him so closely, she will handle the money and Stringer will handle the drugs. Though Brianna is conventionally feminine in many ways (marked most obviously in her makeup and clothing), in this scene she is also marked as being much like the men. While Avon and Stringer wear plain beige shirts, she stands out in a low-cut red outfit. She smokes a cigarette in a nonchalant way, making it clear that she is not nervous when talking about the drug game. She stands with her arms folded, in an exact physical echo of Stringer's body language. The scene makes the three of them look like a united front. They respect her opinion and follow her advice; she is given the same number of lines in the scene as they are. When they get to the subject of D'Angelo, she is both mother and employer, telling Avon that she will visit after she situates the new drug buy. She speaks to Avon as both a sister and a partner, telling him that he will definitely pay for D'Angelo's service. The action of the scene literally revolves around the efficiency and maternity of her body, and during this time of crisis, she is burdened with a wide range of Barksdale policies and practices.

When D'Angelo wants to leave his family behind and "breathe like regular folk," his mother's visit becomes even more important (2.06). She tells him he has two choices: do the time or step into Avon's place and let him do it. Either way, he must fulfill his place in the family. Brianna warns him that if he talks to the police he will bring down the entire family: "All of us. Me and Trina and the cousins" (2.06). The job of women here is to remind men of their masculine duties. Though she is a trusted advisor in the organization and certainly not incarcerated, Brianna manipulatively constructs herself, Donette, Trina, and the children as all being dependent upon D'Angelo, Avon, and the rest of the men. It then becomes D'Angelo's job to keep his mouth shut and save them all from living "down in the fucking Terrace . . . on scraps" (2.06). She even goes so far as to say that without the game they might not be a family. Their familial ties are strengthened by their participation in illegal activities, and this is the logic on which gender roles are constructed. When the organization needs the women to look pretty and be helpless, they do it. When it needs them to be fierce leaders, they do that too. Donette and Brianna are required to perform a flexibility that is

integral to the workings of the group. They represent the complex negotiations that occur between and among different constituencies in the imperial context.

Like Father, Like Son

If Donette represents the mother in limbo whose son might carry on the legacy of his dead father, and Brianna sacrifices her son for the sake of family, De'Londa Brice's entire life is built upon the ambitious dream of running the empire even after her ties to it are severed. The drama of De'Londa and her son Namond plays out like a younger version of Brianna and D'Angelo, and, like Donette, she was also romantically involved with one of Avon's employees. However, unlike Brianna, she has no qualms about exposing her son to the harshness of street life. Brianna uses her closeness to Avon to negotiate for more safety and better working conditions for D'Angelo while De'Londa uses her tenuous ties to the Barksdale organization for her own self-interest. When we meet De'Londa, Wee-Bey has already been imprisoned for life, and she is being supported by a pension from the Barksdale organization. Like the other women, she is accustomed to certain material comforts, but unlike the other women, she depends upon her boyfriend's good name and on her son in order to maintain them.

De'Londa is introduced in the show's fourth season, a season which revolves around the home and life of four boys, Namond Brice, Randy Wagstaff, Michael Lee, and Duquan Weems. Out of all these boys, Namond is the only one who has a biological mother who cares for him. Duquan's family consists of drug addicts who steal his clothes and abandon him; Michael's mother sells groceries for drugs; and Randy lives with a foster mother. If we follow the conventional cultural logic, De'Londa is the most successful mother of the bunch. Unlike the other boys, Namond wears nice clothes and has all the latest video games and stereo equipment because his mother wants the best for him. With this comes the expectation that he should continue to live the life of a soldier's son. This is in stark contrast to Michael's mother who, when detectives come by to look for him, only knows the he and his brother have found their own place to live. She tells them, "I popped him and Bug out my ass, and they forgot where they came from" (5.06). We can never forget where Namond

comes from because De'Londa never has a scene without him or his father, and we rarely see her outside of a domestic setting.

Being the son of De'Londa Brice is not without its hardships. In a move that mirrors the first two seasons, Namond decides that he does not want to be in the family business. This is when the show deploys another conventional female role: keeper of traditions. It is De'Londa's job to remind Namond of all the sacrifices she and his father have made for him; she does not appear fragile or dependent. Though Wee-Bey is in jail for life without parole, she uncritically holds him up as an example to follow. Their confrontation reaches new heights when she yells at him for not beating up Kenard, a younger boy who stole drugs Namond was to sell. Namond wants to use diplomacy to solve the problem, while his mother wants Kenard to "feel some pain for what he did":

De'Londa: This how you pay me back for all the love I showed? Shit, I been kept you in Nikes since you were in diapers.

Namond: What he done got him locked up.

De'Londa: That's right. Wee-Bey walked in Jessup a man, and he gonna walk out one. But you out here, wearing his name, acting a bitch! Aw, look at you, crying now. (4.12)

De'Londa transforms familial love into contractual obligation; Namond owes her loyalty and financial comfort because she has provided nice material things for him. However, Namond points out the inherent contradiction of the contract. Familial love is acted out by participating in illegal activities, but the punishment for those activities, in this case prison, breaks families apart. Wee-Bey was a good provider, but now he is in jail and is unable to do anything for them. The only way for Namond to show that he loves his mother is to take care of her in a way that will lead to his own imprisonment or death; he must sacrifice himself for her happiness. In pointing out that his tears are inappropriate, De'Londa polices the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine.⁶ She has an obsessive fixation on teaching Namond how to be a man by forcing him to be like a man he rarely sees. It is only in her stories about him that Wee-Bey attains model status. Later, when the police call her after Namond runs away, she says, "Put that bitch in baby booking where he

belongs. Let him learn something" (4.10). In a season that revolves around education and the Baltimore public school system, we see a mother who believes that the penitentiary would serve as the best academy for her son. She does not talk to her son after this pronouncement, suggesting that prison will be the final shaper of his male identity. Eventually the show offers alternative caregivers for Namond as it attempts to separate familial ties from economic ones. Howard "Bunny" Colvin offers to take Namond into his home and show him a different way to live under a different type of masculine authority. Colvin's home represents a chance for Namond to have a present father figure, but more importantly for the show's argument, for him to have an appropriate mother figure.

De'Londa uses her son in order to stay connected to the Barksdale crew after it crumbles. She feels that she is teaching Namond to be an upstanding citizen in a criminal community. While they are not law-abiding citizens, she teaches him that to participate in the underground economy of drug selling, certain characteristics are desirable. There is intense sadness in her voice when she realizes that the change in her son's prospects also necessitates a separation from her. When Colvin visits Wee-Bey, he says, "Your boy is smart and funny and open-hearted . . . He could go a lot of places and do a lot of things with his life. Be out there in the world in a way that, you know, didn't happen for you and me" (4.13). Colvin portrays the life he can give Namond as being vastly more expansive than the one De'Londa can offer. Namond is being given the chance for a legal life, a life where social class and material possessions are not jeopardized by police and incarceration. Colvin appeals to Wee-Bey using shared memories of the West Side and tells him that the game he ran is not the same one in which his son will participate. He differentiates the two of them from a new generation by saying that the new crews have "no code, no family." This generational shift is emphasized in the lack of female characters in Marlo Stanfield's crew. His crew is not bound by blood, and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, its only woman, is consistently masculinized. The show no longer portrays female counterparts to the male criminals fulfilling feminine roles. The new women are killing machines.

Though the show portrays strong women who break the law, we are always reminded that their strength is a result of how well they perform

their assigned roles. Black mothers do not hold all the cards. Colvin tells Wee-Bey that Namond's future is up to him, and does so without involving De'Londa. The later exchange between Namond's parents is fascinating for the way it maps gender and parental roles. Wee-Bey is depicted as wanting Namond to have a life full of opportunities, while De'Londa's only concern seems to be how Namond ties her to Wee-Bey, and by extension, to the now fallen Barksdale organization:

Wee-Bey: You put him out, huh?

De'Londa: He need to get hard.

Wee-Bey: If he out, then he out.

De'Londa: Oh no you not. You ain't gonna take my son away from me, not for this—

Wee-Bey: Remember who the fuck you talking to right here. Remember who I am. My word is still my word. In here, in Baltimore, and in any place you can think of calling home, it'll be my word. They'll find you.

De'Londa: So, did you cutting me off too?

Wee-Bey: You still got me. We'll get by. But you gonna let go of that boy. Bet that. (4.13)

Lest we believe that De'Londa is in control, Wee-Bey makes it known that even from jail he has the ability to send people out to hurt her if she does not do as he wishes. Like the other Barksdale women, De'Londa's freedom is tempered by the tremendous burden she carries and by an implicit threat of violence. Having a boyfriend and a son whose lives are shaped by their participation in crime shapes her understanding of womanhood. She is desperate after having been cut off by the Barksdale organization, and she has to rely on her son to fill the economic need that Wee-Bey cannot and the Barksdales will not.

Representations of crime in black popular culture have focused primarily on men and masculinity. When women are discussed, they often exist solely as wives or mothers who support the men in their lives. *The Wire* disrupts this narrative and suggests that womanhood, like all roles within capitalism, is not without a desire for self-preservation. The organization of crime depends upon the inherent gendered nature of domesticity, and women are just as invested in their own survival as

men are. As a result, the show's black mothers symbolize both assets and liabilities in their attempts to assert themselves within the organization. These women are neither Madonna-like "angels of the hearth" nor the neglectful fallen women Collins and hooks describe. By using crime as a lens through which to understand more fully the nexus of women's work in depictions of familial networks, *The Wire* accepts and even embraces some stereotypical roles ascribed to black mothers and uses them to transform the horizons of the audience's expectations.

Notes

1. There is, of course, much to say about other forms of motherhood in the show, notably in Kima Greggs and Cheryl's lesbian motherhood and Anna Jeffries's foster mothering of Randy. I do not want to imply that these other forms of motherhood are unimportant to my discussion. In fact, in opening up forms of male parenting, *The Wire* makes significant interventions in discussions of black parenting on television. See, for example, Michael and Duquan's caring for Bug, Howard Colvin's fostering of Namond, and Bubbles's caring for Sherrod. *The Wire* declines to make caretaking strictly the role of women.

2. I use the word empire deliberately both to suggest the control that Avon Barksdale has over broad areas of Baltimore and the ways that he uses family ties to sustain his operations.

3. Without overromanticizing the brutality of the Barksdale organization, they are depicted as family-oriented. By the end of Season Five, though, family structures break down. Michael Lee asks Chris Partlow to kill his stepfather, and Calvin "Cheese" Wagstaff conspires with Chris Partlow and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson to have his uncle, Proposition Joe Stewart, killed.

4. In Season One, D'Angelo teaches chess to two other drug dealers, Wallace and Preston "Bodie" Broadus. They speak in metaphors which relate the chess game to drug game. In both settings, pawns "get capped quick" while "the king stay[s] the king" (1.03).

5. Mary J. Blige's "Sweet Thing" (1993) plays in the background during this scene.

6. Wee-Bey also tells Namond to cut off his long hair, but because it makes him an easier target for the police.