Omar (Be)Coming: Institutional War Machines and anti-Subjectivity

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Abstract

This essay explores the model provided by *The Wire*'s Omar Little (read in conjunction with the Deleuzian War Machine) as an instructive form of "Becoming," with regard to engaging institutions. Importantly, Omar demonstrates an intensive form of activity which resides outside of the neoliberal institutions which dominate his immediate milieu. With little option of opting out of contact entirely, Omar offers a useful model of resistance to institutional subjectivity and presents a model of "Becoming-War Machine." In following a Becoming-Omar, we might seek to become less governed by the kinds of stratifying institutions which have yet to be transformed or abolished.

Introduction

Nearly 10 years after its' conclusion, HBO's *The Wire* remains an important sociological drama whose visual text(s) continue to inform the intersections between neoliberalism, subjectivity, and race. While this paper engages primarily with content offered by The Wire, the more central point pursues a consideration of notions of subjectivity. While issues of scale, space, and scope mostly preclude a comprehensive summation of *The Wire*'s five seasons, it is worth noting that David Simon's Baltimore is constructed with a persistent emphasis on institutions. Accordingly, the show's trenchant structuralism illustrates a world animated by a quasi-determinist schema of individuals comported to the various institutions in which they are embedded. Across the institutions examined by the show, from criminal organizations to electoral politics, a common thread of neoliberal rationality underpins models of operation and governance.

More specifically, neoliberal rationality of economization (if not always monetary accumulation per se) dominates each of these spheres of activity within the fictionalized city of Baltimore, which itself looms as something akin to both silent protagonist and organizing polis. David Simon suggests that the show is best approached through an optic of classical tragedy as applied to post-industrial American modernity. One might simply replace the gods of Greek drama with the social institutions of contemporary capitalism to understand the plight of individuals who are commonly subjectified and stratified within *The Wire*'s neoliberal logic.

Of the show's characters, perhaps none has been deemed so compelling as Omar Little, a Black, Queer, and free spirit who robs drug dealers and evades capture by the show's major institutions. This essay was written prior to the death of Michael K. Williams, who plays Omar, but a review of the actor's powerfully affective, vulnerable, and ultimately tragic textures and performances might expand and enhance the themes which follow below. While much critical and scholarly commentary has celebrated Omar's uniqueness, he is generally read as merely an anomalous articulation of neoliberal subjectivity yet still taken as such i.e., a subject. Linda Williams writes: "if Marlo offers a vision of neoliberal subjectivity at its most ruthless, Omar offers a vision of its more creative, flexible possibilities." (Williams 2004: 194)

In a point of divergence (though not polemic rejection), this essay draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to suggest that Omar is best understood as something *other* than, strictly speaking, a neoliberal subject. By examining alternative metaphysical possibilities as well as considering the manner in which Omar stands in continuity with a potent tradition of Black practices of subversive marginality, this essay contends that the category of subjecthood must be troubled and (at the very least) resisted in order to retain a political imaginary capable of articulating agency, avoiding domination by institutions, and of combating neoliberal subject-making tactics.

War Machines

Returning to Williams' quote, it is important to situate where it falls within her own set of critiques and commentary prior to engaging with Deleuze and Guattari and offering an alternate descriptive modality. Citing David Simon, Williams writes:

> While the series is obviously a generic "cop show," clearly it is also something more. David Simon would like that something more to be a tragedy. I argue instead that it is superior serial melodrama. Simon writes: "We have ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides…We've basically taken the idea of a Greek tragedy and applied it to the modern city-state…it's the postmodern institutions …those are the indifferent gods. (Williams 2014: 4)

Several things are instructive here. Williams offers an illuminating note about her methodological position vis-à-vis critique and offers a concise expression of some of the assumptions underlying David Simon's philosophical position. Williams' central contention, throughout her book, *On the Wire*, is that *The Wire* is better understood as a form of melodrama, rather than as Greek tragedy. By departing from Simon's descriptive statement, Williams opens up a different epistemology. For Williams, melodrama concerns itself with the pursuit of justice, albeit in smaller, more immediate, and less-cosmic forms than other genres. Tragic heroes, for Williams, rail against injustice but must ulti-

mately accept and comply with fate.

Melodramatic heroes, on the other hand, deploy a much greater range of agency in the face of injustice and are sometimes able to overcome and resist injustices. Following Williams' model of critique, I want also to suggest an alternative mode of understanding not so much the show itself, but rather, the character of Omar as well as to probe forms of agency and political imagination which might be opened up. In short, I am seeking to implement Williams' model of perceptual intervention by directing it at a subject which Williams study is less concerned with, namely, the metaphysical dimensions and political connotations of subjectivity.

In what follows, I will sketch a theory of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "War Machine" and proceed to inquire as to whether Omar can be fittingly understood through this particular Deleuzian lens. If this is the case, I hope to have offered an alternative modality through which to understand Omar which might also inform an approach to political thinking. Just as a summary of *The Wire's* five seasons would exceed this introductory essay's scope, a full account of Deleuze and Guattari's colossal thought project will similarly not be provided. However, a comprehensive familiarity is neither required or even necessarily resonant with Deleuzian methodologies and sensibilities. The primary points of engagement here derive from Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of a figure which they term "The War Machine" in their text, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

While *A Thousand Plateaus* constitutes a substantial project of considerable length and offers bold, multivocal experimental lines of expression and engagement, when asked about any potential points of broad conceptual unity, Deleuze replied: "I think it is the idea of an assemblage" (Deleuze 2007: 177). For Deleuze and Guattari, thinking in assemblages constitute, among other things, a multiplicitous schema of heterogenous bundles of intensive tendencies toward both stasis and change. This ontological intervention can usefully be positioned amidst longstanding Western philosophical debates on thinghood, change, and substance. As Brent Adkins argues, Deleuze and Guattari never avoided or shied away from pursuing metaphysics (Adkins 2015: 1). In fact, in a later text they denote: "In any case, the death of metaphysics or the overcoming of philosophy has never been a problem for us: it is just tiresome, idle chatter" (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 9).

With this metaphysical emphasis in mind, we might approach the concept of war machines in light of an attempt to think Omar outside of notions of subjecthood. It is also worth noting that, for Deleuze, the war machine constitutes the major starting point for *A Thousand Plateaus* as a whole (Adkins 2015: 191). While the nomadology plateau looms as one of the largest and most dense sections of *A Thousand Plateaus* (offering three axioms, three problems, and nine propositions in a style curiously divergent from Deleuze and Guattari's usual rhizomatic methodology), for my purposes, I focus largely on axiom one: "The war machine is exterior to the State apparatus" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 351).

With regard to "the state," it must be stressed that Deleuze and Guattari draw on several previous plateaus in order to offer illustrations of the state as an ontological form and as a stratifying figure. In other words, rather than a narrow or literal articulation of historically constituted political governments, the state can also be conceptually understood as a set of tendencies toward hierarchy, stratification, and stasis. Eric Beck articulates the danger of stratification within Deleuze and Guattari's project as he notes: "Strata primarily function, as the common connotation of their name implies, to create distinctions, levels, and rankings. They are constantly ordering, which for Deleuze and Guattari means that they can never be sources or modes of liberation and escape" (Beck 2009).

The point of interest for me is the challenge of thinking through exteriority as such and the manner in which the war machine constitutes a vehicle through which to think political activity outside of the state. Differently put, the war machine is an invitation to think and experiment outside of conventional (read: state) cognitive ordering practices. Deleuze and Guattari note:

> It is not enough to affirm that the war machine is external to the apparatus. It is necessary to reach the point of conceiving the war machine as itself a pure form of exteriority, whereas the State apparatus constitutes the form of interiority we habitually take as a model, or according to which we are in the habit of thinking. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 354)

Pursuing this errand leads Deleuze and Guattari to offer an affirmation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* as a positive account of what a war machine outside of the state might look like. Kleist's story recounts a 16th century horse-dealer who is cheated by a petty baron. Kohlhaas attempts to pursue justice through the formal legal channels without success. As Adkins describes: "At this point, Kohlhaas sees that he can no longer work within the strictures of the state and becomes an outlaw" (Adkins 2015: 194). This sequence is one that is familiar to many of *The Wire*'s characters who are locked within a post-industrial neoliberal city-*state* with little to no legitimate avenues or opportunities for economic survival, safety and wellbeing, or the pursuit of justice.

Certain characters collapse into narco-nihilism (taking the form of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call a suicidal or empty body without organs) while others pursue agency mediated through the terms of neoliberal(state) logic by competing within given institutions (including drug gangs, police departments, labor unions, educational arenas, print media, and electoral politics) to accumulate status, power, and capital. The "Game," a frequent and multiplicitous description of life which serves as a point of reference for many of the show's characters, is clearly rigged, but a cutthroat ethos of self-interested accumulation and a willingness to use violence might still make it possible for one to play it better than others. My interest in Omar derives from his rejection of both nihilistic and unabashedly neoliberal forms of response to the dangerous, callous, and stratify-

ing ontological conditions of *The Wire*'s lifeworld.

Returning to Kleist, Kohlhaas forms a small band of militants and destroys the baron's castle. Roving the countryside, Kohlhaas and his nomads outpace the reactionary forces which unsuccessfully attempt to subdue the uprising at every turn. Martin Luther even inserts himself into the conversation and chastises Koolhaas's war against the state. Kohlhaas responds as one ejected from the community itself. Here, Adkins (2015) notes that Luther's baffled reaction demonstrates the difficulty of thinking outside of the state, as Luther exclaims: "Expelled! What madness has seized your thinking? Who could have expelled you from the community of the state in which you lived? Indeed, has it ever been the case, since states existed, that any man, whoever he might be, has been expelled from one?" (Von Kleist 2004: 236). Luther serves as a lucid example of state-thinking.

It is also worth underscoring that for Deleuze and Guattari, it is not the case that states and war machines are two ontologically different kinds of things. Instead, they merely occupy opposed positions on a continuum of intensive tendencies. The tendency toward becoming-war machine offers a line of movement away from state subjectivity even if perhaps it never fully escapes it or purifies itself of any remnants of subjecthood. For Deleuze and Guattari, affective intensity is a key element:

> The power of this affect sweeps me away…so that self (Moi) is nothing more than a character whose actions and emotions are desubjectified, perhaps even to the point of death. Such is Kleist's personal formula: a succession of flights of madness and catatonic freezes in which no subjective interiority remains. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 356)

This is the war machine's science of "nomadology," which Deleuze and Guattari present in contradistinction to royal (state)science. The war machine is that which takes assemblages as its organizing logic and proliferates creative lines of freedom-seeking flight as it seeks to map out new ways of affecting and being affected. Their concern here is epistemological as well as affective; "only thought is capable of inventing the fictions of a State that is universally by right, of elevating the State to the level of de jure universality" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 375). Thought, here described particularly as that which derives from state logic, legitimates the state and articulates it as necessary rather than as historically contingent. Part and parcel of its universalizing mission, state thinking presents two major universals: "the Whole as the final ground of being or all-encompassing horizon, and the Subject as the principal that converts being into being-for us" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 379). The war machine exists in a smooth space of consideration between the towering universals of subject and object as it utilizes nomad (rather than state) thought which attends to reality differently.

Predictably, the state seeks to striate, territorialize, and control space such that the war machine must be destroyed or appropriated. Deleuze and Guattari note that "It is

the vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire 'exterior' over all of the flows traversing the ecumenon" (1987: 385). This notion anticipates the activities of Omar, who is constantly hunted by both the illicit drug gangs whom he robs relentlessly as well as threatened with appropriative conscription and/or incarceration by the police. While a reading of these selections presented by Deleuze and Guattari alongside their animation of Kleist's war machine depicts the forms of conflict which frequently arise from contact between the state's inherently repressive tendencies (and its attempts at appropriation) and the nomad's lines of flight, there is no essential bellicosity within the war machine. Deleuze and Guattari's ninth proposition holds: "War does not necessarily have the battle as its object, and more important, the war machine does not necessarily have war as its object, although war and battle may be its necessary result (under certain conditions)" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 416). As will be explored later, I believe Omar to be a war machine which does not necessarily have war as his object (throughout most of the show) which contributes to his embodied performance of "anti-subjectivity."

Prior to a consideration of Omar, a short summary might, again, underscore that the war machine constitutes an experiment in imagining exteriority as such. Thinking of "things" outside of the metaphysical discontinuity of the subject/object schema is a central task which animates the concept of the war machine. My interest along these lines lies, again, in conceiving of modalities of political thought outside of this discontinuous ontology. This movement entails not simply resisting the universalizing narratives of state logic but also in experimenting with the forms which a war machine might take. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kleist's work offers such an altenative imaginary in the figure of Kohlhaas. It is worth stressing that many things can be war machines. As Adkins notes, the main criterion involves the creation of new things, the opening of striated space toward smooth space, and the creation of lines of flight (Adkins 2015: 216). None of these activities offer any "guarantees," however, as the war machine is always fragile, fraught, and vulnerable to appropriation by the state. The key for a war machine is to continue to experiment and to proliferate assemblages. In the next section, I will probe what implications might follow from this discussion as relates to Omar Little.

Omar Comin'

Linda Williams identifies Omar as one of two characters within *The Wire* who she finds laudable for their attempts to "live with integrity outside the existing institutions and strata of power" (Williams 2014: 195). While this theme foregrounds much of my argument that Omar can be understood as a war machine, additionally, there are five major Deleuzian considerations which I will marshal in support of the war machine the-

sis. These include Omar's capacities for affect, alliance, non-neoliberal ethical activity, experimental methodologies, and his spatial relationality both with and within the city-state.

Eric Beck describes Omar as one who manages to occupy a middle ground between the two major strata of the drug gangs and the police. For Beck, Omar's ability to creatively thrive outside of these and other major strata make him an anomalous and exciting subject. Beck notes:

> Free, by both refusal and rejection, from institutional affiliation and stable forms of life but nonetheless dependent on those institutions and forms in many ways, Omar embodies a kind of subjectivity that corresponds to, and in instructive ways departs from, the demands of neoliberal capitalism. (Beck 2009)

Beck ultimately lauds much of Omar's liberatory activity and creative sensibilities while reading the possibilities of departure from neoliberal subjectivity. Following this instructive thread, I seek to illustrate five important continuities between Omar and the war machine so as to offer a language for thinking Omar outside of notions of subjectivity.

Proposition 1: Omar circulates and engages in emotion, affect, and love

While these traits are by no meant the exclusive to war machines, they do suggest some important things about Omar in relation to the show's other characters. Within the hypermasculine and decidedly homophobic criminal environment in which Omar finds himself embedded, he stands out as not only one of the most fearless, skilled, and unique operators, but also among the most tender. Linda Williams observes:

> Aside from 'all in the game,' Omar's most emblematic phrase is the question repeatedly: "You feel me?" ...In asking this question, Omar exposes his raw feelings...the question "Do you feel me" cannot be separated from his position as a queer man of color within a black community that is especially homophobic. (Williams 2014: 199)

Early in *The Wire's* first season, Omar is dating an inexperienced stickup-man named Brandon. After a successful robbery against the powerful Barksdale crew, the two men become targets for retribution. Brandon is eventually tortured, killed, and displayed publicly by the gang in order to discourage any future robberies. When Omar views Brandon's body, he emits a blood curdling scream which resonates throughout the morgue. Omar weeps openly as he rises up from Brandon's body after sharing one last emotional kiss with his lost partner (Simon 2002, ep.6). Later, Omar mourns the loss of another stick-up partner, Tosha, whose death comes as a result of a botched drug robbery. This event comes as the latest in a war which Omar directs against the Barksdale organization in the wake of Brandon's death. As Omar cries for Tosha, he extinguishes lit

cigarettes into his palm (Simon 2003, ep.3) but, as Williams points out, the greater pain comes from his inability to properly mourn her due to the threatening Barksdale soldiers who patrol the funeral home which houses Tosha's slain body (Williams 2014: 204).

Omar forms affective ties throughout the show. He is one of the few reliably monogamous agents and is seen in affectionate relations with partners Dante and Renaldo, respectively. Omar engages in affective relationships with the police as well. Quasi-protagonist Jimmy McNulty, a troubled, morally dubious, yet brilliant detective comes to respect Omar and becomes something akin to a friend. McNulty's admiration of Omar stems in part from Omar's evasion of institutional capture, which McNulty expresses at one point by encouraging Omar to "stay free" (Simon 2002, ep.13). McNulty's partner, Bunk Moreland, elicits authentic guilt from Omar when he chides him as a "predatory motherfucker" and recounts seeing young kids mimicking one of Omar's many bouts of gun violence. Upon realizing the poor example which he has set, Omar again weeps openly in painful introspection (Simon 2004, ep.6). These selected moments cannot quite capture the depth of emotion, anguish and joyous affect which flow through Omar during the course of the show's five seasons, however it might suffice to gesture at a deep capacity for (and more importantly, a willingness to openly display) authentic, honest, and tender affects. The war machine certainly is one defined by its affective circulations.

One of the more interesting and under accentuated elements of Omar's assemblage is his deep love for his grandmother, who is scarcely seen other than during an ill-advised attack on Omar as he is escorting her to church (Simon 2004, ep.9). In the aftermath of the botched attack by Barksdale soldiers, Omar is both furious that they violated the unofficial "Sunday truce" and endangered his grandmother as well as frustrated that the attack might reflect/suggest his involvement in criminal enterprises. A conversation with fellow accomplice, Kimmy is instructive:

> Omar: "I damn near got that woman killed yo. Y'all should have seen me inside that hospital while they were stitching her up; lying about why somebody wanna shoot me down in the street. That woman think I work in a cafeteria.
> Kimmy: A cafeteria?
> Omar: At the airport, yeah
> Kimmy: The airport? Why the airport?
> Omar: Cuz 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! (Simon 2004, ep.9).

Omar's attention to his grandmother as well his decision to lie about his employment status illustrate his deep respect, love, and reverence for her. The choice of fictive occupation subtly underscores Omar's thoughtfulness and intellect as well as a basic fact about most of *The Wire*'s characters: very few individuals move freely or travel widely

through space, thus, working at the airport is an ideal cover story.

Proposition 2: Omar operates across Smooth, rather than striated, Space

This proposition very straightforwardly gestures toward Omar's enhanced capacity for movement and his consistently nomadic sensibilities. The city-state of Baltimore comes to be the geographical and ontological limit for most of the characters. From the low-level dealers who have scarcely left their own neighborhood corners to the alcoholic cops who patrol the same streets, sit in the same office, and frequent the same set of bars season after season, free movement does not best describe the vast majority of individuals featured in *The Wire.* This sentiment is perhaps best exemplified by Michael B. Jordan's character, Wallace, a corner boy who holds deeply felt existential anguish about the realities of poverty, violence, and working in the drug trade and is eventually able to forge a line of flight out of the city.

Wallace never recovers psychologically from his role in identifying and capturing Omar's boyfriend, Brandon, and he subsequently falls into heroin usage and neglects his job as a drug dealer. Seeking an escape into new circumstances, Wallace agrees to cooperate with the police who temporarily place him with his grandmother in the more rural area of Cambridge. In a move which simultaneously reinforces the ineptitude of the police institution as well as demonstrates the economy of care which both structures the city-state's lifeworld and excludes Wallace along with the rest of the racialized, condemned, and forgotten urban underclass, the police forget about Wallace in the aftermath of other events. Wallace, neglected and illegible, chooses to return to the toxic world (for him at least, others thrive within it) of the corner rather than continuing to attempt a new life. When one of Wallace's mentors, D'Angelo, while questioning his return and advising him instead to return to high school, references a restaurant several blocks away, Wallace responds: "If it ain't up in the Westside, I don't know shit. Cuz this shit, this is me yo, *right here*" (Simon 2002, ep.12). Wallace not only affirms his commitment to the drug trade but articulates the role of place-positionality and the convergence of identity and geography within *The Wire*'s corner world.

Omar, on the other hand, does not reside any place in particular. In season 2, Omar agrees to help the police by providing a false testimony against a Barksdale associate. While the ensuing "court scene" is rightfully celebrated for Omar's brilliant and humorous exchanges with the defense attorney, another line stands as pertinent to space. Responding to the prosecuting attorney's basic inquiry into his residence, Omar responds: "No place in particular, ma'am." The attorney responds: "you're homeless?" to which Omar answers: "in the wind, so to speak" (Simon 2003, ep.6). Omar's liminal positionality between homelessness and housing occupant constitutes perhaps another manner in which Beck's assertion that Omar resides in the middle holds true. It also presents him with a tactical advantage against his adversaries throughout the show as he routinely elides capture. Beck's essay opens with one such scene:

> In a scene during the first season of the American television series *The Wire*, Omar
> Little, a gay black man who makes his precarious living and iconic reputation by
> stealing money and drugs from local gangs, watches from the window of a distant
> apartment as one of those gangs ransacks his latest crash pad and torches his van.
> Behind him, a destitute junkie who Omar supplies with free drugs stares into space,
> momentarily floating in a heroin high but soon to be weighed down by its inevitable
> crash. On his lap sits the junkie's child, whose head he calmly caresses as he impas-
> sively takes in the scene around him. (Beck 2009)

Apart from existing within Baltimore as an equanimous nomad and seemingly corre-
sponding to Deleuze and Guattari's advice to "make rhizomes, not roots. Never plant!"
(1987: 24), Omar also travels much further and more frequently outside of the city-state
than most in the show. Season one ends with Omar, having stirred up much criminal an-
tagonism and police scrutiny during his war with the Barksdale family, in New York City
robbing a drug dealer. Omar's joyous affect shines through as he grinningly exclaims:
"it's all in the game, yo" (Simon 2002, ep.13). After a coordinated robbery of epic propor-
tions in Season 4, Omar and his partner, Renaldo, "retire" in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
Scenes of Omar walking in the sunshine, searching for favorite cereal brands, and giving
out candy to children present him as genuinely happy. Having left both Baltimore and
his occupation behind, Omar demonstrates a freedom to move freely and create new
things, although it would be mistaken to suggest that Puerto Rico was any sort of telos.
Scott Clifton acutely points out that even in this setting, Omar's apartment is still "more
like a resting place, good for the time being, but not permanent" (2013: 113).

Omar fatefully returns to Baltimore to respond to the torture and death of his mentor,
a prescient, old, blind man named Butchie. This tragic return indexes Omar's affectivity
and anguish at Butchie's death as well as his firm contention that while many violent
acts are permissible within the context of "The Game," Butchie's murder was unjust. This
sense of justice presents another decidedly non-neoliberal attribute of Omar's, his ethos.

Proposition 3: Omar maintains an ethical code which departs from neoliberal rationality
Omar's decision to cooperate with the police (and to provide false testimony) is cer-
tainly motivated by his animosity against the Barksdale crew which killed his lover,
though a broader point is at stake for Omar. The trial in question is in connection to a
murder carried out by Barksdale associate, Byrd, against an average, non-criminal,
working citizen who had previously testified against gang member, D'Angelo. Byrd's role
in killing the "taxpayer" is well known, but the police have difficulty marshalling proof
without the eyewitness testimony which Omar agrees to give, despite having been no-
where near the scene. Cooperating with the police seemingly violates the major norms
which circulate within the criminal world, however, Omar does not subscribe to gang-
land morality. Omar is certainly engaged in violence, but there is something he finds par-
ticularly unjust in Byrd's case. Omar notes: "Bird trifling, basically. Kill an everyday

working man and all. I mean, don't get it twisted. I do some dirt too, but I ain't never put my gun on nobody who wasn't in the game" (Simon 2002: ep.7). Omar's code permits violence against any who choose to participate in the drug trade but vehemently insists on a bifurcation of the city between the world of "The Game" and of "citizens."

Omar's ethical code diverges from both the political laws of the city-state, which would prohibit and condemn armed violence and robbery, as well as from the social mores of the drug world which would proscribe any association with the police. Though the latter flirts with incorporation into the state, Omar operates within a separate ethos which orients toward his own particular (r)evaluations of justice, rather than toward economic ends. In the wake of his guilt about modeling criminal behavior for young kids, Omar uses his own fiscal resources to help Bunk Moreland find and recover a service weapon which had been lost in the field. Omar's mentor, Butchie, comments on the antithetical relationship between attending to guilt and maximizing economic activity: "conscience do cost" (Simon 2004, ep.7).

This is not the only time in which Omar acts contrary to maximizing his own economic ends. During his later war with Marlo Stanfield's gang, Omar taunts his foe as he literally burns stashes of drugs and money which he had appropriated from Marlo's stash houses. As Clifton observes: "He displays no strong attachment to money or material goods. Having amassed a tidy sum as the result of robbing dealers for years, he could live more comfortably [than he does]. Wealth is only secondary, however, to the imposition of his own will on the players of the street" (Clifton 2014: 113). While Clifton's language of will exertion reflects the Nietzschean lens through which he analyses Omar, the next proposition suggests that Omar's activity at the level of the street can be understood as multiplicitous and rhizomatic.

Proposition 4: Omar circulates creative experimentation in his love of the game

While Omar is best described as one who steals from drug dealers, there is something in his craft which exceeds the simple framework of robbery. Omar is a more talented and successful investigator than many of the show's detectives. He is a master of surveillance, observation, and organization and his organic and nomadic positionality within the city offers him a premier vantage point. Apart from a strong and patient work ethic, Omar possesses a keen sense of experimentation and creativity as he plays the game. Beck remarks:

> Omar is always experimenting. The middle is not a blessed space, a place of repose for the beautiful soul, but one where innovation is required in order to survive. Omar and his cohorts constantly create elaborate ruses for stealing from the drug gangs, including Omar's pretending to be a wheelchair-bound old man, one of the members of his group feigning to be a mother whose child has been abducted, and even using a neighborhood child to gain entry to a drug-dealer's stash house. (Beck 2009)

Beck acutely identifies the multiplicity of techniques and schemes which Omar and his co-conspirators deploy throughout the show. Recalling Adkins' emphasis on experimentation within the context of nomadology helps to clarify Omar's eventual demise as a war machine. Omar's return from Puerto Rico to wage war against Marlo Stanfield signals the beginning of the end for him. Having suffered the devastating loss of Butchie, Omar engages in a form of what Deleuze and Guattari call "total war" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 421) which requires consistent resource investment (for Omar, this largely means his time, efforts, and affective energy) and pursues annihilation as its center. Omar relentlessly targets the Stanfield gang in a manner highly reminiscent of Koolhaas's war; Omar burns stolen cash, drugs and property, kills impulsively, and mobilizes the language of hegemonic masculinity to taunt his foes. After sustaining a serious injury while evading a Stanfield trap, Omar continues his war against Marlo while hobbling around on crutches. Eventually, Omar is randomly killed in a convenience store by Kenard, the very same young boy who Bunk Moreland previously observed imitating Omar's gun violence.

Clifton points to Omar's reactionary spiral downward into absolute war against the Stanfield outfit as something which does not suggest Omar as a Nietzschean overman. For Clifton, Omar's succumbing to careless and totalizing war with Marlo marks a failure to become a value creator, thus marking Omar not as an overman but instead as "noble, but human, all too human" (Clifton 2014: 123). Beck similarly narrates Omar's demise:

> Though Omar tries to maintain his code, his desire for revenge causes him to eventually break it by killing a mid-level member of Stanfield's gang. Rather than rely on his cunning and theatrical experimentation to achieve his goal, he resorts to pure force. He seems to have severed all relations with his compadres and with collectivity, and he taunts Stanfield on the latter's turf, challenging his manhood and protesting the legitimacy of his rule. In short, though he has returned to the physical site of his minor life, he has abandoned its cramped spaces for the guarantees of a molar identity as a street warrior. The result for Omar is death. (Beck 2009)

While Beck compellingly asserts that Omar's death comes as a result of his abandoning the middle to participate in the brutish power exchanges of the criminal strata, it is also clear that Omar ceased experimenting. If we are to understand him as a war machine, Adkins' account would confirm that the end of experimentation would indeed bring about death. Deleuze and Guattari consistently affirm that neither becoming-war machine nor experimentation come with certainty of outcome as they note:

> We say this as a reminder that smooth space and the form of exteriority do not have an irresistible revolutionary calling but change meaning drastically depending on the interactions they are part of and the concrete conditions of their exercise or establishment (for example, the way in which total war, and even guerilla warfare,

borrow one another's methods). (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 387)

Omar, who had successfully managed to craft a vibrant existence with experimentations in guerrilla war, fell into a static pursuit of total war. In effect, Omar's embrace of hegemonic practice translates into the appropriation of his war machinic tendencies into the state modalities of operating, thinking, and feeling.

Proposition 5: Omar forms temporary, horizontal, connective alliances

Beck's account of Omar's demise also underscores the manner in which his total war against Marlo is fought largely as an individual. This too is a departure from Omar's consistent affinity for forming non-permanent alliances with other agents. From helping the police to teaming up with fellow stickup artists, Omar enduringly assembles with others in creative ways which amplify his capacities to affect and be affected. As Beck writes of the pre-total war Omar:

> Omar does in fact participate in organizations. He forms numerous alliances and groups, most of which are marked by a high degree of horizontal decision-making, camaraderie, dissension, love, and transitoriness and which are usually populated by women, gay men, and other minor characters from the drug trade. (Beck 2009)

Williams also comments on Omar's penchant for temporary associations "from whom he demands, unlike the feudal Barksdales, no fealty" (Williams 2014: 197). Omar's grandest heist presents the pinnacle of this free associationism as he and a coalition of criminal operatives temporarily combine for a creative performance involving disguises, costumes, and timely deception in order to rob a neoliberal cartel of drug traffickers of a multi-million dollar shipment. Omar's most creative, vibrant, and free moments come amidst assemblages organized along the Deleuzian model of "becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 361) up until the point in which experimentation stops. A war machine which ceases experimenting can easily become suicidal, fascistic, or appropriated by the state and Omar's demise certainly resonates with the contingent and relational potentialities which cohere within war machines.

Given these five propositions which affirm important elements of the war machine within Omar's lifeworld as depicted on the show, I assert that Omar can be helpfully understood as a war machine. The show's bleak environment of cruelty, apathy, despair, and pervasive neoliberal rationality forms a certain regime of stratification. The implications from thinking through Omar as a war machine characterized by lines of flight and an exteriority to the state-logic of the Baltimore polis seemingly allow for Omar to emerge as an instructive figure with regard to resisting neoliberalism. I have hoped to demonstrate the war machine as a viable onto-epistemological optic through which to consider Omar and by which to imagine life outside of the hegemony of state logic.

Conclusion: Institutional War Machines

In light of the above review of Omar's intensive credentials as a war machine, I would like to offer a concluding rumination on the practical and political suggestions which are demonstrated by Omar's vibrant example. In a manner consistent with the Deleuzian war machine, Omar derives from the marginal terrain outside of the immediate domain of predatory institutional space and he resists appropriation through the forging of creative lines of flight, entering into collective alliances of Becoming, and by resisting the dominant ideological or discursive values circulated by the neoliberal institutions which threaten him. While this space doesn't allow for a comprehensive review of the manner in which revolt against white supremacist hegemony has consistently been undertaken by Black and marginalized agents, suffice to say that the history of coloniality has always been one of creative resistance undertaken by potent and collective assemblages of racialized actors. This subversive Black political tradition, with which Omar stands in strong continuity, is lucidly engaged by Sylvia Wynter's *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World*, as one useful descriptive example.

If this image of a Baltimore war machine seems a bit too romantic, however, it might be due to the fantastical nature of Omar's fictional life. While certainly, throughout *The Wire*'s five seasons, viewers are privy to private moments of his pain, deprivation, and struggle, it is still likely to be difficult for the average person to relate to Omar's incredible life.

While he leaps from tall buildings and walks away from gunfights unscathed, perhaps the more dissonant element of Omar's life is that he appears so freely unencumbered by the institutions which otherwise seem omnipresent and inevitable structures of power. The question of refusal loom large in political relations within dialectic struggles between individuals, groups, and institutions. Unequal access to and distribution of resources, mobility, and privilege inflect the practical and ethical questions of "opting out" or of refusing participation in the predatory institutions whose ostensible stranglehold on society often inflicts a paralyzing sense of hopelessness. From Autonomist debates over work to contemporary tensions between Ecomodernist and Degrowth perspectives and beyond, there is a rich terrain of inquiry regarding the future of institutions and the promise of new worlds without domination, exploitation, and biopolitical management.

In a related, though distinct, space which lies adjacent to the broader "what is to be done" questions, Omar offers a flourishing example of intensive life within the web of institutional situations for which neither total escape nor total transformation *feels* eminent. In this way, Omar offers a practical demonstration of what a "Becoming-war machine" can offer with regard to being "less governed" by the institutions which we might (for the moment at least—rupture often emerges when we least expect) have little choice but to engage with. If domination by institutional mechanisms derives at least in part from the processes by which they deploy technologies of appropriation and culti-

vate subjecthood, then a turn away from subjectivity toward the "Becoming-war machine" offers a promising starting place for liberation.

There is no doubt a risk in following this thread too far into the realm of individualist projects of the self—in the end, even Omar stands alone—and so Omar's tale is cautionary in this regard as well. Overall, it might be the affective resources imparted by Omar which bear the most on contemporary situations of institutional hopelessness and worldwide nihilism. Omar's affirmational embrace of "The Game" seems to offer a way of guarding against exploitation and affective burnout in a manner which recalls Lauren Berlant's suggestion of "lateral politics" (Berlant 2011: 261) as a mode of life carried out in between the spaces of institutional transition, adjustment, and abolition. By following Omar's model of insurgent agency against institutional stratification, perhaps we might—at the very least—become less governable in a manner which holds open transformative space for forthcoming abolitionist movements, deterritorializations, and states of liberation.

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