

Remembering Michael K. Williams, a Defender of Black Fictions

The death of the actor, who played Omar Little in “The Wire” and Chalky White in “Boardwalk Empire,” has cut tragically short one of the most interesting careers in television history.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#) September 9, 2021

Why, in the wake of Michael K. Williams’s death, do I find myself dwelling on his performance in Julien Temple’s forgotten flick “Bullet”? It should have been a nothing role. Tupac Shakur fills the screen as Tank, the glamorous drug dealer who settles scores from the comforts of a limousine. In one scene, Tank grills two white boys about the emergence of a neighborhood threat. Williams plays High Top, Tank’s brother and unthinking sentinel, and he’s hardly allowed into the frame—until he is. Williams doesn’t barge in. He lives silently in the shadow of the composition, exuding a menace that is understated until it becomes a tangible presence, and when he gives economical voice to that menace—“Get outta here,” he snarls, as he shoves the goons out of the vehicle—the power dynamic of the American gangster genre is flipped, and it is the white man who finds his neck yoked.

This was in 1996, when Williams was twenty-nine, years before Omar Little was in him. At the time, he was a complete unknown—unless you were a club kid or a house head, in which case you might have recognized him as Mike, the beautiful Brooklyn baby with the hooked smile and wrinkled brow, who was something of a fixture on the ballroom scene. Before he was an actor, Williams was a dancer, first brought to his feet, he once said, by Janet Jackson’s “Rhythm Nation” video. He left school to pursue dance and spent a year intermittently homeless, sleeping on trains and in clubs, as he tried to

land gigs. "I would literally just pound that pavement up and down Broadway, running up in record companies, finding out who the new artist—you need new dancers, man?" he told NPR. He joined tours for Madonna and George Michael as a background dancer, in addition to doing choreography work for certified divas. Was it Williams's early exposure to drag and other expressions of freedom that helped him connect with his characters—commune with them, almost spiritually? When, in "Lovecraft Country," his Montrose Freeman, anguished by his sexuality, closes his eyes, submits to the music, and allows the queens to lift him off the dance floor—what was that scene but a kind of conversion? There was a relinquishment of self, in his too-small oeuvre, a theory of acting as being. There was the thinker, in Williams, and the romantic. His death this past Monday, at the age of fifty-four, of a possible overdose, has cut tragically short one of the most interesting careers in television history.

We cannot avoid the topic of physiognomy. When Williams was twenty-five, he was slashed in a bar fight, leaving his face bisected from the hairline to the cheek. His scar should have granted him the enviable hauteur of a Roman bust, but, in the unimaginative world of entertainment, the combination of the mark and his dark skin was treated like built-in makeup. Music-video directors no longer wanted him simply to dance: he was mostly offered spots in which he was asked to "roll these dice" or "have this fight," he recalled. "Bullet" was his first film part, which he landed after Tupac saw a Polaroid of him and demanded that he be cast. In 2002 came Omar Little, his breakthrough role in "The Wire." The description of the character would have sounded preposterous at the turn of the last century: a loner stickup artist who hunts down drug dealers and outwits the police, casing the alleys of Baltimore with a sawed-off handgun, sheltering his pink-lipped boyfriend in the house of his big trenchcoat. He is introduced as a legend, literally whistling "The Farmer in the Dell" as he stomps down the street; "Omar comin'," the dope boys warn as they scatter. Williams was told that his character was not meant to last for more than a season. But he steadied the equilibrium of the crime opera—he sexualized it, too—so he stayed for

another four.

No knock on [David Simon](#) and Ed Burns, but it was Williams who invented Omar. For the job, the rookie actor immersed himself in Baltimore. He improvised on the set, deepening the history that he was given; the kiss between Omar and his boyfriend, in Season 1, was unscripted and initiated by Williams. As Omar took shape over the seasons, he began to cut a Bogart figure: the outlaw administrator of a one-man moral code. The game was the game. Not for Omar. The audience loved him for his individuality, but, gay or straight, they also wanted him—to be punished or rescued by him, whatever *he* wanted. I remember Williams-as-Omar as an inaugural love object of the so-called prestige age of television.

Video From The New Yorker

The contact that Williams made with the public through Omar is rare and destabilizing. When Omar was killed, in 2008, toward the end of “The Wire,” Williams lost his moorings and his sense of identity. On the block, fans would call him by his character’s name, which is to say that they were asking after a ghost. To be reminded that the actor was “more than” Omar is to acknowledge in the same breath that Omar was a masterpiece. But Williams was, of course, more than that one role. Some fans hold his “Boardwalk Empire” character, the sneering bootlegger Chalky White, in equal regard. Others, myself included, are partial to his portrayal of Freddy, the suave and mercurial Rikers mentor to [Riz Ahmed](#)’s frightened Naz Khan, in “The Night Of.” Williams is lauded for scene-stealing, but he was a generous partner. Playing against Ahmed, Wendell Pierce, Steve Buscemi, Jeffrey Wright, Queen Latifah, and others, he was extraordinarily contained.

Is it taboo to say that Williams, an actor who approached the text with a self-effacing modesty, could let the work take over if he wasn’t careful? And that he did not always desire to be careful? I am not suggesting that art caused his death. I am saying, with pained admiration, that Williams could not produce in the cold manner of contemporary professionalized actors. And,

because he was not a spokesman guarding the Black Hollywood brand, Williams, a recovering addict, spoke honestly about how inhabiting Omar, and later, Montrose, triggered relapses. He was open about the afterlife of the job, how it took strangling root in him.

Williams was drawn to works of heightened realism, but no one would describe his performances, even the rougher ones, as merely realistic. (However, I don't know what to call his tribute to [DMX](#), at this year's BET Awards, other than a reincarnation.) Williams was a performer openly daunted by the task at hand, a shock absorber. The membrane was so thin: he saw you seeing him, and it was as if he allowed you to touch him. He did not have the smell of self-seriousness on him, but he took his vocation seriously. We loved him for his special embrace of difference; there was something of Brando in his visions of queer masculine life. Black fans appreciated him for his unashamed emotion for the hood. He brought to bear not only his own experiences but that of the people he loved and knew, growing up in the Vanderveer Estates (now Flatbush Gardens), in Flatbush, Brooklyn. "Do you ask De Niro, Is he tired of being typecast, all the mob movies he's made?" he once [wondered](#) aloud. Williams should have been better known as a defender of the variety of Black fictions, so internally and externally harangued, which is to say, he should have been better known as a lover of art.

We have some larks in his filmography that better acquaint us with his personality, which was, by all accounts, big-hearted and sensitive. Professor Marshall Kane, on "Community." The martial-arts guru in the crappy remake of "[Superfly](#)." The scratchy conservative gay cowboy in "Hap and Leonard." Music videos. His oft-updated Instagram. But I am angry that Williams is gone. There is a void. There was a void when he was here, too. He worked with what he was given. He was the calibre of actor for whom scripts should have been written. We should have had more of him. What he gave was more than enough.

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