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Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities. Mark Anthony Neal. New York and London: New York UP., 2013. p/bk 224 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0814758366. Price $22.00.

Looking for Leroy continues Mark Anthony Neal's work of offering a nuanced, critical understanding of African American culture, in particular the ways African American culture constructs masculinity — a topic that Neal has previously studied in *New Black Man* (2006). Metaphors of "legible" and "illegible" masculinity organize *Looking for Leroy:* for Neal, a "legible" Black man fits with familiar models or stereotypes of Black masculinity, whereas the "illegible" man subverts or defies these norms. Neal's thesis is that certain "illegible" Black men in mainstream US media actually offer a "radical rescripting of the accepted performances of a heteronormative black masculinity" (4) through their unwillingness or their failure to conform to the usual scripts of black masculine behavior. Neal's book takes its title from a character in the movie *Fame* (1980) and the spin-off television show that followed. Leroy Johnson displayed contradictory gendered features, from a chiseled, muscular physique that signified a stereotyped masculinity to a flamboyant, effeminate style of dance that positioned him as a stereotypically feminine object for the desiring gaze of spectators both in and out of the fiction. Yet *Fame* did not explicitly identify Leroy as gay, rendering his queer performance "illegible" for many. Neal therefore looks for other examples of men who deviate from the (hetero)normative scripts of black masculinity, arguing that these "illegible" figures offer potentially liberating models for interpreting, critiquing, and imagining masculinity.

Neal performs close readings of a wide variety of mass media texts, ranging from TV dramas to song lyrics to press interviews, though his main objects of study are either singers (Jay-Z, R. Kelly, Luther Vandross) or television characters (from *A Man Called Hawk*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *The Wire*). As Neal moves from one figure to the next, he examines each in the context of that figure's predecessors within the relevant medium, genre, or discourse — that is, the models of "legible" masculinity from which the "illegible" figure deviates. In doing so, Neal's book functions as a historical survey of African American masculine types, from the "race man" of the early 1900s, to the conflicted "soul man" of the 1960s, to the "thug" of 1990s gangster rap, and beyond. Neal makes extensive use of queer theory, especially in his analyses of the closeted or non-normative

sexualities of some of these "illegible" men, but he keeps these asides short, and his lucid prose makes even the more abstruse theoretical points accessible to the uninitiated reader. The book thus appeals to a wide audience of scholars (and students) of African American culture and the gender politics of mass media. Throughout the book, Neal explains how certain "illegible" Black masculinities emerge, why they pose difficulties for interpretation, and what models they offer for individual or collective political action.

Neal's analyses explore questions of legibility both within the primary texts he studies and in the discourses that surround those texts — documents of their production, circulation, and reception. For example, Neal's chapter on Avery Brooks, the first African American to earn an MFA in drama from Rutgers University, looks at Brooks' first starring television role as A *Man Called Hawk* (1989). Hawk combines erudition, big-city cool, open commitment to Black empowerment, and the skilled use of violence — and not just the violence of the street, but of spies and special-forces operatives. Neal therefore sees Hawk as a character defined by his illegibility: "virtually all thirteen episodes of the series feature a moment where characters publicly question Hawk's identity, often to witty acerbic retorts from Hawk" (18). Outside the fiction, however, interviewers and fans of the show regularly assumed that Brooks was not really acting, but actually resembled Hawk (14). Neal argues that when Brooks appeared as Commander Benjamin Sisko, lead character in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-99), producers took care to make his character more "legible," in part by distancing Sisko's appearance from Hawk's. Because Hawk wore a Van Dyck beard with a shaven head, *DS9's* producers had Brooks shave the beard and grow out his hair; after two seasons, in which *DS9* established its own audience, the producers let Brooks return to his signature beard and shaven head. Furthermore, Neal argues, *DS9* presents Sisko from the start "as a highly legible black man, by situating his existence in the context of trauma and mourning" over the death of his wife (27). In the future of the *Star Trek* universe, the trauma that makes Sisko "legible" is not that of racially stereotyped violence (e.g. that of black ghetto criminals or of racist whites) but that of non-human aliens. Thus, Neal argues, *DS9* achieves a "legibility" for Sisko at the expense of largely removing him from the historical, discursive, and political contexts of African American experience.

The book's movement from television to popular music and back again may frustrate readers hoping for a more sustained focus on one or the other (as Neal delivered in his first book, *What the Music Said: Black*

Popular Music and Black Public Culture (1998)). Others may wonder why Neal chose two media, rather than widening the book's scope to include other kinds of Black public figure: politician, scientist, entrepreneur, or athlete. And although the proverb forbids us to judge the book by its cover, in this case, the use of an image from the artist Hank Willis Thomas' painting "Strange Fruit" is downright misleading. The cover image shows a shirtless black basketball player with his hand caught in a noose, yet Neal's book says nothing about black athletes, lynching, or the use of lynching imagery in white racist harassment of blacks (especially the harassment of Barack Obama). Yet such objections ultimately miss the point by failing to understand the usefulness of Neal's book as a model for other studies of Black masculinity, and as an intervention that reveals "illegibility" the crux where normative scripts of raced, gendered, and sexualized identity reveal themselves as historically contingent rather than natural or inevitable.

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