

Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)

By Mark Anthony Neal

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Mark Anthony Neal's *Looking for Leroy* is an engaging and provocative analysis of the complex ways in which black masculinity has been read and misread through contemporary American popular culture. Neal argues that black men and boys are bound, in profound ways, to and by their legibility. The most "legible" black male bodies are often rendered as criminal, bodies in need of policing and containment. Ironically, Neal argues, this sort of legibility brings welcome relief to white America, providing easily identifiable images of black men in an era defined by shifts in racial, sexual, and gendered identities.

Neal highlights the radical potential of rendering legible black male bodies—those bodies that are all too real for us—as illegible, while simultaneously rendering illegible black male bodies—those versions of black masculinity that we can't believe are real—as legible. In examining figures such as hip-hop entrepreneur and artist Jay-Z, R&B Svengali R. Kelly, the late vocalist Luther Vandross, and characters from the hit HBO series *The Wire*, among others, Neal demonstrates how distinct representations of black masculinity can break the links in the public imagination that create antagonism toward black men. *Looking for Leroy* features close readings of contemporary black masculinity and popular culture, highlighting both the complexity and accessibility of black men and boys through visual and sonic cues within American culture, media, and public policy. By rendering legible the illegible, Neal maps the range of identifications and anxieties that have marked the performance and reception of post-Civil Rights era African American masculinity.

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Editorial Review

Review
"This is an important new book for gay and straight alike."-*Windy City Times*

"Whiteness and White privilege, Jay Z's entrance into the Pace Gallery recalls a scene nearly 30 years earlier, when three young Black men, clad in black leather jackets and black brims walked into another art space and were told, 'You guys don't belong here.' Just as Run DMC was breaking down commercial barriers—MTV then as resistant to Black bodies as any high-end art gallery—Jean-Michael Basquiat was breaking down barriers in the art world. Although Picasso is the signifier that brings every one together—and to our worst fears about Picasso and appropriating, dare I say colonizing, space—it is Basquiat who clearly haunts this space."-Mark Anthony Neal,*Art Papers*

"*Leroy* mines the contradiction between epistemologies and realness of self-making in relation to black men in popular culture. Neal has crafted an accessible text that creatively renders our understanding of black men as alien, offering complex connections between spatiality, cosmopolitanism, sound, and desire."-Jared Richardson,*The Black Scholar*

"*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…"-*Journal of American Studies of Turkey*

"*Looking for Leroy* is a fascinating study of Black masculinity."-Abdul Ali ,*The Crisis Magazine*

"*Looking for Leroy* is very much an act of self-exploration; the men examined offer different variations of the type of black man Neal sees himself to be….This introspection adds to rather than detracts from an intriguing and thought-provoking addition to the growing research on black masculinity in the post-segregationist era—one that blurs the line and closes the gap between heteronormative scholarship and queer studies."-*Cinema Journal*

"Mark Anthony Neal is one of our most consistently interesting and inspiring critics of contemporary black popular culture and music, to which *Looking for Leroy* is brilliant testament. It showcases Neal's masterful ability to take iconic figures of black masculinity, from Avery Brooks's neo-cool Hawk to Shawn Carter's neo-queer Jay-Z, and show them to us in an entirely new light. This is an incredibly powerful little book, and readers will never look at R. Kelly or Luther Vandross the same way again."-John L. Jackson, Jr.,author of *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness*

"Neal's critique of black masculinity in the U.S. confronts the enormous pressure placed on black males by society's assumptions. Through a pop-culture lens, he shows how the perpetuation of racial stereotypes continues to neutralize the potential of black men and boys."-*Ms. Magazine*

"*Looking for Leroy* challenges readers to view black masculinity outside the scope in which it is imagined...Neal achieves his goal of radically rescripting accepted notions of a heteronormative black masculinity."-*American Studies*

"Mark Anthony Neal takes us on a fantastic journey searching for the meaning of black masculinity in the

USA. As we join him in Looking for Leroy, we find queer and feminist answers to questions about legibility and illegibility, visibility and invisibility, violation and vulnerability. No one writes with more passion, power and speculative brilliance about black masculinity than Neal and no one but Neal would manage to produce a theory of black masculinity capable of explaining the smoothness of Luther Vandross, the cosmopolitan genius of Jay-Z, the enigma of Leroy from Fame, and the sheer brute force of Snoop from The Wire. Genius."-Jack Halberstam,author of Female Masculinity (1998) and *Gaga Feminism* (2012)

About the Author

Mark Anthony Neal is Professor of African & African American Studies at Duke University. He is the author of several books, including *New Black Man* and *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, and the host of the weekly webcast Left of Black.

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