

***New Black Man* by Mark Anthony Neal (Book Review)**

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In reviewing literature and media sources of the condition of Black men and their issues in America, you might note they have been ostracized as college dropouts, gang members, criminals, shiftless, and unintelligent as well as associated with violent, immoral, and negligent behaviors. While many social and historical scholars would argue the formation of Black masculinity in America was, in part, the object and influence of racial and social oppression, Mark Anthony Neal adds a new and unique feminist critique to the debate. Neal suggests the various strategies meant to inspire constructive images of “Strong Black Men” have also perpetuated a patriarchal gender bias; in other words, attitudes and behaviors reflecting a “black male privilege” (p. 44).

Gendered by *misogyny*, *homophobia*, and *sexism*, Neal argues that the social construction of race as well as masculinity have forced Black men into a paradox of subordinate and patriarchal roles that do not affirm one’s innate and authentic identities. This has the impact of leaving new or emerging components of his identity trapped and virtually unnoticed. Neal describes this “invisible” component of Black men’s identity as the “New Black Man,” which he details as one who embraces a feminist worldview. *New Black Man* offers a critical social, cultural, and political analysis to the research of men’s studies, feminist theory, and issues related to the complex patriarchal influences that have shaped both “old school” and “new school” points of view, establishing the “New Black Man” as the metaphorical and conceptual *ideal* of Black masculinity.

Chapter 1 suggests the plight of Black males was influenced by historical and contemporary political and social debates between Black men of upper-middle-class and those of lower socioeconomic status in the heartlands and inner cities of America. Particularly within a subheading of this chapter, *The Hip-Hop Thug versus the New Talented Tenth*, Neal asserts a dichotomous formation of masculinity represented by the “New Talented Tenth” (the social “elite” or upper-middle-class) and the “Hip-Hop Thug” (the social dysfunction or “lower-class”). Emerging literature by “Black intellectuals” of the 1980s began to write about the “plight of Black men,” describing their collective condition as a “crisis” in America. Neal notes how music, television, sports, and the entertainment industry, as well as local and national news outlets, have portrayed Black men as a caricature of destructive

controversy in the media, particularly placing much of the blame on hip-hop music.

Neal sharply scrutinizes the Dean of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia, Dr. M. R. Turner, and his remarks that “hip-hop’s culture is eroding the numbers of the next generation of the ‘Talented Tenth’” and how it has influenced Black male students who “often fail to become involved in many aspects of university life” (p. 8). Neal suggests that such thinking is an underrepresented example of the otherwise “well-adjusted” Black elite “scapegoat[ing]” the hip-hop generation for the declining plight of the Black male in an attempt to maintain their Black patriarchal privilege. Despite Neal’s appreciation of certain aspects of hip-hop in literature and books he has written about hip-hop and black cultural music, he identifies a patriarchal crisis in two formations of Black masculinity as the so called “Strong Black Man”.

In chapter 2, Neal uses his life as a narrative to dismantle complex issues and to inform the reader about his journey of embracing Black feminist thought. Neal’s fragile relationship with his father and powerful admiration for his mother seem to serve as predictors toward his general respect and appreciation of women’s values. What was most significant toward the development of this self-proclaimed “Black male feminist” was transformative experiences in graduate school and a relationship he developed with his professor and mentor, who he affectionately called “Mama Soul.” Mama Soul’s class, along with others Neal took, during his doctoral studies introduced him to the literature and arts of feminist activists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Frances Cress Welsing, Sonia Sanchez, and Patricia Hill-Collins. This was a critical time during Neal’s intellectual development. Once confronted as a sexist, Neal eventually grew to internalize that patriarchy still grants him privileges despite the challenges Black men face with racism.

Chapter 3, entitled *Queers in a Barrel*, is the most transformative and revolutionary part of the book in regards to how Neal illustrates the pain in living out a new paradigm. In this chapter, Neal talks about “coming out” as a Black male feminist in a world where it would be easier to conform to societal norms. *Queers in a Barrel* not only discusses pro-feminist and anti-homophobic activism on college campuses, it addresses how alternative forms Black masculinity has been made to seem *strange* or *suspicious*—the “queering” of Black male identity. Neal makes the point that oftentimes we deny the diversity within “blackness” as well as within masculinities, acknowledging there are multiple modes of being for Black men that are more healthy than the hegemonic paradigm fed to us through the socialization

process.

Chapters 4 and 5 chronicle the internal strivings of battling and truly being at piece with one's identity. As a man, son, brother, husband, father, as well as oftentimes the traditional "provider" role, how does one reconcile the multiple dimensions of masculinity? For Neal, having his first child, a little girl, affirmed and compelled him to become even more reflective in his thinking about everything from how she would grow up to him as a man and how men would come to value "daddy's little girl." The appreciation or objectification of Black women is complicated. Neal asks, "how does black male feminism deal with the reality of heterosexual desire?" To speak candidly about the aesthetic beauty of Black women, without appearing misogynist, is an enduring conflict, at best.

Neal does acknowledge the diversity of masculinity, but he is fixated with debating how narrow Black masculinity exists as dichotomous, patriarchal performances. It would have been more informative for Neal to point out representatives of the "New Black Man" in today's society. The "New Black Man" should be thought of as a metaphor of the ideal Black male feminist, not of all Black masculinity.

The perpetual threaded theme that looped its way from the beginning and beyond the stitching of this book essentially asks, what is the measure of a man? W.E.B. Du Bois ([1903] 2003) once critical addressed a dilemma of African Americans as the "color line." Du Bois' theory of Double-Consciousness pioneered the notion of social dichotomies or "two-warring ideals." *New Black Man* is a representation of the "warring" ideologies of masculinity and manhood for Black men in America. bell hooks' (2004), *We Real Cool" Black Men and Masculinity* is a perfect companion to the *New Black Man*. Debating conflicting worldviews of race and gender politics in American colleges and universities serves as a spring board toward acknowledging or "coming out" with social equities that might otherwise be hidden. For student affairs practitioners and other college educators, I strongly recommend this book. It is a great book for student advocates, especially those working with Black and African American men. Neal is truly one of many unsung voices challenged with negotiating the barriers of gender bias and racial discrimination of mainstream America.

References

- Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1903] 2003). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A.; Modern Library Edition.
- hooks, b. (2004). *We Real Cool" Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge: New York and London.