



What Color is Your Hoodie? Essays on Black Gay Identity
By Jarrett Neal

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Abstract

This review of What Color Is Your Hoodie? highlights the ways in which the essayist writes to make sense of the intersectionalities of his own identities and subjectivities. Neal's biographical vignettes serve as points of entry to discuss various social and cultural phenomena. The author weaves his personal stories into broad political analyses and social commentaries on a number of issues that are of interest to scholars of culture—in particular, race, class, masculinity, sexualities, bodies, and power.

Keywords: *memoir, race, sexuality*

Introduction

Essayist Jarrett Neal (2015) underscores the role that writing plays in understanding the complexities, precarities, and contradictions of identities and subjectivities in an uncertain world, what Bauman might refer to as “liquid life” (2005). “Writers write to make sense of the world,” Neal explains. They “seek to map the complex psychic terrain of human experience, to make sense of a world that often makes no sense” (p. 77). Constructing stories can help individuals form connections between seemingly incongruent phenomena, creating meanings that make sense to the writer in light of the writer’s prior understandings. Social and/or “identity” media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Tumblr* allow just about anyone with a mobile phone to inhabit the space of a writer, externalizing their inner psyches and joining a spectacle of endless discourse for millions to instantly consume (Debord, 2014). Just hours after Omar Mateen carried out his June 12, 2016 attack at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, leaving 50 individuals dead and 50 more wounded, Donald Trump wrote via *Twitter*, “Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism.” Implying that a tougher stance on immigration would have prevented this mass murder, Trump wrote nothing of reforming U.S. gun laws or attitudes of social tolerance toward those targeted in the attack. He merely used the attack to further an isolationist agenda. Fellow television star, conservative commentator, and Trump supporter Stacey Dash echoed Trump’s self-congratulatory post on her own *Twitter* feed: “This atrocity would not go unanswered under President Trump,” she wrote, supporting the candidate’s position on constructing literal and figurative walls to keep individuals (mostly Mexican and Muslim) out of the U.S. Like Dash, whose family background is Mexican, Barbadian, and African American, the majority of the victims of Mateen’s

nightclub attack were minorities, a point that serves to underscore the complexities that hide behind the easy shortcuts of identity categories and stereotypes—social divisions that rarely help individuals understand the interworkings and intersectionalities of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Dash’s *Twitter* comment came just days after she suggested that transgender individuals should not be allowed to use public restrooms and should instead “go in the bushes,” her reasoning being that “I’m not gonna put my child’s life at risk because you want to change a law” to allow gender-free restrooms. However, current gun ownership laws that put *other* people’s children at risk even in so-called “safe” spaces, from schools to LGBT nightclubs, did not provoke the same passionate response from these and other conservatives.

In his recently published collection of personal essays entitled *What Color Is Your Hoodie?* Jarrett Neal does what he says writers do: He writes to make sense of the intersectionalities of his own identities and subjectivities, mapping these intersectionalities onto his past experiences in order to make sense of the past and the present—“of a world that often makes no sense” (p. 77). Biographical themes found in these vignettes range from the author’s budding sexuality as an eighth grader seeing a naked adult man for the first time, to Neal’s circumcision at the age of 20 and a fairly randy analysis of interracial gay pornography. In most instances, Neal (re)constructs these vignettes to make sense of his own experiences, to connect his present subjectivities with a number of formative experiences from his past. For example, Neal describes accidentally glimpsing his coach’s wet, muscular body in the school’s locker room shower, explaining that it was “like watching one of my action figures come to life” (p. 12). Here he uses this childhood memory to explore his adulthood fascination with perfecting his own physique through bodybuilding, which he writes about with some detail. In other instances, Neal employs the tools of the comic, sometimes generalizing his experiences to *all* men who are gay and/or black for the sake of humor. For example, the author credits the “blatant homoerotic imagery” found in Mattel’s *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* for “captivating an entire generation of gay men” with a “half-naked bronzed barbarian” (p. 12).

The author’s personal vignettes serve as points of entry to explore various social and cultural phenomena, as he weaves the narratives into broad political analyses and social commentaries on a number of issues that are of interest to scholars of culture—in particular, issues surrounding race, class, masculinity, bodies, and power. In these instances, Neal reveals a number of contradictions that tend to arise when writers struggle to make sense of precarious lives. While Neal, a self-proclaimed nerd, explains how he used his academic skills to learn as much as he could about fitness in order to perfect his body, he acknowledges, but does not go so far as to explicitly critique, the ways in which such rigid standards of beauty are socially, racially, economically, and politically constructed. Though he admits the dangers involved in the health and beauty industries that perpetuate cultural stereotypes and consumerism, Neal posits that beauty, like writing, should be understood as “an artistic project, a craft of aesthetic possibilities, a form of resistance” (p. 41). Neal’s poetic musing, “To be beautiful, after all, is to be truly seen” (p. 42), makes his assertion that all black men inevitably confront the hyper-masculine, sexualized stereotype of the Mandingo seem all the more pointed.

It is in such instances that Neal acknowledges the contradictions that are uncovered by attempts to “make sense” of complex experiences: The Mandingo archetype is “forged out of a racist past yet perpetuated by a masculine desire to attain alpha male status, to be cock of the walk” (p. 31). While the author implicitly critiques the social conditioning that requires black men to perform a sure-footed “cock of the walk” identity, Neal laments that then-President Obama “refuses to crow about his successes.” In a chapter particularly relevant in light of the 2016 election,

Neal professes his “love affair” with Obama’s “brainy coolness,” even though the author ultimately criticizes Obama’s steady demeanor. Neal explains that during his presidency, Bill Clinton often expressed anger when addressing his critics; however, because “black men are stereotyped as violent brutes, angry, always out to steal from and harm every white person they see,” Obama chose to keep cool. Neal suggests that it was Obama’s silent “high-minded attitude” that enabled members of the radical right (p. 60) to construct and perpetuate a number of false narratives about his nationality, religion, and even his sexuality. Indeed, in the days following the aforementioned Orlando nightclub attack, Donald Trump implied that President Obama was directly responsible for the murders.

Neal also reflects on the contradictions that emerge as he navigates social expectations and stereotypes in his own public persona as a teacher. In the essay entitled “Teaching Black, Living Gay,” the author addresses his current professional life as a university writing instructor. Neal explains that while he requires students to read works by LGBT authors in his classes, he prefers not to tell his students that he is gay. “If my students knew,” he explains, “suddenly their focus wouldn’t be on their studies; rather, they’d spend all class period thinking about me sucking dick” (p. 85).

Neal’s essays underscore the fact that despite gains made over the last several decades in educational attainment, political power, and visibility in film, television, and other popular media, black men are still more likely than white men to be negatively stereotyped, incarcerated, and unemployed. In fact, Neal posits, “black men are falling farther and farther behind all other groups of men” *except* in one arena, that of sexual desirability (p. 32): “Everyone, it seems, wants a big black dick” (p. 31). Indeed, the “black dick” tends to play a prominent role throughout this collection. In the chapter entitled “Peewee’s Peepee,” Neal maps an analysis of American exceptionalism, cultural expectations of circumcision, and popular culture’s fascination with penises with his own experience of having his foreskin surgically removed at the age of 20. It is no coincidence, the author suggests, that he elected to have the surgery the same year that he failed out of college *and* came out to his family: “Perhaps it has always been about my body, this restlessness within me” (p. 150). The circumcision, Neal explains, “was my first step toward self-acceptance... a way of wresting control of my identity, body, sexuality, and destiny from my community, and the culture” (p. 149). Even as he acknowledges extant debates over the cultural practice of circumcision, including the loss of sensitivity the procedure brings, Neal concedes that he would still elect to have a son circumcised at birth in order to conform to dominant American values.

Readers accustomed to scholarly treatments of studies of culture might find themselves looking for “evidence” for some of the connections and conclusions that the author makes. For example, in his discussion of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, Neal suggests that because male role models were scarce in his community growing up, “Our mothers, almost in desperation, relied on He-Man among other superheroes and action film stars, toys and games... to fill the void left by our absent fathers” (p. 13). While a scholarly project might provide insights from oral history interviews with the neighborhood mothers, for example, to show the reasoning behind this argument, Neal’s is not that kind of book. However, traces of scholarly conversations can be found in the author’s analyses (bell hooks and Cornel West are explicitly referenced).

Neal’s perspective reveals several contradictions and compromises made every day, which serve to maintain the status quo of societal structures. The collection will be of interest to readers concerned with race, gender, sexuality, queer studies, and perhaps most significantly, the subject of intersectionality: While black men bring billions of dollars each year to the music and sports

industries, the author asks, “does anyone care if the running back is only semi-literate?” (p. 42) Ultimately, Neal concedes that “every success, no matter how small, must be celebrated” (p. 73).

References

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