

Book Review: Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine? Gender, Race, and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men edited by Brittany C. Slatton and Kamesha Spates

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Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine? does the important work of addressing some of the myths and stereotypes that plague black men, and recognises the danger inherent in black men's alterity, writes Megan Armstrong.

Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine? Gender, Race, and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men. Edited by Brittany C. Slatton and Kamesha Spates. Ashgate. 2014.

Find this book: 

One need only switch on the news, especially in the United States, to see that race and racism are still topical. *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?*, edited by Brittany C. Slatton and Kamesha Spates, opens with a discussion of the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, but racially-motivated violence targeting black men, women, and children has continued since the volume moved to publication. The deaths of Michael Brown and Tamir Rice more recently have further driven the salience of this problematic forward, particularly in the context of American race politics.

Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine? is an edited volume divided into four sections, each organised around an underlying theme. These include challenges of identity formation (p.5), "negotiating unequal ground" (p.43), critical interpretations of gender (p.73), and counter-narratives "in the struggle for masculine and sexual autonomy" (p.101). The essays within these sections vary considerably in their scope, their methods, and their topics.

The introduction to the book is very brief, and quickly sets the tone for the rest of the book – the majority of the chapters are reasonably short, providing quick interventions that are diverse in their theoretical groundings, their methodologies, and their subject matter. The overall organisation of the book is logical and the brevity of the chapters makes the majority of the text a gentle introduction to a complex problematic. Upon reading, the terse introduction and lack of conclusion seemed a somewhat confusing editorial decision, particularly when the terminology was introduced and defined. Readers uninitiated in discussion of intersectionality would have benefited from a more rigorous explanation and grounding in the beginning of the text. Furthermore, the volume as a whole would have benefited from a conclusion chapter, and without the cohesion of bookending introduction and conclusion chapters, some readers may find that the volume feels somewhat disjointed and abrupt.

The sixth chapter of this volume is an essay entitled "Confronting Black Male Privilege", written by R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy. McCoy, an Associate Professor at City University of New York, provides a fascinating narrative account of the struggle to name and confront black male privilege. He situated the discussion within gendered and post-colonial examinations of white and male privilege, citing Peggy McIntosh's (1990) seminal "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack". The concept of black male privilege is under-theorised and under-examined largely because it is difficult to even discuss the privilege of a group that is simultaneously outside hegemonic privilege (p.76). Lewis-McCoy discusses earlier attempts at unpacking the knapsack of black male privilege by Jewel Woods (2008), highlighting not only its contribution but the rationale behind its poor reception, given that questions of black male privilege are always contextualised by discussions of "the crisis of black men and boys" (p.77).

Lewis-McCoy's examination is primarily narrative, built upon his own experiences navigating male privilege as a

black man. He contextualises what he sees as a dual inscription of oppressor and oppressed by retelling a memory from his university days, in which he slept through a conference discussing the oppression of black women because of a night of over-indulgence, which included a visit to a strip club (p.75). The response from his friends was ultimately that as a black man, Lewis-McCoy had more relevant and pressing things to worry about than the oppression of women, even black women (p.75). This is one of the ways that black male privilege operates for Lewis-McCoy – the subordination of concerns impacting women to the crisis of the black male. He argues that black male privilege operates in similar fashion to white male privilege if only in the confines of the black community (p.77), but unlike white male privilege, it does more harm than good to black men (p.80).

The eleventh chapter of this volume, in the final section dealing with counter-narratives of masculinity, deals explicitly with challenges to the hyper-masculine and hyper-sexual stereotypes that are questioned in the title of this book. The chapter, titled 'I just be myself', draws upon primary interview data to discuss how black men in low income New York City neighbourhoods navigate hyper-masculine and hyper-sexual stereotypes. The authors open with the claim that "black masculinity has been defined by others" with little attention paid to how group members conceptualised their own masculinity (p.167). The majority of the data presented deals with "sexual scripts" (p.167) and the hegemonic masculine assumption of the patriarch as provider or "breadwinner" for the household (p.169).

The findings of the study that dealt with "[t]he provider as a lived reality" (p.174) were in some ways the most interesting. The authors found that while the idea of "providing" was instrumental to participants' definitions of both manhood and masculinity (p.174), the data presented suggested that providing was a dynamic concept that fluctuated according to participants' resources and where relevant, the resources of their partners (p.175). One interviewee who received food stamps while seeking employment included household chores in his definition of provision and contribution (p.175), illustrating the dynamism of participants' definitions of provider and contributor. Failure to recognise this dynamism and adaptation of role is apparent, the authors argue, in previous research that focuses on black men with a criminal record, obscuring the realities of the majority of the population and reinforcing the hyper-masculine stereotype (p.175).

Overall, this book is an important intervention into race and gender studies literature, and in particular its emphasis on intersectional identities is a refreshing and interesting contribution. It would serve well as an introduction to those interested in the problem of intersectionality, specifically with respect to race and masculinity. The volume does not, however, go much further than introducing how race and masculinity may inform one another or how they may obscure one another in specific contexts, and indeed stops short of a unified call to action. *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?* does the important work of addressing some of the myths and stereotypes that plague black men, and recognises the danger inherent in black men's alterity, but does so without providing a cohesive reimagining of the problem or conclusive outcome to the varied discussion.

Megan Armstrong is a third year PhD candidate in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University. She received her BA in Political Science from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Her research focuses on the intersection of performativity, gender, and the weaponization and brutalization of the body in ethnic violence. Further research interests include sexuality, security studies, and zombies. [Read more reviews by Megan.](#)

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