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Code Warrior

By Reviewed Alondra Nelson

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HACKER CRACKER *

A Journey from the Mean

Streets of Brooklyn

To the Frontiers of Cyberspace

By Ejovi Nuwere with David Chanoff

Morrow. 258 pp. \$24.95

The recorded history of black hackers is short indeed. And what history there is has been forced to fit stereotypical narratives. Most notoriously, John Lee, an African-American techie who went by the nom de hack Corrupt, became the iconic figurehead of an elite hacker clique named Masters of Deception when he appeared on the cover of Wired magazine in December 1994. Lee's visage fronted an excerpt from a book about MOD that used his blackness to support spectacular claims about cyberspace gang wars.

After this bittersweet media debut, Lee went underground for a time, courtesy of the feds, only to reemerge in 2001 as the mastermind behind the website urbanexpose.com, which skewered the then burgeoning "urban" new media scene. This exploit (to borrow a phrase from hacking dialect) and the resulting press clamor confirmed Lee's status as a technical trickster of the highest order, capable of hacking both classified information systems and cracking the codes of American popular culture.

Now comes Hacker Cracker, a coming-of-age story that details the transformation of an African-American hacker into a security professional against the backdrop of underprivileged urban life. The term "hacking" takes on a double meaning in Ejovi Nuwere's memoir, characterizing both his efforts to surmount the structural inequities that often constrain black men in America and his ability to overcome sophisticated and highly guarded computer networks. As he explains, "I feel like I've been hacking foreign cultures most of my life." Mirroring John Lee's experiences to some degree, Nuwere's story suggests that the skills that make a good hacker -- steely determination, quick thinking, a good-humored disrespect for convention, role-playing, audacity -- extend beyond the computer screen to the rest of life.

Nuwere's tale begins in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, where he was raised by his steadfast grandmother while his mother struggled, off and on, with drug addiction and later with AIDS. Though the

neighborhood was too frequently the setting for shootings and drug transactions, Nuwere's home was a haven of extended family. His uncles -- Osie, a graduate student in math, and Big E, an underground entrepreneur -- were important influences. It was Osie, with whom Nuwere shared a bedroom, who brought the first computer into the home. Soon after, Nuwere began his journey into the alternative world of hacking, which supplied an escape from the stresses of home life and a new identity -- iGotz. Nuwere explains that hacking, like his high school passion for acting, was about "being someone other than who you really are, who I really was."

Nuwere began with small exploits, such as swapping pirated software and simple programming. He soon graduated to entire computer systems, and a hack of an Internet service provider resulted in a security job. At the pinnacle of his hacking career, Nuwere and a hacker comrade broke into an information system so classified that all references to it in the book are blacked out like an FBI file after it's been sanitized for the Freedom of Information Act. Being a good security specialist required that Nuwere keep up with the latest hacking skills and tools. As his hacking skills improved, so did his security positions, as he moved from small and then midsize Internet companies to the upper echelons of a Wall Street financial firm.

Despite the inspirational qualities of his evolution, Nuwere provides little insight into how it was accomplished. He comes off as a black, geeky Forrest Gump who stumbles from one lucky break to the next -- work as a production assistant for Spike Lee and a motion picture extra, a spot in an exclusive performing arts school in New York City, entrance to the inner sanctum of New York City hackers in the early 1990s, an introduction to the legendary MOD crew, and an acquaintance with hacker and Napster CEO Mark Fanning. These experiences seem to have been flukes rather than the results of a skillful young man's labors.

Like many memoirs, this one begins at the end, with a gripping prologue that details a race against both the clock and another skilled computer expert to save corporate information. The reader is dropped, as in a good science fiction novel, into another time and place, where the action has already begun. It's compelling stuff, the kind of writing and pacing that sell a book proposal. Yet what follows is uneven in its pacing, as details of Nuwere's family life give way to overly technical accounts of his hacking adventures. At times, the book reads more like "Hacking for Dummies" than a memoir; there's even a glossary at the end.

If *Hacker Cracker* is incomplete as autobiography, ultimately it succeeds in describing hacking as a lens through which to view an African-American story of survival and success. Nuwere's story sets up his career as a security specialist in opposition to his Bedford Stuyvesant youth, but the two experiences might be better read as closely related. Too often these days, the ultimate hack of American culture for a young black man is to reach adulthood. The talents that propelled Nuwere's journey from hacker to cracker are the same skills that have buoyed him through life. *

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