

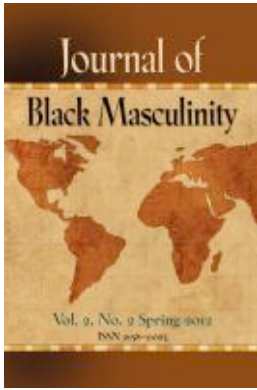
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The Journal of Black Masculinity

C. P. Gause, Ph.D.-Founder and Editor-In-Chief

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Manuscript submissions, books for review, and correspondence concerning all editorial matters should be sent to: C. P. Gause, Editor, *Journal of Black Masculinity*, using the contact information below. Manuscripts submitted for publication will be peer-reviewed.

Manuscripts should be submitted in electronic form and should not exceed 35 pages in length (including endnotes and references). Authors should follow the *APA Publication Manual*, 6th edition (APA Press, 2010). A style guide for preparing manuscripts is located on the *JBM* website at <http://www.blackmasculinity.com>.

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If we analyze the ways in which race structured the extent of Walter Lee's Dreams, as well as Mama's life as written in Hansberry's play, how would that compare to the ways in which Blackness works as a currency for class and mobility within Hip Hop? Ultimately, what are the dreams of the 35 year old Black man of 50 years ago, and how have they evolved, disintegrated, flourished and exploded through the cultural production of 30 year old Black men today?

This is the Re-Mix...

One way to approach these questions is to simply ask, what does it mean for young men of color that self-identify as mixed race or Black to log onto the Internet and see video clips of their favorite rapper endorsing the President of the United States of America while shaking his hand? At the conclusion of the election, it was clear that the majority of voters in the United States shared at least one dream—for Barack Obama to serve as President. Along with celebrating a monumental victory because of Obama's win, young black men also continued participating in a public discourse reconstructing representations of the manhood that were being assigned to them. In order to re-mix black masculinity, these young men began interfacing with power in new ways, challenging old systems of oppression and racism using tried and true methods of cultural production.

The Internet has become a major tool in facilitating the alternative versions of Black masculinity that are offered through chart topping music. An example of this is unsigned, previously unknown artist A.P.T., who gained notoriety for a homemade video remix he posted on YouTube in 2008, when he covered an original song by platinum recording artist, Lil' Wayne. Winning a Grammy for Best Solo Rap Song in 2009, *A Milli* was first released by Lil' Wayne and CashMoney records. Re-written and video recorded over the original beat by artist A.P.T. and released on YouTube with new lyrics and the title of *O-bama O-bama*, the song grew in popularity and notoriety until it was also played by major radio stations across the country. The original lyrics penned by Lil' Wayne were misogynistic, violent, and not at all related to the election; as such, *A Milli* offered little in terms

of lyrical content besides the played-out praise to material possessions, money, cars, physical might, and bragging rights based on sexual conquests with women. In other words, the original song subscribed to the negative portrayals of Black masculinity so commonly marketed as the singular option for engagement and manhood young men of color have access to. What the song did offer to the socially conscious listener was an exceptionally catchy chorus and beat.

However, the re-mixed version of the song uploaded by A.P.T. promptly vaulted to the number one spot on YouTube, all while promoting Barack Obama's political campaign, and garnered over 4 million views. A.P.T. (2010) references the overnight success of his video and song by saying, "It has been re-posted on a countless number of websites and heard or seen by MILLIONS of people. And – most importantly – it actually changed the minds of people who were John McCain supporters, and convinced them to vote for Barack Obama instead" (<http://aptsongs.wordpress.com/obamamilliremix/>). The *O-bama O-bama* re-mix includes efforts to validate Obama's integrity as a Black man by aligning him with historical legends in the Black community such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and even Robert Kennedy. The lyrics work to untangle and distance Obama from negative and conflicting images of the historical Uncle Tom character that has been assigned to other high-ranking Black politicians. Uncle Tom is the literary figure in Harriet Beecher Stowe's, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who was a slave and was brutally martyred because he refused to give away the hiding place of two escaped women slaves.

The character of "Uncle Tom" has since undergone criticism from literary giants such as James Baldwin and James Weldon Johnson who firmly rejected the servility, emasculation, and passiveness of the original character in Stowe's novel. Later, "Uncle Tom" evolved as a caricature in minstrel shows to be portrayed as a subservient fool; an accommodating Black male slave who groveled at the feet of White masters. This version of "Uncle Tom," the passive, unintelligent, and weak slave is the antithesis to popular culture's portrayal (however limiting and binary it may be) of Black hyper-masculinity. Thus, in contemporary slang terms, any Black person that is referred to as an "Uncle Tom" is viewed in a negative light. They are a person

recognized as a “sellout,” one who would willingly trade their people for favors or money from Whites, or any oppressive social group that might benefit the individual over the community. Because of Obama’s mixed race heritage, and the overlapping boundaries of class and race that are at play whenever his identity is interpreted, it makes sense that A.P.T. (2010) would acknowledge and approve of Obama’s overt performance of both his masculinity and his race. The third verse of *O-bama O-bama* ends with the following lyrics:

People, I say this country’s no hope without him
But he’s gotta go out and relate to everybody
He do what he do, like give his wife a hug and
then a fist dap
Gotta do that stuff in public, so the hood’ll know that -
He’s black
Gotta use big words, white people love to hear it
If they hear it, they don’t fear him, they don’t know him, but
they feel him
That’s real.... (A.P.T., 2010)

Astute observations are noted in these lines regarding the demands of social navigation being made on Obama through the political commentary written and performed by this young Hip Hop artist. A.P.T.’s lyrics provide insight regarding the ways in which a male, mixed race body in America must negotiate the social transactions and public discourses that are constructed around masculinity, Blackness, and identity. This last verse begins with noting how Obama has worked to “relate to everybody” using the example of Obama’s public displays of affection with his wife which include not only romantic hugs and kisses, but fist dap—a familiar casual greeting similar to a handshake used commonly and recognized as a sign of mutual respect and agreement.

A.P.T. approves of Obama’s ability to maneuver the often contradictory in-between spaces that border his subject positions as a mixed race man and as a political candidate simultaneously. Because Obama publicly interacts with his Black wife in this manner, showing

her forms of respect recognized culturally, according to A.P.T., he will be acknowledged as “Black enough” to win the votes and therefore earn the trust of the Black community. From this perspective, urban sensibility is equated to youth and Blackness. Obama’s embodiment and performance of his Black masculinity, and even more telling, his ability to function in a way that is traditionally accepted and expected by White America, affords him social collateral that is necessary for him to succeed on both planes. President Obama has learned to navigate the landscape in both of the communities that stake a claim in his life.

On the other hand, A.P.T. also references the President’s need to “use big words” so that White people won’t be afraid of him, even if he does appear to be different from them and from the traditional presidential candidate. A.P.T.’s lyric asserts his comprehension of Obama’s need to perform his education and intelligence through his speech so that White people will also relate to him easily. It is an unfortunately not uncommon “compliment” when White people call young Black men articulate—it suggests surprise that young Black men are able to thoughtfully and clearly communicate highly intellectual ideas in a clear and coherent manner. While this insinuation is insulting and offensive, it persists and is even internalized and perpetuated by the Black community as is signified in A.P.T.’s song. Obama’s role as a senator, and then as a presidential candidate, makes him no stranger to piloting his way through the systems of oppression so often mired in the institutions of higher education and government that are the apotheosis of our society.

A.P.T. acknowledges the “double consciousness” that Franz Fanon (1967) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) wrote about surrounding the mental and emotional split that Black men often experience as a result of inhabiting a body of African descent and living as a citizen socialized in America. What happens when the theory of double consciousness is applied to a mixed race man that self-identifies with both of his heritages? Clearly, Obama has reconciled and certainly employed his dual racial citizenship to his personal benefit (and I would argue to the benefit of our country at large). When the President of the United States self-identifies as mixed race, what does it mean

that there is still a need to affirm his authenticity as a man of color? More importantly, what does it mean that young Black men recognize and affirm Obama's reconstructed identity, as well as the shifts he makes in the ways in which he performs that identity along the way?

I suggest that it is because young Black men appreciate Obama's vocalized goals of progress and of radical change because they symbolize a new form of success and a new definition of masculinity. Also, young Black men understand that becoming fluent in multiple identities, as well as fluid in the shifting of those identities, is a useful, vital, and necessary skill to develop in order to live out their Dreams. Obama demonstrates an innovative and imaginative way to work through and occupy those identities, thus presenting a new version of manhood. Finally, how does this popular culture re-mix translate to the lives of mixed race citizens? What is the motivation for claiming or denying ethnic authenticity to mixed race individuals? In her discussion on appropriation, the act of writing, and racism, bell hooks (1989) states, "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (p. 43).

What hooks declares about writing can also be applied to performance, and more broadly to relationships, and the subjectivities or identities we are assigned by other people—even the President. How does this translate to the lived experiences of a less famous mixed race person? What is the motivating factor that determines how invested a Person of Color or a White person is in the success or well-being of a mixed race person?

Neither of Obama's performances of his selves excludes or precludes the existence, vitality, priority, and value of the others. Obama's re-presentation of all of his selves, from loving husband to competent politico, is authentic: he neither strives to disregard one or another of his characters and this has earned him respect from folks of all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds. Based on my experience as a mixed race person, I often speculate that the reason that communities of color are suspicious of mixed race peoples' motivations is because mixed race people always have a choice—when the going gets tough,

they can *choose* to self-identify or pass for an ethnicity that might have an easier time. But what I know for sure is that no matter where you come from, “life ain’t no easy ride.” Obama’s performances of his selves ring with integrity because he has refused to make such a choice, asking instead that the American people decide for themselves. His performances demand a reconciliation of multiple consciousnesses, not for himself, but for those of us who still struggle with our own conflicts around the embodiment of race and gender. It is Obama’s integrity then, the skilled shuffling of his identity that is acknowledged and applauded by A.P.T., by Jay-Z, by Jeezy, and by America.

The delicate work of locating the individual autonomous self(s) within the community of humanity and vice versa is all too often clumsily plodded through or simplistically addressed. What this work *requires*, however, is an awareness of the interactions between others and our selves, and recognition of the validity of that in-between space where such interaction occurs. Careful attention to this process is the ultimate demand of an ethics of embodiment, for any knowledge produced by a collective body is produced under very particular circumstances. The reconfiguration of Dreams is slippery, and we must continue to explore the possibility of liberation and mobility within the intersections of incongruous spaces that mixed race people are assigned to and abide in. Understanding how power, race, and gender scribe those spaces and performances will help us to keep a listening ear for the production of new re-mixes. Who knows, we might even find ourselves dancing along to their beat.

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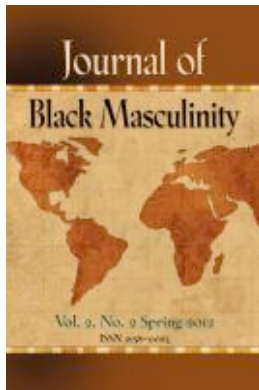
Biography

CRYSTAL LEIGH ENDSLEY, PhD, is currently Visiting Assistant Professor in Africana Studies at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York where she also serves as director of the Institute for Global Africana Studies. Endsley is also a networked fellow with the Digital Humanities Initiative at Hamilton College. Recognized by *Cosmopolitan Magazine* as a “Fun, Fearless Female,” Crystal Leigh is part performer, part professor, and works to serve her community as an internationally acclaimed spoken word artist, activist, and actor. Endsley has performed and presented workshops and lectures at numerous colleges and universities across the United States as well as the world including Zanzibar, Tanzania, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Her current research focuses on intersections of performance and identity with themes such as feminist pedagogy, race, and popular culture; Hip Hop and cultural production as activism; and the connections between academic/home communities, motherhood and knowledge production.

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