

Patriarchy continues to loom large over representations of Black masculinity in the age of President Obama

While many hailed the election of the first black president with Barack Obama to be the beginning of a new “post-racial” age in the United States, the incarceration rates and racial wealth gap reveal how little has changed in the past six years. **Crystal Belle** examines different constructions of black masculinity in the age of President Obama. She argues that society must focus on dismantling patriarchy alongside institutional racism as both force black men to perform particularized visions of their identities.

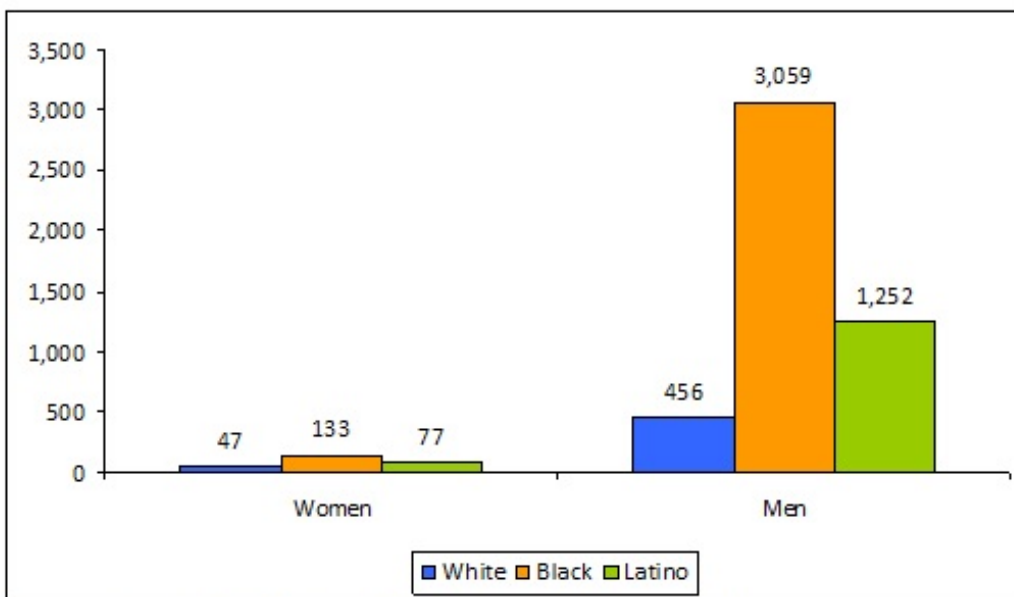


“You will have to reject the cynicism that says the circumstances of your birth or society’s lingering injustices necessarily define you and your future” – President Obama [My Brothers Keeper Initiative]

The United States is both enthralled with and afraid of black men. Although this is the era of President Obama, the nation’s first black president, this historical legacy is paired with the cold-blooded [murder of black teens walking in gated communities](#), or those who get [killed while listening to “thug” music in their cars](#). It is evident that living in a black male body is equated with being an acceptable, if not acclaimed, target.

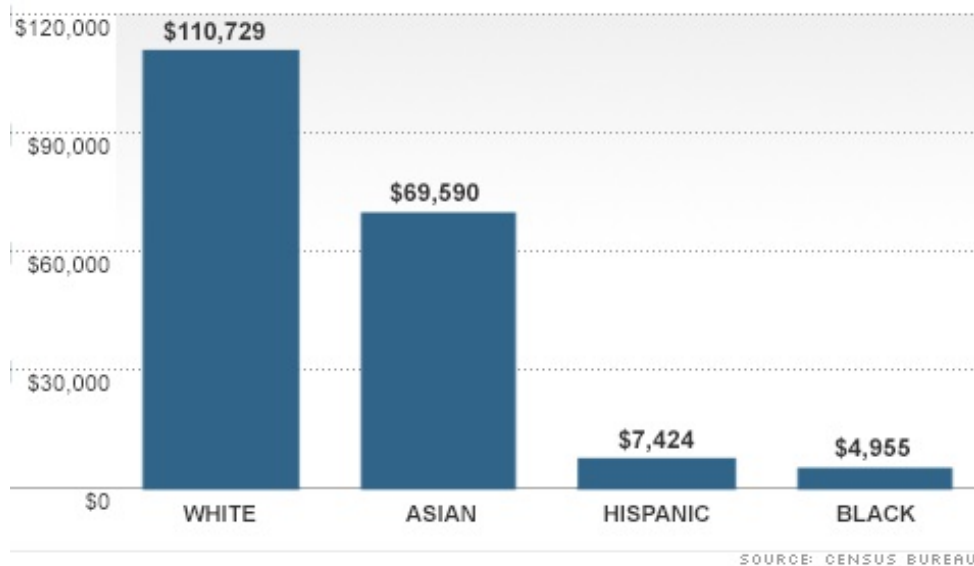
Black men are continuously spoken of in monolithic ways, often being referred to as dangerous, absentee fathers or so-called “thugs.” And despite the fact that a black man holds the highest office in the nation, these stereotypical beliefs have not changed. I was not naïve enough to think that a black president would in fact change the myth of the dangerous black man overnight, but I did not expect things to look increasingly [grim](#), as expressed in the figures below.

Figure 1: Rate of Incarcerations Per 100,000 by Gender and Race, 2010



Source: Guerino, P., Harrison, P. M., & Sabol, W. (2011). *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 2: Racial Wealth Gap



Along with racism, black men today must also contend with particular notions of masculinity. The concept of masculinity is tied to patriarchal perceptions of manhood. Perceptions of what manhood may or may not look like are racialized and, of course, gendered. There are several ways of looking at who black men are, politically, socially, and culturally. I have specifically looked at representations of black masculinity in hip-hop as a way to make sense of how popular culture is used as a medium to highlight and play upon racial stereotypes. Since hip-hop music and culture were created and dominated by black men, some critical questions to explore are: In what ways is masculinity performed? In what ways is race performed? How does the performance of race and masculinity impact black male identities? These questions also apply to broader political and cultural understandings of black male experiences in the United States.

In her book, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003), bell hooks asserts that, “at the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute, untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling” (p. xii). Although I think hooks’ description is embellished and simplifies the complex construction of black masculinity in this country, I do agree that an unemotional persona lies at the heart of black masculine performances. This is often an act, a performance of sorts that asserts a vision of manhood that is dominant and deviant, attempting to define itself in a world that has often tried to deny the very existence of black men. Sometimes in an attempt to rewrite one’s story, while invoking a painful history, African Americans struggle to positively see themselves under the gaze of white supremacy, similar to W.E.B. Du Bois’ theory of *double consciousness* in his groundbreaking text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, 1996). According to Du Bois, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (p. 5). Thus, with regard to black masculinity, it is difficult to decipher what is *real* and what is merely a performance instigated by a white gaze.

There are also different constructions of black masculinity performed under the white supremacist gaze. For example, President Obama has constructed what scholar Ronda C. Henry Anthony calls a *black middle class masculinity* that allows him to spew the “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” rhetoric that appeals to the American Dream. But how many people actually achieve this dream and how much of that is truly tied to a meritocracy? Obama’s biracial identity and being raised by a white, educated woman, certainly assists in a black masculinity construction that is deemed as “safe” and approachable to the (white) masses.



Photo from Obama's My Brothers Keeper Initiative (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

The President's new initiative, [My Brothers Keeper](#), is tailored to "create opportunities for boys and young men of color" (although the [picture](#) on the White House website has a picture of black men specifically, staring hopefully into the president's eyes) since apparently "data shows that boys and young men of color — regardless of where they come from — are disproportionately at risk from their youngest years through college and the early stages of their professional lives." Such language reinforces prejudiced ideologies of who black men are, in a society that already upholds [Bigger Thomas](#), a black youth living in poverty in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, more than [Kwasi Enin](#), a New York teen who was recently accepted to all eight of the Ivy League colleges. It is easy for someone like President Obama, the "good" Ivy League educated biracial brotha to insist that black men "reject the cynicism" that is certainly a product of structural and institutional racism.

In his book, [Black Masculinity and Sexual Politics](#) (2009), Anthony Lemelle, Jr. argues that:

major social institutions managed the domination of black males. The basic four cultural institutions are military, jails, organized athletics, and the entertainment industry. In each case, masculinity is an image of machismo spectacle. In each role, expectations for black males are to produce a particular brand of masculinity. (p. 52)

Although there is validity to Lemelle's argument, education is missing from that list. During my tenure as a high school English teacher in NYC public schools, it was clear that the criminalization of black men was not only happening on the streets via [Stop-and-Frisk](#) but also in the classrooms and hallways. Black male students were suspended for trivial reasons like wearing their pants low or talking back to teachers. Scholar Athena D. Mutua defines [progressive black masculinities](#) as "the unique and innovative performances of the masculine self that, on the one hand, personally eschew and ethically and actively stand against social structures of domination." In order to see more examples of alternative masculinities, we need to become a society that admonishes patriarchy in every possible environment: homes, schools, government and communities. It is difficult to say how this can be done, however, it is clear that the theory of black masculinity, whether real or imagined, has been elevated during President's Obama's tenure. Moving forward, we must ask how much of this elevation thrives off of deficit representations of black men that stress individual accountability as opposed to sustainable political, economic, and educational reform?

*This article is based on the paper "[From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music](#)" which appeared in the *Journal of Black Studies*.*

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About the author

Crystal Belle- Columbia University

Crystal Belle is an educator, poet and Ph.D. candidate of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include Black masculinities, multiple literacies, poetry-as-research and hip-hop studies. Belle is the author of a poetry collection, [Woman on Fire](#), which weaves stories through stanzas about a Black woman's experience in the African Diaspora.



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