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**Bringing Sexy Back: Barack Obama &  
The "Triumph" of White-Collar Masculinity  
By Jewel Woods  
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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With months left in this seemingly never-ending election season, men have gotten used to the ritual of observing their wives or significant other grin at the TV whenever Senator Obama graces the screen. Senator Obama does not even have to be delivering one of his historic speeches - which seem to occur every other day - in order to elicit such a response. He can be answering questions, shaking hands, or merely strolling across the tarmac on his way to an event, and men watch as the women in their lives edge closer to the television to openly adore this Democratic presidential nominee.

What men might not have become accustomed to are the powerful reactions Senator Obama generates among other men. In fact, some may find it unusual the way other men tend to gravitate towards the TV whenever Senator Obama is on; or how men seem to offer Mr. Obama their full attention - a rarity in male culture - whenever he speaks; or - the unspeakable - how men can even be observed curling the corners of their mouths into a grin while looking at the Senator Obama as well.

The indelible image of an African American man crying during a speech by Senator Obama in Pennsylvania - posted on the front page of theroot.com the day after - vividly captured the powerful reactions that Senator Obama has been able to generate among men. And while commentators may attribute this particular level of reaction to feelings of "racial pride" or being "caught up" in a moment, in reality, the reactions among men to Senator Obama are not limited to black men. An article in Salon titled, Hey, Obama boys: Back off already! "motley crew of men" in their praise and adulation of the Senator from Illinois.

So why has this one man been able to make women smile and men cry? Moreover, why do men as racially, sexually, politically, and culturally diverse as Colin Powell, Michael Eric Dyson, Andrew Sullivan, Tom Joyner, Ted Kennedy, Bill Richardson, Christopher Hitchens appear to have such a "man crush" on Senator Obama?

Political pundits will attribute Senator Obama's broad appeal to a variety of factors, ranging from his "charisma" and the unique qualities that set him apart as a candidate - such as his oratorical skills - to his "populist message" and the belief that he represents the potential to reach across party lines and end the gridlock that currently exists in Washington. Others even suggest that Senator Obama's appeal evidences this nation's deep hope and vision for a "post-racial" American society. However, commentators have offered little explanation for why Senator Obama enjoys such strong support among men. The few critics that have talked about gender in relationship to men and Senator Obama usually point to sexism as the main reason why men appear to have any affinity for him at all.

An alternative explanation for why Senator Obama currently enjoys such support among men is that many see in him a validation and recognition that they find wildly appealing. "Obamamania" among men may represent a sort of "triumph" of white-collar masculinity stemming from the structural and cultural tensions created as America is transformed from a blue-collar manufacturing economy to a technological and service-based economy.

The meteoric rise of Senator Obama comes on the heels of a precipitous decline in the standard of living for most Americans, especially men. The decimation of America's industrial and manufacturing base has caused North American men to experience their own version of the "Full Monty", a decline that has been particularly heart-felt for working class men of color. However, at the same time that de-industrialization and downsizing has crippled America's industrial and manufacturing base, there has been an expansion of jobs that require education and advanced training. Economist Julianne Malveaux estimates that positions requiring an associate degree or higher levels of education will account for 44 percent of future economic growth.

The result has been not only a growing class divide within American society, but also division between men. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the two largest occupation categories for black males in 2004 were professional, managerial and related occupations (21.7%) and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (26.5%). The most common occupations for white males were professional, managerial and related occupations (33.1%) and natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations (19.7%). Rebecca Blank, former Dean of Public Policy at the University of Michigan and member of the President's Council of Economic Advisors under the Clinton administration, noted in her book, *It Takes A Nation*, that less-skilled men in virtually every occupation and industry have faced wage declines, while more-skilled men have experienced increases in earnings.

Yet, despite the overwhelming trend away from blue-collar jobs and tear-jerking stories written in the *New York Times* like "Blue-Collar Jobs Disappear, Taking Families Way of Life Along", many of the most powerful expressions of masculinity within contemporary American society continue to be associated with blue-collar masculinities. The unprecedented popularity of video games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Halo*, *Madden Football* and the explosion of professional blood sports like *Ultimate Fighting* into the mainstream exemplify this trend. In addition, movies like *300*, *American Gangsta*, *Jackass - The Movie*, most of Will Ferrell's movies; television shows like *South Park*, *Wild N Out*, *Rob & Big*, and *Flavor Of Love*; and the ubiquitous images of Hip Hop/Rap Music continue to demonstrate a basic tension for males in modern society: while society is becoming less reliant on men's bodies and men's brawn, most of the dominant images of masculinity remain rooted in such "traditional" masculinity. In the realm of political and popular culture, the class divisions among men have never been strictly economic in nature. Larry the Cable Guy does not convey the same sense of

humor as Bill Maher [even though both are hysterical]; Kal Penn does not project the same type of public masculinity as a Fared Zakaria; and Lil Wayne certainly does not signify the same cultural sensibilities as Julian Bond.

With degrees from institutions like Columbia and Harvard, and a background teaching Constitutional Law at the University of Chicago, it is no surprise that Senator Obama represents a break from conventional images of masculinity. However, it is not Senator Obama's educational bona fides that distinguish him from "traditional" masculinity in American society - George W. Bush has a degree from Yale University yet remains within the traditional paradigm. On the one hand, what distinguishes Senator Obama is his extremely high level of performance in speeches and debates. [As an aside, I continue to be amazed about the number of people that have cried during a Barack Obama speech.] In this respect, the reason why men crowd televisions to watch Senator Obama speak is the same reason why basketball players would rush home to watch Michael Jordan play, or why people who have no knowledge or interest in golf will interrupt their day to watch Tiger Woods tee up. These men perform at levels that are without equal in their respective fields - it just so happens that Senator Obama performs white-collar masculinity. On the other hand, what sets his particular brand of masculinity apart is his ability to blend aspects of both blue-collar and white-collar masculinities. Senator Obama not only plays word games like Taboo, he also plays basketball. And before Barack Obama was the editor and president of the Harvard Law Review, he was stomping the streets on the South Side of Chicago as a community organizer.

Consequently, the key to Senator Obama's appeal among men is not solely his intelligence or his elocution, but his smooth and unflappable character, or simply his "coolness". Senator Obama has become the embodiment of smooth. He is like one of the agents in the Matrix trilogy who moves so fast you can't tell he's dodging bullets. He possesses a "grace under fire" that men have always found intoxicating. Similar to a "Black Frank Sinatra", Senator Obama possesses a Billy Dee Williams type of cool.

The result is that Senator Obama has accomplished what men like John Kerry and former Al Gore were not able to accomplish - he has brought sexy back to white-collar masculinity.

For African American men, Senator Obama has accomplished something even more extraordinary - arguably single-handedly transforming the black public sphere. It is no longer "easy" to view black men solely through the lens of deficiencies, bad behavior, their bodies, or even their relationship to black women. As a result, Senator Obama occupies a peculiar place in the collective imagination of African American men. For example, he must be the only black man in America that can smile as often as he does and still be taken seriously by other black men.

Martin Linsky attempted to explain this unique blending of masculinity in Newsweek by referring to Senator Obama as the "First Female President" and arguing that Senator Obama embodied the qualities and values normally associated with women. While it is true that modern white-collar masculinity can be viewed in relation to the emergence of "pink-collar" jobs and fears of the "feminization" of professional categories, the stature of Senator Obama among men does not necessarily represent a culture war between men and women as much as it represents conflict between men. Middle class white men compete with the public masculinities of Howard Stern and Ben Stiller just as middle class black men compete with the public masculinities of Flavor Flav and Pac Man Jones.

Perhaps the easiest arena in which to see the battle between blue-collar and white-

collar masculinities play out in this election is in discussions of the "white male" vote. Often derisively referred to as the "Bubba Voters" - as in Thomas Schaller's trenchant article, So Long White Boy - working class white males voters have not been nearly as receptive to Senator Obama's "A Change We Can Believe In" message as college-educated white male voters. This suggests that it will not be simply racism, nor regionalism, but class that will most determine the white male vote for Senator Obama in the November elections.

At a time when America lags behind virtually every other industrialized nation in education and economic growth, many Americans see in Senator Obama an embodiment of policies that make this nation relevant for the challenges of a changing world. However, men also see in Senator Obama a masculinity that they can identify with and aspire to. After eight years of the failed experiment of having the type of president that men would rather have a beer with, Senator Obama's public brand of masculinity would be more similar to European heads of state. The contrast between the current president and Senator Obama who often appears brilliant, the epitome of smooth, and highly articulate, is quite striking!

Let's face it, the Senator from Illinois with the good looks and the winning smile is not only attractive to women. The guy with the big ears and big brain possesses what Harvard political scientist Martin Kilson referred to as "a high-order gentlemanliness" quality about him. He also personifies a post-industrial and post-modern version of masculinity for men and boys facing a changing world that is not quite sure what to do with them.


It is for this reason that so many men find him to be an attractive candidate, and why men have such a Man Crush on him as well.


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**The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**

**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, Jewel Woods, holds a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, a Master's in Sociology from The University of Toledo, and a Master's in Social Work from The University of Michigan. Jewel is a 2005 New Voices Fellow, a former participant in the Minority Scholar's Program at The University of Chicago and a select member of the Fragile Families Data Workshop at Columbia University. Working toward earning a PhD in Social Work with a specialization in men's issues, Jewel is a gender analyst and the founder and executive director of The [Renaissance Male Project](#), Inc. a non-profit advocacy and accountability organization for men and boys. Additionally, he is the co-author of [Don't Blame It on Rio: The Real Deal Behind Why Men Go to Brazil for Sex](#). Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Woods.

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