

Michael Jackson: Color Complex and the Politics of White Supremacy

by

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Abstract

This presentation argues that Michael Jackson's compassionate and loving spirit fell victim to the ever present and dangerous, subliminal forces of White racial superiority, although he had an abundance of positive role models and pro-Black examples of success and greatness. Second, a series of question are asked about why he so desperately try to change the 'Man in the Mirror' once he became a mega superstar and a pop musical icon; what were the root causes of his seemingly anti-Black attitude and apparent acceptance of pro-White aesthetics and standards of attractiveness, and why was Black self-determination, Black pride, identity and self esteem were seemingly repressed in his life experiences? Thus, Michael Jackson was victimized by the long historical and institutional reality of White supremacy.

"Lord, Lord Why did you make me Black? Why did you make someone the world wants to hold back? Why did you give me thick lips, a broad nose and kinky hair? Why did you make someone who receives the hatred stare? Why do people think I'm useless? How come I feel so used? Why do some people see my skin and think I should be abused? Lord I just don't understand what is it about my skin? Why do some people want to hate me and not know the person within? Lord you know my own people mistreat me and I know this just ain't right. They don't like my hair; they say I'm too dark or too light..."

I have taken the liberty to delete certain lines of this poem which was given to me by a student at South Mountain Community College (Phoenix, AZ) about ten years ago. It has an anonymous author and it is too long for my purpose here, but I will close out with God's response to the profound poetic question "Why did you make me Black?"

For the record, let me state at the outset that I have loved and admired the Jackson 5 and Michael Jackson for over 40 years. We are both natives of a very special city in northwest Indiana called Gary which to many, including myself believe has a very unique and rich history as part of the great American cultural landscape.

Michael Jackson was ten years old in 1967-68, when in 1968 the registered voters in Gary elected Richard Gordon Hatcher as the first African American mayor of Gary, Indiana to become one of the first Black mayors elected in a northern industrial city and the first in the state of Indiana. As a teenager during the late 1960's, I still can remember the pride and joy of my family and community had when the election results came in. My beloved city had just made history as did Cleveland, Ohio whose residents in 1967 elected Carl Stokes (1927-1996) as their first African American mayor.

Gary was a predominately Black city in the U.S. because thousands of Blacks migrated there seeking employment in the United States steel manufacturing industry. My father moved my family to Gary where he worked and retired from US Steel after 25 long years. Gary or "Chocolate City" as some have nicknamed it, was the birth place and home of many other celebrities and high profile Blacks, in addition to the Jackson family, including people like Denise (Chandler) Williams, Fred Williamson, Avery Brooks, William Marshal, The Spaniels, Dick Barnett, Gerald Irons, Willie McCarter, Manny Newsome, Austin Artis, and Glenn Robinson to name a few. Thus, the Jackson family was a part of this history. And unknown to many, the first Jackson 5 record entitled "Big Boy" was released on the local Gary, Indiana 'Steel Town' label before the family left home to join Berry Gordy and the Motown enterprise in Detroit, Michigan.

My reasons for sharing this background information on Michael and Gary, Indiana are simply to convey the message that from 1958 to 1968- for ten whole years of his early youth, Michael was nurtured, immersed and socialized in a Black world with plenty of positive role models and pro-Black examples of success and greatness. During his impressionable and formative years, despite allegations that his father frequently called him "big nose Michael", young Michael had an abundance of people, culture and history to keep him rooted and grounded in self love and veneration.

The so-called "King of Pop," Michael Joseph Jackson (MJ) as we all know, later in his adult life, underwent numerous cosmetic facial surgeries and skin lightening procedures that literally transformed and altered his appearance. He was barely recognizable to those of us who remember his handsome and adorable young countenance at ten and even twenty years old. So the question we all need to ask and sincerely explore is why did Michael so desperately try to change the 'Man in the Mirror' once he became a mega superstar and a pop musical icon? What were the root causes for MJ's seemingly anti-Black attitude and apparent acceptance of pro-White aesthetics and standards of attractiveness?

With all of his personal success, fame, fortune and power of influence across our global village, why would he reject and sacrifice his beautiful Black skin and features and surrender his Black racial identity? In reality, the MJ of recent years resembled a gross mis-representation of Blackness. I content that Michael Jackson was just another African American who was victimized by the long historical and institutional reality of White supremacy culture in American society. Long before MJ was born in northern Indiana, during the antebellum era and post emancipation period; African American aesthetics were characterized and propagated as undesirable, unattractive and downright ugly.

According to Sander Gilman in *The Figure of the Black in German Aesthetic Theory* (Gilman 1975) the issue was raised of the relationship between blackness of skin and eighteenth century aesthetics, and this idea was taken even further in Gilman's book *On Blackness Without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Gilman 1982). In her pioneering studies, Gilman draws out the way in which theories of the 'ugly' were formed and applied to human types, especially Africans. To illustrate the latter, Gilman documents a dialogue between Moses Mendelssohn and Gottfried Ephraim Lessing which positioned the physiognomy of Blacks to European standards of beauty, and brought the supposed feelings of disgust at the appearance of other peoples into the framework of aesthetic theory.

Also David Bindman's profoundly provocative text "*Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*" (Bindman 2002), and other recently published books have taken in the issue of race, skin color and the Black aesthetic. For example, *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex* (Golden 2004) and *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* edited by Russell, Wilson and Hall (Russell 1992).

There are numerous other examples one could cite to document this lengthy racist Eurocentric tradition propagating negative images and aesthetics of Blacks and other peoples of color. Thus, African descendants in America, the Caribbean and Brazil have internalized these fabricated and fictionalized images of themselves to the extent that some scholars have defined this psychological abnormality as 'Post Trauma Slavery Disorder' (PTSD). The most visible symptoms are: 1) use of skin lightening/bleaching creams 2) preference for White or light skinned mates 3) preference for light skinned children 4) wearing of blond hair or blond wigs 5) black skin/white masks 6) internalized inferiority 7) lack of self love/veneration 8) group self hatred (Niggeritis) and 9) lack of group unity and trust (Leary 2005).

In the March 1966 issue of *Liberator* magazine, a group of concerned Black women wrote an article asking the question "Is Ebony Killing the Black Woman?" A partial extract from the article should suffice to make my point clear:

"The psychological effect on our people of a publication such as Ebony, with its skin bleaching cream and straight hair ads, is demoralizing and tends to reinforce the already evident inferiority and self hatred complexes of the Black community. As a race, we have been taught by Whites that Black is ugly; for example to be 'blacklisted', 'blackmailed' or 'black balled' –every day phrases denotes exclusion or alienation...when a supposedly Black magazine comes forth with the same ideology as the oppressor, it indicates the extent to which the oppressor has used his symbols through culture, to psychologically enslave Black people. It also indicates how successful the oppressor has been...Every race has its own standards of beauty. Every race maintains a loyalty to its cultural and historical roots. Why then would a publication such as Ebony want us to lose our inherent standards of beauty, and substitute in its place European criteria (Rodgers 1966)?"

It is clear then from the above commentary, that this has been and still is a Black people's social-psychological problem, and not an identity problem totally unique to a pop cultural icon such as Michael Joseph Jackson.

I don't expect everyone to relate or connect to what I am saying. For example, do White Americans care to understand what 500 years of White supremacy ideology and imagery can still do to a person of Michael Jackson's stature and celebrity? Does Larry King and the hosts of CNN news correspondents really understand or comprehend the global political dynamics of Eurocentric and White supremacy?

If anti-Black feelings regarding Black people in America could seemingly permeate and dominate the mindset of a giant cultural icon such as Michael Jackson, then it is certainly understandable to me how young Black children in New York City in 2007 are still choosing White dolls and White images over Black dolls and Black images as more attractive and more desirable (Edney 2006).

Why is the image of the White aesthetic so enticing, seductive and intoxicating to so many people of color in America and abroad? What is the nature of the power behind Euro-American values, holidays, languages, clothing styles, etc.? Why are African women in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa using skin lightening and bleaching creams that are potentially life threatening in their attempt to be more attractive to African men (Blay 2007)?

How does America still successfully produce Blacks who continue to practice self hatred and not self love? The centuries old "color complex" and the ideas about Black inferiority are still prevalent in the psyches of far too many African Americans. Why is this? It has been said that the "colonized" mind is always on the verge of mentacide (Wright 1984). Sadly, a mind like this is self destructive because it has been indoctrinated against itself.

Black self-determination, Black pride, identity and self esteem were seemingly repressed in Michael Jackson's life experiences. It is unfortunate for too many of us, that when we think that we have finally overcome and transcended racial oppression, we foolishly reject and abandon our cultural roots. And as soon as we become rich and famous, we think that it's ok to not sustain and maintain Afrocentric art, culture and information in our lives.

I firmly believe that a Black person, even one born and nurtured in Gary, Indiana like Michael Jackson, who does not read, study and analyze the critical writings of W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz), Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, Frances Cress Welsing and other anti-hegemonic authors will always be in the dangerous position of being intellectually colonized by the political philosophy of White supremacy.

Even with all his monumental success with the Jackson 5 and his own solo career as "the greatest entertainer of all time," Michael Jackson's compassionate and loving spirit fell victim to the ever present and dangerous, subliminal forces of White racial superiority.

Lord, Lord why did you make me Black? And God answered.....

Why did I make you Black? Why did I make you Black? Get off your knees and look around. Tell me, what do you see? I didn't make you in the image of darkness; I made you in likeness of me!

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