

Michael Jackson & The Psycho/Biology of Race

by

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For many, Michael Joseph Jackson represented the epitome of entertainment. His lyrical gravity, choreographed precision, and existential spontaneity were unparalleled and may never be seen in one individual again. Because of this, MJ was loved by billions in multiple generations across ethnic and national boundaries. Still, Mike held a special place in the hearts of African Americans because, more than other groups, we understand how the politics of anti-black racism and its preceding notion of race function in the Land of the Free. We understand that through his music, his surgeries, his skin bleaching, and even his rearing of white children that he unsuccessfully sought to transcend the lofty barriers that the American concept of race has so securely set in place. However, much of our understanding was schizophrenic in that we sympathized with his quest and simultaneously felt betrayed by his attempt. In this paper, I will argue that while race in the American context functions largely as a fictive political narrative, it has psychological and sociological implications that surfaced in Michael Jackson's pathology of appearance and America's bipolar obsession with his racially ambiguous expression.

Why Michael Matters

“Billie Jean?” “Wanna Be Starting Something?” “Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough?” “Thriller?” For many Michael Jackson fans, nothing more needs to be said concerning Michael's relevance as a subject for popular consideration. Globally, vast portions of the population can chart pivotal life moments by the lyrics and syncopations of “Beat It”, “Off The Wall”, or “Workin' Day and Night”. But as Michael grew larger as a performer, he also grew more transcendent and translucent in his appearance. The personable, brown-hued, and afroed adolescent that we fell in love with gradually became a being that lacked visible aspects of both his pigment and personality. Yet within this deficit, Michael achieved greatness and pushed his audience to ascend beyond borders and boundaries with him.

Most are aware of his industry feats so that information does not need repeating here. Still, one important reason why Michael matters is because of his gargantuan influence on how the world understands and experiences music.

Until Michael, the videos of Black artists were not featured on television, in general, and MTV in particular. His collaboration with Rock Legends like Eddie Van Halen and Popular Music Icons like Paul McCartney of Beatles fame paved the way for groups like Run DMC to partner with Aerosmith, bringing Rap Music into mainstream culture. MJ's movements were precise and graceful in ways no one could have imagined before seeing him execute a dance routine. His music was trans-ethnic and division erasing in both style and content. Michael challenged us to be the change we want to see ("Man In The Mirror"), to identify with the poor and needy ("We Are The World"), and in a color-conscious, racist world he dared to utter that social relations should not be affected by skin color ("Black or White"). So in terms of Music Industry trailblazing, innovative performance, and progressive thought, the world owes a great debt to MJ. As a result, anything regarding Michael Jackson has the full attention of millions of spectators internationally. Not surprisingly, his offstage behavior and private life are intriguing across generational as well as ethnic lines; but are particularly interesting to African Americans as his community of origin.

Lupus & Vitiligo

Americans, in general, are very basic when it comes to perceptions of illness. In the popular imagination, illness is largely explainable and predictable given certain genetic markers and contributing behaviors. For instance, if someone has a family history of Alzheimer's, then Alzheimer's occurrence in a member of that family would not be surprising. Likewise, if someone has been a habitually heavy smoker for a number of years, a precipitating lung cancer would almost be expected. In terms of Black Americans, we are accustomed to disproportionate diagnoses of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, sickle-cell anemia, cancer, and even aids. On occasion, our community encounters a few designer diseases. So Michael's declaration of having Lupus during a 1993 interview with Oprahⁱ, while unfamiliar, was nevertheless believable because of the *kind* of illness it is understood to be.

Lupus is an autoimmune disorder that is often hereditary, manifesting frequently in African Americans and Asian women. The disease attacks healthy tissue and can damage multiple organs including the joints, skin, liver, heart, blood vessels, lungs, and brain. There are various forms of Lupus but Discoid Lupus affects only the skin and causes rashes on the face neck and scalp.ⁱⁱ Regarding Michael, there are many pictures that show what appear to be pre-skin lightening rashes on his neck and face. Additionally, there is footage of a younger Michael where prolonged bouts with acne are visible. So if all of this was somehow connected to Lupus, and Mike endured it as well as joint pain to bring us thrilling performances, the entire world is appreciative and eternally grateful. But when you couple Lupus with an additional disease that turns brown skin into white skin, it was a bit too much for black people to emotionally accept.

Vitiligo is a dermatological disorder that destroys pigment in patches of skin and becomes progressively worse over time. The exact cause of Vitiligo is unknown; however, it is primarily genetic and sometimes affected by environmental factors.ⁱⁱⁱ The condition is also highly represented in people with thyroid disorders. It causes milky white splotches to appear on the skin near body orifices and is commonly seen on the extremities as evolving discoloration. When Michael confessed to Oprah Winfrey in a 1993 interview that he suffered from Vitiligo, he was responding to the question of his skin becoming gradually lighter since the mid 1980's.^{iv} After Michael's death, Arnold Klein, his Dermatologist, confirmed the condition on *Larry King Live*.^v There is even speculation that the genesis of his sequined glove, besides his brother Marlon's urging, was to cover his right hand in the early stages of Vitiligo. But despite the candid admission, scientific plausibility, and physician corroboration, many black people remained skeptical.

The Skepticism of Black America

One reason for this skepticism is the history of race in America. Given the mistreatment of black people in this country, what person of color has not briefly entertained a world without racism only to be brought crashing back to a racialized reality? Compounded by the scientific consensus that biological race is a political fiction that functions to define and reinforce social stratifications, black folk understand the attractiveness of creating a narrative that allows an escape from race *if such a narrative were possible*. Delilah in the film *Imitation of Life* displayed quite well these sentiments, and the resentment of Black America is still palpable whenever we perceive a member of our community attempting to "pass" for white. To even attempt a coup of race itself would take lots of resources, cooperation, representation, and access to sympathetic Media willing to plead one's case to a receptive audience. Because Michael had all these ingredients in place (at one time) and a flair for the eccentric, many African Americans were deeply suspicious that he'd tried to pull one over on us with the Vitiligo routine.

Since the Oprah interview, Michael's longtime makeup artist, Karen Faye, has also confirmed the extent of his Vitiligo. Her contention is that she eventually had to shift from following the original shade of his skin toward the lighter, discolored tone because the Vitiligo became so extensive. Endless talk shows have discussed MJ's skin and brought on guests suffering from Vitiligo to affirm Michael's story. At this point, in varying degrees, the world has grown comfortable with the thought of Michael having Vitiligo. Thus the truth or falsity of the disease is not a major issue for throngs of interested discussants...in isolation. But what brings the entire Vitiligo narrative around for re-interrogation is Michael's claim that he is the biological father of his ethnically white children.

This is the second, and most damning, claim that Black America has to bolster skepticism about Michael's denial of race escapism. Returning to the Oprah 1993 interview, Michael makes a point to declare his "pride in being black" and his lack of desire that a white child portray him in a biographical movie. Yet, Michael would have us believe that he is the biological father of three children who have no pigment in their skin whatsoever? Perhaps one side effect of Vitiligo is that it de-pigments the genes as well as the dermis, but no data to that effect has surfaced. So that leaves black people feeling like not only is Michael lying about being the father of three white kids, but he's *probably* lying about the Vitiligo as well. The last clause is certainly an emotional response to the fatherhood myth, but the more pressing psychological communal question is: "Why would Michael lie about fathering children who bear no physical resemblance to his pre-Vitiligo self?"

Two answers immediately surface in my mind. The first is that the explanation for Michael's choices is an intense self-hatred, abnegation of blackness, and overt preference for whiteness that caused him to create an external life-world that reflected his innermost desires. Within this response, the fact of Michael's Vitiligo is negligible in that it could be viewed as an unrelated, albeit ironic, condition that has very little to do with his mindset. In the same vein, Vitiligo could be seen as an opportunity of sorts that facilitates, and perhaps legitimates, Michael's flight into synthetic white-skinned privilege. The other, competing answer is that Michael used his body and personal life as canvases on which to paint a mural of inclusion that transcended race and gender while teaching his audience to embrace his behavior as a paradigm shift. I will spend the remainder of the essay exploring this theme and why America was both fascinated and repulsed by Michael's attempt to overthrow the dark tyranny of race.

It Don't Matter If You're Black or White

In many black communities, such a phrase is regarded as a euphemism for "I want to date a non-black person". The history of racial territorialism is entrenched in the social fabric of American society. Particularly in the black community, to embrace one's kind came to be seen as embracing oneself. Instead of running from monikers foisted upon us by an oppressive and hostile society, black people accepted Negritude and learned from James Brown to "Say it Loud!" So, the logic of integration and racial inclusion is clear in a healthy social order. But personal and group identities built around the rallying point of race are hard pressed to surrender their kernel of solidarity easily. Michael's video for "Black or White" can therefore be interpreted as further accentuating the erosion of group cohesion by morphing myriads of distinct ethnic faces into a blended cacophony of difference, reflecting a more global idea of community.

In one sense Michael is right in an uncontroversial way. "It don't matter if you're black or white" when the object is racial harmony and appreciation of the unique gifts that ethnic heritage helps bring to the table of diversity. But coming from the greatest superstar of all-time, born and raised in Gary, Indiana, nursed on the bosom of Motown Records and the love of Black America, whether he is black or white matters a great deal.

Michael's blackness is connected in an extremely public and psychological way to our group pride in giving a talent like him to the rest of the humanity. In a world of drive-bys and escalating black male incarceration, to see Michael loved by the world allows many black people to participate in that loving; if just for a moment. But Michael had plans to transcend one community while creating a new one that didn't suffer from the limitations that he'd inherited.

Body art or the body as canvas is nothing extraordinary in modern times. Tattooing is hackneyed to the degree that it is almost surprising to find someone who does not don a symbol or emblem inked into their flesh. The exemplary lies in how one uses the canvas and how well the message is received. Michael's facial surgeries showed the malleability of presentation and that the customary markers of race, as well as gender, can be blurred and even breached with enough attempts. Yet the most identifiable and accessible referent for race is the epidermis. So Michael's decision to engage in the de-pigmentation process to disarm his Vitiligo is also an experiment in the post-racial. If the biggest star on the planet cannot pull it off, it probably can't be done. Oprah's comment in her 2009 interview reflecting on Michael's death and their 1993 encounter, she said that he looked "translucent" and that she could see through his skin and clearly view his veins.^{vi} I do not claim that Michael did not suffer from his condition, but simply that his condition enabled a trans-ethnic journey that was both alien and futuristically analogous to the society many have envisioned in fantasy literature. Thus, Michael starting with "The Man In the Mirror" and starring in *Captain EO* has personal metaphorical weight in relation to his physical transformation as well as his charitable strivings of social self-development.

So when Chinese people fainted for Mike, we felt joy from his transcendence. When Mike was accused of child molestation, we defended Mike passively because he used to be black in the same ways that many of us remain black. When Mike was repeatedly acquitted, many of us breathed an inaudible sigh of relief because of John Donne's edict that Mike is a part of our collective island. Against our better judgment, we stood with Mike through charges that the most trusted members of our communities would not have been able to overcome. This is our schizophrenia, motivated by both solidarity and opportunism versus a reproach for some of the most heinous allegations imaginable. Katt Williams, in his standup comic routine "The Pimp Chronicles: Part 1", forcefully makes the case that if different people on different occasions accuse you of being a child molester for twenty years, you're probably a child molester.^{vii} No doubt Williams' analysis is tongue-in-cheek, but he does make a point that takes an intentional or neurotic effort to consistently miss.

Choosing to wear wigs with bone-straight locks also contributes to Michael's project of racial ambiguity. Given the trauma and burns that he experienced during the Pepsi pyrotechnics fire with his hair, wigs are understandable. Still, the entire portrait that stood before Black America at times spoke to the duplicity or double-consciousness that rages through every waking moment of our lives.

Paraphrasing, the collective thought might be the following: “We understand that you have skin and hair issues, but why are you trying so hard to look like a white woman, taking estrogen to keep your voice high, and had the nerve to tell us that those white kids are your biological offspring?” Michael’s retort could simply be “Because it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white.” But on that point, the jury is still out in African America.

Notes

¹ February 10, 1993 Interview from Michael Jackson’s Neverland Ranch.

² Mayo Foundation For Medical Education and Research (MFMER) website. Accessed January 30, 2010. See www.mayoclinic.com/health/lupus/DS00115/DSECTION=causes.

³ Nath SK, Majumder PP, Nordlund JJ (November 1994). "Genetic Epidemiology of Vitiligo: Multilocus Recessivity Cross-Validated". *American Journal of Human Genetics* 55 (5): 981–90.

⁴ In the 1993 interview with Oprah, Michael asserted that the trait for Vitiligo is genetically present on his father’s side of the family.

⁵ July 9, 2009 Interview on *Larry King Live*.

⁶ September 16, 2009. Oprah Interview reflecting on her interview with Michael Jackson.

⁷ See Katt Williams “The Pimp Chronicles: Part 1”, (2006).