

Excerpt from Corridors of Genius

My sister introduced me to the Jackson Five in 1970. From that point on, I was a fan. My sister, my cousins, and I had a favorite Jackson. Tito was my favorite. My sister's favorite Jackson was Michael. However, once per month she would alternate. Sometimes, it was Marlon; sometimes, it was Jermaine. It did not really matter. We loved them all and bought every album they produced (Taylor, Michael "Little Joe" I). By the 1980s, I was too busy with my career to listen to the radio or keep up with the Billboard 100 charts on a regular basis. I am proud to say I witnessed the Motown 25 television special the night it was first broadcast and was happy to see the Jacksons performing again. They were still handsome, still polished professionals, and still made me smile as they evoked childhood memories. Then, there was Michael. It was the first time I had seen him perform in years. His performance of Billie Jean was magnificent.

I feel blessed to have attended Jackson 5 concerts. I, as many of my generation, "grew up" with the Jackson family. I have many Jackson 5 memories from the days they appeared on the Flip Wilson Show and the Sonny & Cher Show. Surprisingly, I remember the time there was a Jackson Five cartoon show.¹ Those are the childhood memories. However, decades later, I am a historian. I am one who loves literature, culture, the arts, and am fascinated by the creativity and creative processes of talented artists who honed their skills and excel despite obstacles.

My journey towards seriously studying Michael Jackson's artistry began in 2012. I took a course in visual culture. This was three years after the death of Michael and only four months after the passing of songstress, actress, and film producer Whitney Houston. Their voices filled the airwaves, bringing forth memories of a not too distant past. Their early and unexpected deaths made those in my generation realize their own mortality; for Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston were dead. Films, videos, and recordings were the only methods of accessing them. There would be no more incredible "live" performances.

Michael Jackson was an American master, and I knew his contribution to American and world culture would be studied in the future. I became transfixed by his voice and the images of his performances which flooded the airwaves; as a humanities scholar trained to assess art and artists, I deduced Jackson might have been using his art forms to make a difference by promoting social justice and a global community in which all beings called human worked together for as John Stuart Mill would say, "the greater good." I began to ask myself, why was I not studying this

exceptional artist? Why do we wait for an artist to die and attempt to understand his genius posthumously? When I did a search of peer reviewed articles, dissertations, and scholarly books, I was shocked at the paucity of materials, considering his artistry and a career which spanned over four decades. He was remarkable. Were we as intellectuals asleep or blinded by the public discourse lead by the media, forfeiting our responsibility to our culture? What would the historical records lose, misinterpret or falsely assert because of tons of erroneous data that I, as a present day scholar, could effortlessly recognize or unravel with greater precision than a future historian? Must I act now? As I meditated upon these questions, I could hear Dr. Nancy Boxill's voice saying, "We are the culture keepers," a phrase she often repeated at the beginning of each semester.²

I was studying Katherine Dunham, one of the artists I researched as a part of my Master's thesis. She is an amazing scholar/artist whose methodology is intriguing. How can I desert her? Was this a betrayal of the female artists who were a central part of my research? My literature review on Katherine Dunham was progressing well. When one of my fellow students asked me the subject of my research, I said I was considering a study of Michael Jackson. He said "Michael Jackson?" in a tone which suggested - Are you kidding? I retorted "Yes. Michael Jackson" in a tone which insisted, "Why not"?

I decided to prepare a seminar paper on Jackson for my course on Visual Culture. When given the opportunity to give a conference presentation on Creativity, Social Change, and Activism, I prepared a conference presentation on Jackson's creative use of short films to make political and social statements. The more I studied his work and became cognizant of the abundance of symbols, metaphors, and messages being communicated, I began researching his life story. I struggled as to whether I wanted to commit myself to studying a controversial Pop icon whose personal choices were center stage, and his phenomenal artistry was barely discussed. My mother always believed that Michael's actions were misinterpreted, encouraged me to uncover the truth, and insisted I had the perfect background to study his art. My sister who is very intuitive finally said to me: "What would light you up? Who would you most enjoy studying?" I saw an image of myself locked in my library, watching the short films of Michael Jackson, eating popcorn and unable to keep still as he danced to "Scream" and "Another Part of Me." As I heard Michael sing "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" and "Give In To Me," I grappled with changing the direction of my research. I knew it would be a more challenging journey, but I could not resist the temptation. Michael won.

I was captivated at how the private Jackson was a very different person from the public Jackson. I, also, realized he had been baptized as a Jehovah's Witness; though I knew that his mother and older sisters were baptized as witnesses, I was never fully aware of the extent to which Jackson was engaged in the practices of the religion. I recalled a comment his sister La Toya made about him in her memoir, (*Growing Up*) that was instrumental to an understanding of Jackson at thirty years old. His behavior was such that she always believed he would eventually be chosen by God to be a member of the "heavenly class." It was as if she had communicated a sign, a symbol or given a key to understanding her brother that was "hidden in plain view."³ After wrestling with her words, I knew if I were to pursue this study with integrity I had to enter a realm of my consciousness where "I" was sepulchered in the dusty corridors of my past. I had to don a pair of dusty lens neatly shelved in my memory bank and as Katherine Dunham become the observer and the observed. I had to re-enter the cave.

I confess. I cannot, as an ethical scholar, continue to walk the line, the rules of ethics set forth by the Institutional Review Board and not reveal my deep, not so dark secret, which I fail to include in most conversations about myself. The secret which few know about me until now is that though I am no longer affiliated with the organization, I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. Yes, I admit I spent over one-third of my life as a Jehovah's Witness. Two of my mother's 14 siblings were Witnesses, giving me Jehovah's Witness cousins, and I was surprised when one of my uncles, who is 80 years old and never was committed to the Jehovah's Witness ideology, recently said he would still, at some point, consider becoming a Witness. My grandmother spent 46 years of her 92 years of life as a dedicated Jehovah's Witness, grieved because most of her children did not follow her path, asking on her deathbed for my mother, my sister, and me to consider "coming back into the truth." Yes, I was one of the children you would see on the streets with the adults peddling the Watchtower and Awake magazines.

My mother was serious. She did not half-step, and did not allow us to associate with "worldly people." We were only allowed to associate with other Jehovah's Witness children who were, by no means, saints. My mother, as Joseph and Katherine Jackson, believed, as her parents and many parents of her era, that one should not "spare the rod and spoil the child". When we did not obey the rules, we got our spankings. That was the norm of the day. However, I must interject, my mother was, in no way an abusive parent as some of the Jackson children purport their father to be. My mother knew the scriptures, and we had to set to memorization (NWT) 1Corinthians

15.33 which insists, “Bad association spoils useful habits,” a tenet drilled into the consciousness of all Witnesses, especially the young children. She required us to memorize the Ten Commandments and the names of all books in the Old Testament. We never missed a meeting on Fridays, a Bible study on Tuesdays or the meeting on Sundays. My mother was an earnest servant of God, trying to follow all of the rules, so she and her daughters would live forever in the “New World.” We went in field Service religiously on Saturdays and Sundays. We were at every convention, assembly, and special event such as the annual Service held to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we fell asleep in the Kingdom Hall during the long meetings, my mother would pinch us so we could wake up and listen to the “talk” or what would be considered by other religions as a structured, non-animated sermon. Though discomfort still exists with retrieving these memories, I have no regrets. The consistent reading and studying of the Bible that was forced upon my young mind gave me a knowledge many Christians do not have. Yet, I, until today, find this revelation somewhat embarrassing, not so much because of the sometimes misguided perceptions people have of Jehovah’s Witnesses, but because of the lingering childhood memories of ritualistically going out into “field service” and knocking on doors only to find a classmate peering in the background, anxiously waiting to share the notice of my visit to a snickering classroom of second graders the next school day. I, at the time, did not mind going into field service as long as we did not have to go into the projects where many of my classmates lived. My sister and I tried to hide behind our mother, so we would not be seen. These memories unearth the first feelings of being an outcast, different, the other.

I wanted to reach my goal of selling the magazines, spreading the word of God, and preaching that it was important to study the Bible and learn “the truth” about the paradise earth after Armageddon. I knew I should willingly accept my difference because I was doing it for Jehovah God, so I could make it into the “new world” with my family, after Armageddon destroyed the “worldly people.” I was fulfilling God’s purpose for my life which was to preach the “good news of the Kingdom... in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations; and then the end will come” (New World Translation, Matthew 24.14).

I remember strolling down Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York one night, after what we had learned at the annual assembly of Jehovah’s Witnesses was reiterated at a meeting at the Kingdom Hall. My mother and her rattled friends were walking behind me, my sister and the three children of her friends. We were trying to figure out how old we would be at the time of

Armageddon, if we would make it out of elementary or high school and which, if any, of us, would make it into the “New World.” We had many questions. We were trying to fathom if one of us made it into the New World and our parents did not survive, what we would do. We wanted to know what innocent misstep would lead us to destruction. I wondered how it was possible to ensure that everyone in the world would receive the news of the impending doom because we were told before Armageddon would happen, all people would have a chance to learn “the good news” about God’s kingdom and have an opportunity to become a Witness.

We were told in the mid-1960s that the end of the world, Armageddon, was projected to occur in 1975. We were living in “the last days” though today most Witnesses do not desire to discuss the projected date and speak of it as a miscalculation or human error. As far as the Witnesses are concerned, we are still living in “the last days,” and the signs of pending doom are evident, though it is over forty years later.

These confessions are not because I want to tap into my soul and share my religious roots. It is because as Justice Sonia Sotomayor suggests that she, as a Latina woman, perceives things differently from her male colleagues and this (in turn) affects her decision-making process, I know what I consider a haunting background which I have chosen to hide from others most of my adult life, has lingering effects on my consciousness; would Jackson’s consciousness not be tinted by his religious roots? Though Sotomayor had a pristine judicial record of balanced decision-making, she received harsh criticism for this revelation of self. I know some may want to stay in the closet about some of their belief systems and pretend they are objective and have risen above and are not influenced by external conditioning. I am not blind. I believe, whether it is cultural or religious in nature, one’s perception, her way of seeing, is affected by her experiences. So, I pursue this study knowing I perceive Michael differently from most scholars who have not shared our common religious experience. At four years old, our mothers were baptized, and we entered the Kingdom Hall and a world which remains an indelible part of our mental environment. Our conscious and subconscious minds were held captive and fed a belief system which affected our very being. When I look into the eyes of Michael Jackson, when I peer “Beyond the Mask,” I admit, I see what many others cannot. My lens, are tinted with lingering shadows from our common past lives, and my mental environment accommodates an assemblage of religious experiences which compel me to interpret Jackson’s difference through this knowing. I see a conflicted soul battling with illusion and reality; the cave and the light; truth and deception; a gift and what could be considered a curse.

I see a consciousness, colored with thoughts of guilt and shame because he willingly “fell out of the truth.”³ This was a truth believed by both parents (K. Jackson, *My Family* 32), specifically his mother, the person whom he most loved and trusted, and his grandparents (Carr, “MJ & Jehovah’s ...” *LA Sentinel* 2009). I see a man whose complex consciousness lays the foundation of understanding his artistic voice. I see a man who, as his ancestors and artistic predecessors, transmits messages, not always easily interpretable, through song. I see a visionary, a talented, but fragile and sensitive soul, sequestered and exposed, living life on a public stage; entering and exiting his public life; desperately stepping into another world, another land-Neverland; nurturing simmering thoughts of how to live and be Christlike (J. Jackson *Not Alone* 302) in a world of overwhelming sin and temptation (“Dirty Diana,” “Billie Jean”), and being judged by those who do not understand his ever-evolving belief systems (“Tabloid Junkie”). I see what others may not see; therefore, I offer my perception of Michael Jackson’s consciousness based upon research, analysis, and a lived experience which can often be misinterpreted. My perception of Jackson’s reality is informed by a knowledge of his religious background and his acceptance, as I, of the proponents of the metaphysical and New Age philosophers.

Preface: “Looking Through The Windows”

Traditionally, African American artists have used their art forms, their voices, and their platforms to promote social justice. The purpose of this research is to determine if Michael Joseph Jackson, an internationally acclaimed artist, consciously used his art forms, his voice, his arena to promote social change. This dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach to examining Jackson’s consciousness, his artistic statements, his worldview, and his creative process. It deconstructs his evolving consciousness, unveils his creative process, and decodes his songs and short films based upon his unique perspective.

Life is a dance of perspective. It is an ongoing waltz with reality. It is an ongoing interplay with man’s physical and spiritual self. Michael Joseph Jackson was indisputably a creative genius, an American master who spent over four decades producing a massive amount of innovative work which not just entertained and amazed an international audience, but played a role in elevating public consciousness. Broadcast journalists and media outlets engage in heralding the bravura of Jackson’s artistry while ridiculing his seemingly idiosyncratic nature. The growing tabloidization of the media continues to place more light on his (and other artists) lifestyles rather than take a

critical and analytical look at what one can learn from his artistic ability and the impact that he has had on what is now four generations. After Jackson's death, the academic community acknowledged that it was remiss and had limited scholarship and research on Jackson.

Scholars began the discourse on Michael Jackson and his impact on American popular culture over three decades ago. Through the years, there have been articles on Jackson, specifically scholarship on identity, race and culture; his influence on culture and music, specifically music videos; his influence on the global community, and his call for racial harmony. The discourse is expanding, yet, there is still extremely limited scholarship dedicated to his music and other art forms.

Jackson's artistry is rapidly becoming a viable area of disquisition. Since I began my research, there has been an evolving field of study titled: Michael Jackson Studies. In 2012, there was a graduate course made available to MBA students at Clark Atlanta University titled: "Michael Jackson: The Business of Music." Also, there is a new online academic journal dedicated to scholarship on Jackson.

Though there is a growing, but paltry number of peer reviewed articles on Jackson, the books written from an academic perspective remain scant. The primary voices in the field of Jacksonian research are Susan Fast, Harriet Manning, Willa Stillwater, and Joseph Vogel. Fast, Stillwater, and Vogel are pioneers in the analysis of the artistry of Michael Jackson. Vogel does a tremendous service to Michael Jackson Studies, as he has gathered significant data and analyzes Jackson's songs and films offering an alternative perspective to the narrative on Jackson; Stillwater advances a compelling interpretation of Jackson's artistic voice, and Fast renders a punctilious analysis of Jackson's songs. Elizabeth Chin, Michael Eric Dyson, Margo Jefferson, and Brian Rossiter have also amplified the discourse by proffering unconventional interpretations of Jackson's art.

This research offers an antithetical approach to analyzing Jackson's artistry. There are four sections in this dissertation. The first section delineates the roots of a cultural tradition which uses one's voice to promote social change. The second section builds upon this bedrock and probes into the consciousness of Michael Jackson by exploring his family and religious core, unearthing an artistic voice rooted in a Judeo-Christian ideology. The third section unveils a prolific creative process nurtured by his parents who were born and raised their children in the Jim Crow era, and is refined by his quest for perfectionism. The study discovers an artist who believed in Dr. Martin

Luther King's Beloved Community and vigorously endeavored to use his artistry to promote individual agency and social change. Finally, after creating a lens from which to perceive Jackson's artistry, a fourth section proffers an interpretation of Jackson's short films which can be included in the burgeoning discourse.

Michael Joseph Jackson was a social activist. We knew he was a "Dancing Machine" since he was a little boy. "Looking Through The Windows" we watched him become a "Thriller" and achieve more than anyone thought possible for a "Bad" young man from Gary, Indiana. As the media and scholars focused on his diseased skin, asserting it was a conscious choice instead of a decision of his DNA; as his Lupus and pain inflicted body fascinated us all; as he snapped his fingers and sang "I Want to Rock With you"; as he used plastic surgery to alter what he deemed his imperfect nose and place a cleft in his chin, while asking all to take a look at the "Man In The Mirror" and make a change; as he customized and refined a creative process that produced an abundance of art forms; as he was plagued by accusations of profligacy and was never able to recast his tarnished image, perhaps, it was "Human Nature" to dwell in Plato's cave, blinded by the visuals, falling prey to the entertaining illusions. The illusions were created by both Jackson who was fascinated by and tried to create his version of the antics of P.T. Barnum and a decaying American system of manacled expectations for a Negro boy who transformed into a man-artist who James Baldwin pronounced would not be forgiven for his unprecedented rise to the top of the mountain (382). Jackson, a master illusionist, intrigued by the power of an artist and girded with the technology of a visual culture, consciously created films with symbols and metaphors that communicate universal truths to his global audience who does not always comprehend the multiplicity of his artistic statements; nor did his audience realize the doctrines of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were imbedded in the core of his consciousness.

Jackson studied the greats in music and had long-term relationships with the prominent activists of his time. He consciously looked into the past and used his world stage to minister what he learned from those with whom he was immutably linked. This included Coretta Scott King, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Muhammad Ali, Madiba (a.k.a. Nelson Mandela), Reverend Al Sharpton, Sammy Davis, Jr., James Brown, Stevie Wonder, and Quincy Jones. Jackson was an intelligent man who knew and understood injustice.

For over half of his life, Jackson's artistic voice was in the closet. His religion did not allow him to engage in political activities. His record company, Motown, requested that he and his

siblings not publicly express their views about the igneous political events of the day, and as Quincy Jones reminds in his autobiography, “Black artists have always been forced to walk the thin line between what is politically acceptable for them to say and what is not” (217). Jones admits walking behind the casket of Dr. King pushed him to the edge; however, when he became politicized, he received death threats, and his children were called mongrels by The White Citizens Council's national newsletter (217). Jackson knew the stories. He knew his history. He and his brothers had received their share of death threats. He spent countless hours with Ali, Davis and others who bore the wounds of their stride toward freedom and he had a viewpoint, a perspective that he wanted to share with his global audience.¹ Jackson, similar to his predecessors Robeson, and colleagues: Wonder, Gaye, and Brown, saw his art forms as a vehicle to voice his philosophy which was deeply aligned with the ideology of Dr. Martin Luther King.

King said we must “Stride Toward Freedom” and Michael, as a member of the Jacksons, sang “We Can Change The World.” King explained “Why We Can’t Wait” and Jackson declared, “We Have Had Enough.” King spoke out against the Vietnam War, economic injustice, and poverty. Michael denounced all wars, said “We Are Here To Change the World,” “Keep The Faith,” and showed us in his short films, *Man In The Mirror* and *Earth Song*, the devastation of war, greed, and poverty.

King asked, “Where Do We Go From Here?” and envisioned a Beloved Community. Jackson joined forces with other artists and pronounced, “We Are The World,” sang “Cry,” gave us images of the Beloved Community and pronounced we must put our hearts “On The Line” and “Heal The World.” King took us to the top of the mountain and said, “I Have A Dream. Michael, as a member of the Jackson 5, declared that he was determined to persevere and find his “Corner of The Sky.” King begged with the oratory skills of a Baptist minister that we not judge a man by the color of his skin, but the content of his character; and Michael sang and danced with the vocal dexterity of an Olympian and presented images which insisted it does not matter if one is “Black or White.”