



**“ROLLERCOASTING WITH MICHAEL JACKSON:  
RISE, RUIN AND RESURRECTION”**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 07-09-09, p. A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The recent flood and flurry of activities and conversations around Michael Jackson’s earlier rise and fall and now his resurrection as a central subject of national and global focus represents an E-ride on a rollercoaster of history and human fantasy not even his Neverland mind could have imagined. It speaks first to his artistic achievement and enduring status as an icon of popular culture, in spite of mixed media treatment. But it also speaks to the American insatiable appetite for spectacles and self-watching; for consumer caricatures and entertaining images that give them endless avenues of escape; for inexpensive opportunities to care and express superficial concern; and for special space to be “free” from the horrors and harshness of daily life where they are both victims and victimizers.

In spite of all the attempts to reductively translate his life according to varied taste, time and tedious twitter, Michael is, above all, a mirror of and to America. He is a reflection in life and death of ways society and its members see and satisfy themselves, how they idolize, demonize, destroy and then aid in resurrecting those few whom current taste and fortuitous time favor. He is a sobering commentary on media manipulation and misuse; on family dysfunction, abuse and disabling; on post-racial fantasies and the cost and casualties of racial realities. He is a reflection and reminder of the deforming and restrictive racial and sexual protocols of self-presentation for Black men “crossing over” on stage or the campaign trail. And he reflects society’s obsession with youth and the infantilization of men and women; the socially-conditioned self-mutilation of people of color, and the corporate commodification of life and death and all things in between and possible afterwards. In a word, he is both subject and object; a mirror of America talking to itself and about itself in

ambivalent, phobic and fantasized ways about race, sex, age and interrelated issues.

It is within this context that the interlocking fragments of Michael’s fractured life can be pulled together and made into a coherent and credible portrait we can possibly paint of him. First, he must be perceived and respected as a consummate performer, one of the greatest of all time. He was not as versatile and seasoned as Sammy Davis, Jr., nor as smooth and emotionally engaged as Jackie Wilson nor as dap and depthfully soulful as James Brown. But he studied them and others and was able to synthesize something of value from each, evolving his own unique self-presentation and impressive performance. Thus, it is only just, fair and honest to admit this towering talent is the central reason of his relevance, the source of his success and his resultant cultivation and capacity for rise, ruin and resurrection.

Secondly, Michael must also be understood as a complex victim of family, society and self. Rumors and reputedly reliable reports abound about the abuse, interrupted childhood, denial of development and other disabling assaults on his person, dignity and identity as a child. This fierce rites of passage directed toward coerced compliance and perfectionist performance shaped and, no doubt, damaged him severely. Michael’s victimization by society is expressed in its White fears and fantasies about race and sex and its coercive pressure on him as a Black man not to be too masculine, i.e., too strong and assertive; not to be too sexual or too Black. It was/is the price of the ticket to acceptance, the cost and collateral casualty of “crossing over”.

Thus, society conditioned, even compelled, Michael to accept infantilization, “neuterization” (asexuality, not androgyny) and deracialization as the price of the double-edge sword of success, a success that consumes in

the midst of accomplishment and transforms itself into tragedy in the midst of triumph. One need not read W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells and James Baldwin to know the heterosexual and homosexual ambivalence White males have toward Black men; their contradictory tendencies of loathing, lynching and lust, and their equally contradictory desire and will to cuddle, consume and kill Black men.

Here Michael, as a moral agent, had a choice, however restrained, to reaffirm his humanity, community and manhood and bring forth from within him the truth of an expansive self, which the *Husia* says is in all of us, or to submit and accept society's terms for success thru self-erasure. Choosing the latter, Fanon tells us, Michael would and did it seems, go thru four phases of personality disintegration: self-doubt; self-denial, self-condemnation, and finally self-mutilation—both psychic and physical.

Michael Jackson is also a corporate commodity, a packaged person made for record, TV, video, CD, DVD and any other technological instrument of propaganda and profit thru which he can be trapped, trussed-up and trotted out for auction, sales, purchase and pawn. It began with his father and family, the commercialization and reification (thingification). He is “boy interrupted”, child co-opted, talent seized and sold; a product of merciless days of practice and performance, reconstruction of face and future, body and belief, and deprivation of positive family, community and peer-group relationships that help root, discipline and direct our lives toward good and expansive ends.

Michael was/is also a media construction, a process intimately tied to his role as a corporate commodity. The media is clearly ambivalent and divided in how it presents Michael—dishonored and undeserving or resurrected and ready for the eternal adulation a global community of fans has forced them to consider. Always concerned with ratings and revenue and ever-conscious of their role as a marketing and opinion-molding arm of the corporate class, they engage Michael as a saleable controversy. Thus, the media now finds it profitable to present Michael 24-hours daily above a host of serious subjects and issues.

Finally, Michael Jackson is a resurrected icon of popular culture. In death, he stands as a man-soul resurrected and a monument restored. Indeed, it is said he has become larger in death than in life. He began this himself with his preparation to return to the stage with sold-out venues nationally and internationally. It is continued by an unintended confluence of interests: an international outpouring of grief and homage; media concerns for ratings and revenue; corporate interests in selling his life, death, music, missteps, last rehearsals, lost tapes and anything else they can package and peddle; and Black people who, in the interest of racial solidarity and a considered sense of right, assemble again to rescue and rightfully honor him. They, as is custom, forget and forgive his racially escapist “sins”, stress his artistic achievement and humanitarian efforts, and again pay him homage as signs of hope, reconciliation, vindication and now triumphant resurrection.

---

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kawaida and Questions of Life and Struggle: African American, Pan-African and Global Issues*, [[www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org); [www.Us-Organization.org](http://www.Us-Organization.org) and [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org)].