My Life in the Bush with MJ & Iggy

TODD GRAY

Todd Gray, Gang Star – Red, 2016, Three archival pigment prints in artist’s frames and found frames. Courtesy the artist and Meliksetian Briggs.
How to Use This Guide When Visiting MoAD

The Todd Gray: My Life in the Bush with MJ & Iggy Educator Resource Guide is most compatible for use with students in middle school and above; however, the content may be adjusted to meet the learning targets for other age groups. The Student Vocabulary Sheet and MoAD Gallery Worksheet should be used to prepare students for a focused museum visit. MoAD Group Tours are great tools to allow students to deep dive into the content presented in the Resource Guide. More information on Group Tours may be found on our website at https://www.moadsf.org/visit/school-tours.

To prepare students for the visit, it is recommended that you show your students the Michael Jackson videos, Beat It (1982) and Thriller (1983), available for free streaming on Vevo and YouTube. When visiting MoAD, give each of your students a copy of the MoAD Gallery Worksheet to further engage them in the context of the artwork. Note that the Gallery Worksheet is extensive and depending on how long you have at the museum, students may not be able to complete all questions in one visit. Be sure to have students answer the Discussion Questions as soon as possible after your visit to the Museum. These are designed to help students think deeper about what they experienced during their visit to the exhibition.

We sincerely hope you find this Educator’s Resource Guide helpful and welcome any comments or feedback you may have. Additionally, we would love to hear how you chose to implement the material in your classroom or program. If you create handouts or discover new resources, please send us an email with your resources attached, and we will share these with other educators.

Respectfully,

Demetri Broxton
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CONTENTS

About the Exhibition 3
Key Terms 4
Questions to Use While at MoAD 5 – 9
Discussion Questions – After Your Visit 10
Suggested Activities 11
Further Reading – Discussion Questions 12
Michael Jackson and the Pain Behind the Mirror: A Photo Essay by Todd Gray 13 – 24
California Visual Arts & Common Core State Standards 25
Museum of the African Diaspora is pleased to present the work of Los Angeles and Ghana-based artist Todd Gray. With the title of the exhibition, inspired by the novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutuola, Gray visually recounts his similarly surreal experiences in the bush of California and West Africa. Composed of photographs taken throughout his life, Gray layers, splices and interweaves images, problematizing our immediate engagement with them. From the photographs taken of Michael Jackson during his time as MJ’s personal photographer in the 1980s, to documentary images of Iggy Pop in Los Angeles, Gray complicates our projections onto these images by obscuring, and in effect revealing, our collective cultural assumptions attached to the captured personas.

Always concerned with the interpretation and interaction with images, Gray’s earlier work *California Missions*, bookends the gallery space. Similarly dedicated to re-inserting context to images, this series of work insists on injecting the labor and colonization so often missing from idyllic presentation of this state and country.

*My Life in the Bush with MJ and Iggy* complicates our immediate reactions, assumptions, and assessments of images by reframing the context. Gray creates interventions in image viewing, asking us to reflect upon our participation, accountability, and implication in the myths attached to romanticized notions of blackness, music and California.

**Emily Kuhlmann**  
*MoAD Director of Exhibitions*
MENTAL COLONIALISM
An attitude in which colonized people feel themselves to be inferior to their colonizers.

PREJUDICE
Preconceived opinion or belief about a group of people that is not based on fact or actual experience.

MASCULINITY
The qualities a society associates with men. These qualities are typically: dominant, powerful, physically strong, and in control. Ideas of masculinity vary by culture.

PANOPTICON
A circular prison with cells arranged around a central tower, from which prisoners can be observed at all times.

STEREOTYPING
To unfairly believe that all people from a group are the same – usually a group with which the person has had little or no contact.

COMMODITY
An article of trade of use, advantage, or value that can be bought and sold.
California Missions: America, 2004 and California Missions: Horse, 2004 are part of Todd Gray’s California Missions series. In the two pieces, both the taxidermy horse and bison are physically intersected or cut in half by large photographs. The opposite side of each photograph features a mirror. In these pieces, Gray is investigating the philosophical impact of images. Horses were brought to America by the Spanish colonists and missionaries and played an important role in taking control of the land, growing agriculture, and each California Mission was strategically located a day’s journey apart by horseback. The American Bison is only found in North America and used to roam the grasslands in massive herds. The bison is sacred among many Native American tribes and is associated with several Native American creation stories. Bison numbered over 30 million at the time the United States was founded, but that number dropped to only about 1,000 with the westward expansion (to California) of the United States.

1. For the following questions, stand in front of California Missions: Horse, 2014.
   a. Describe what you see.
   b. Why do you think Todd placed a mirror on the opposite side of the picture?
   c. How does the mirror and seeing yourself in it, change your understanding or interpretation of the bisected horse? Explain.
QUESTIONS TO USE

While @ MoAD

a. Why do you think Todd Gray chose to have the bison cut in half by the picture of the Hotel New York? How do the two symbols (the bison and Holland America Line building) relate to each other?

b. Todd Gray chose to place the picture and mirror leaning on a wooden support. The hotel is also turned upside down. Why do you think the artist made this choice? What message do you think he might be trying to get across?

c. What artistic purpose does the mirror serve in this artwork? How is this different compared to Todd’s use of the mirror in the Horse artwork? Explain.

2. Now visit California Missions: America, 2004 at the back end of the gallery.

The building featured on the backside of the mirror is the luxury hotel, Hotel New York in Rotterdam, Netherlands, based in the former office building of the Holland America Line. The Holland America Line operated as a Dutch shipping, passenger, cargo, and cruise line from 1873 to 1989 and was instrumental in the transport of over 400,000 European immigrants seeking a better life in America. The port used by the Holland America Line was the same port used by the Pilgrims. In July of 1620, a group of Pilgrims set sail for Southampton, England where they picked up more Separatists, transferred to the Mayflower, and set sail for the “New World”.

Todd Gray first landed an assignment to be the photographer for the Jackson 5 in 1974. For the next six years, he would continue to photograph the Jackson 5. In 1980, Todd received a phone call saying that Michael Jackson wanted Todd to photograph him at Disneyland. As a result, Todd Gray became Michael’s personal photographer and friend for the next four years. Interestingly, the end of this period was also when MJ was diagnosed with vitiligo (a skin disorder that causes the loss of skin color in blotches) and subsequently began bleaching his skin and undertaking extensive plastic surgery. Surgeons speculate that he had multiple nose reduction surgeries, a forehead lift, eyelid surgery, cheekbone surgery, surgically thinned his lips, and had a cleft put in his chin. Many argue that Michael Jackson undertook his many surgeries and skin bleaching regimen not for health reasons, but to transform himself from African American to white.

Todd Gray was Michael Jackson’s personal photographer in 1982, when *Beat It* was released from his sixth solo album, *Thriller* (1982). The music video was released in February of 1983 and was promoted with a music video featuring MJ bringing two rival gangs together through his music and dance. *Beat It* was one of the leading songs making *Thriller* the best-selling album of all time, securing MJ’s title as the King of Pop. *Beat It* is about courage in the face of defeat and relays MJ’s dislike of violence. The video was filmed in Los Angeles’ Skid Row. To give the video authenticity, MJ decided to cast around 80 real gang members from the rival LA street gangs, the Crips and the Bloods. Some of these gangsters are featured in Todd Gray’s photographic installation pieces. The gangsters are identifiable by their bandanas or plaid shirts.

For the following questions, find *Exquisite Terribleness in the Mangrove*, 2014. The piece features the head and shoulders of Michael Jackson, chopped up and almost unrecognizable. One of the *Beat It* gangsters is in the center of Jackson’s head along with photos Todd shot at MJ concerts and an image of a mangrove tree in an estuary near the coast of Ghana, West Africa. The coasts of Ghana (known as the Gold Coast) are also the sites of several slave castles – fortresses that helped European powers take control of gold and ivory while also holding enslaved Africans before they were loaded onto ships headed across the Atlantic.

a. What are some reasons you think Todd Gray chose to divide Michael Jackson’s head like this?

b. Focus your attention on the gangster from the *Beat It* video. Does he look like what you would imagine a gangster to look like? Why or why not?

c. Besides his role as a cast member in the *Beat It* video, how do you think the gangster connects to Michael Jackson’s identity?

d. How might this art piece be related to the concept of Mental Colonialism (see the vocabulary list for a definition)?

3. For the following questions, find "Exquisite Terribleness in the Mangrove," 2014. The piece features the head and shoulders of Michael Jackson, chopped up and almost unrecognizable. One of the *Beat It* gangsters is in the center of Jackson’s head along with photos Todd shot at MJ concerts and an image of a mangrove tree in an estuary near the coast of Ghana, West Africa. The coasts of Ghana (known as the Gold Coast) are also the sites of several slave castles – fortresses that helped European powers take control of gold and ivory while also holding enslaved Africans before they were loaded onto ships headed across the Atlantic.
In the mid-1970s, Todd Gray briefly lived with Jim Osterberg, aka Iggy Pop. Todd’s piece, IPTKM #1 the main photograph is a portrait of Iggy Pop and the second image is a dog standing in front of water. The dog is most likely one of Gray’s photographs from Ghana. The juxtaposition of the two images recalls Iggy Pop’s famous song, I Wanna Be Your Dog (1969). IPTKM is an abbreviation for “Iggy Pop Tried to Kill Me”, referencing a near death experience Todd Gray had while living as Iggy’s roommate.

Iggy Pop is famously known as the Godfather of Punk. Prior to becoming the famous, shirtless rocker, he was a drummer performing for a blues band named the Prime Movers based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Much of Iggy’s musical knowledge was learned from his time playing with blues legends like James Cotton’s percussionist, Sam Lay, Big Walter Horton and J.B. Hutto. While performing in Chicago blues joints in the 1960s, he decided to front his own band, who became known as the Stooges. The Stooges ventured into the punk genre, but never completely abandoned a strong connection to the blues. In the book, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (McNeal & McCain, published by Grove/Atlantic, Inc. in 2014), Iggy Pop says,

“I appropriated a lot of their [black blues musician’s] vocal forms, and also their turns of phrase—either heard or misheard or twisted from blues songs. So I Wanna Be Your Dog is probably my mishearing of Baby, Please Don’t Go."

The classic Delta blues song, Baby, Please Don’t Go was originally written and performed by Big Joe Williams in 1947, but became famous by other bluesmen such as Muddy Waters. The song features the line, ‘Before I be your dog, I get you way’d out here, and let you walk alone. Aside from Iggy Pop’s admission, the influence of the blues on his music and lyricism is undeniable.

QUESTIONS TO USE

While @ MoAD

4. Find the piece, Turn Table Turn, 2017. The piece features Iggy Pop performing in the center photograph. In place of Iggy’s head is a picture of a college marching band from a historically black college. The bottom image was taken at a Michael Jackson concert.

a. Considering Iggy Pop’s confession that his musical influence lies heavily in African American blues music, what is a possible interpretation of Todd Gray’s artwork, Turn Table Turn?
5. Now look around the gallery. Todd Gray often uses the same image multiple times. If you step back, you can sometimes see the same image in two different artworks at the same time.

a. How many instances can you find where Todd uses the same image multiple times. (HINT: in some of the pictures of cloth, he took a small section from the shirts in the piece, Cape Coast Cosmos, 2014.)

b. Describe the different ways he uses the image in each artwork.

c. How does Todd’s use of the same image in different ways give you a deeper understanding of the meaning behind his artwork? Explain.
Surrealist artists, such as Belgian painter, René Magritte, intentionally obscured the human face in their paintings, see his painting *The Son of Man* (1964). Of the painting, Magritte said, “At least it [the apple] hides the face pretty well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person... Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.” (radio interview with Jean Neyens in 1965). Considering what Magritte says of his intention behind obscuring the human face, how does Todd Gray use this technique? What impact does the covering of faces have on how you view or interpret the meanings behind his artwork?

French philosopher Michel Foucault developed the idea of the **Panopticon** in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The Panopticon is a circular building with an observation tower in the center of an open space surrounded by an outer wall. This outer wall contains the cells for prisoners. Because of the design of the Panopticon and bright light emitted from the watch tower, only one guard needs to be on duty because the prisoners are unable to see who is watching them or how many people are in the tower. Because of the design, prisoners feel like they are under constant surveillance with eyes on them always. The state of being constantly under surveillance, according to Foucault, makes the prisoners self-police themselves. Todd Gray believes that the concepts of the Panopticon and self-policing can be used to understand Michael Jackson’s apparent self-hatred for his African American features, his extreme work ethic, and careful control of his image and behavior in public. How do you think the idea of the Panopticon shows up in Todd Gray’s artwork? Explain.

Todd Gray’s artwork features images of Michael Jackson, but in his mind, the work is a self-portrait – he says the work is actually about himself. Todd says, “I suffer from **mental colonialism**; my consciousness has been hijacked.” As a young, black man born in America, how do you think Todd may have suffered from mental colonialism like Michael Jackson? How is this represented in his artwork? In what ways might mental colonialism be a part of your everyday experience?
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

HISTORY: We recommend a deep exploration of the impact and aftermath of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. *The African American Migration Experience* developed by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture provides a comprehensive set of lesson plans which explain the various cultures in Africa and the impact the Transatlantic Slave Trade had on the sense of identity for both the enslaved Africans brought to the America, as well as, the impact on those left behind. The lesson plans will guide students to consider the long-term impacts of slavery on contemporary life. Lesson plans may be located online at: [http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/](http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/)

LITERATURE: There are several fantastic novels which will provide high school students context to better understand Colonialism’s impact on contemporary society. A few of these books are:
- Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (Nigeria, 1958)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel, *Americanah* (Nigeria, 2013)
- Diriye Osman’s collection of short stories, *Fairytales for Lost Children* (Somalia / Kenya, 2013)

FILM: *Gimme Danger* (2016) is a documentary which chronicles the story of The Stooges, Iggy Pop’s punk band. The film features an in-depth interview with Iggy Pop.

JOURNALISM: In 1986, three years after the release of *Thriller*, cultural critic Kobena Mercer wrote a groundbreaking article, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*” in which he proposes that *Thriller* presents Jackson as being on the boundary between two states: “Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine.” He also discusses how Jackson’s transformation into two different monsters parallels his actual physical transformation via plastic surgery. The article can be viewed at: [http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic989302.files/WEEK%205%20-%20OCTOBER%2017/Kobena%20Mercer.pdf](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic989302.files/WEEK%205%20-%20OCTOBER%2017/Kobena%20Mercer.pdf)

ARTS INTEGRATION: Students can connect with Todd Gray’s work by creating artwork inspired by Todd’s technique. Portraits and self-portraits may be a great entry point to this project. *The Ease of Fiction Educator Resource Guide* has a self-portrait lesson plan, which may be adapted to Todd Gray’s style.
In 2015, Todd Gray contributed a chapter to the book, *Star Bodies and the Erotics of Suffering*, edited by Rebecca Bell-Metereau and Colleen Glenn. With permission from Wayne State University Press, MoAD has reprinted the full article here. In his chapter, “Michael Jackson and the Pain Behind the Mirror: A Photo Essay”, Todd Gray provides insight into his years as Michael Jackson’s personal photographer and the images which make up his artwork in the exhibition on view at MoAD.

The following questions are intended for discussion after reading the chapter. These questions may also be used as prompts for essay responses.

1. In the Kobena Mercer quote on the first page (p. 127), Mercer uses Karl Marx’s term to describe Michael Jackson when he calls him a “social hieroglyph”. What does this mean and how does this concept connect to Todd Gray’s representation of MJ?

2. The second page (p. 128), begins with a quote from Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. Why does Todd choose to present part of the text in italics when he quotes, “…convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness.”? How does this concept connect to Michael Jackson’s life and his experience as a Black entertainer in America? Beyond MJ’s physical changes, what are some other ways this idea shows up in Todd Gray’s work?

3. On page 129, Todd Gray says both he and Michael Jackson had to adopt the Right Attitude. Explain what Todd means by the Right Attitude. How does this idea function in society, particularly for people of color?

4. Discuss Michael Jackson’s masculinity. How was his form of masculinity in alignment or in conflict with the dominant culture’s ideas about what it is to be masculine? Explain your thinking.

5. On pages 133 – 134, Todd discusses his photograph of Michael Jackson with Chuck Berry. The photograph is on page 134 as well as in Todd’s art piece on view in the MoAD gallery, entitled *Faustian Darkness*, 2014. Compare Michael Jackson’s masculinity to Chuck Berry’s. How does Todd play off their contrasting forms of masculinity in *Faustian Darkness*?

6. In the second paragraph on page 137, Todd says, “over the years through the study of these images, I’ve learned more about myself than I care to admit.” What does he mean?

7. Toward the bottom of page 137, Todd recounts a backstage conversation with Led Zeppelin’s lead singer, Robert Plant, in which Plant went on a rant about how Led Zeppelin made millions of dollars by co-opting the Mississippi blues. What does he mean by this? How does this idea connect to Todd’s artworks at MoAD which feature Iggy Pop?

8. On page 138, Todd discusses Michael and his own racial self-loathing. What does he mean by this and how does this idea connect to Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon? Finally, how does racial self-loathing and the Panopticon connect to both Michael Jackson and the images of the gangsters from the set of *Beat It*?

9. On pages 143-144, Todd Gray discusses Michael Jackson’s ascent from being a mere mortal (human being) and “morphed into the mythical world of hero and demi-god.” What does Todd mean by this statement? How is this reflected in the artwork in the MoAD gallery?

10. Todd Gray concludes his essay by “returning” Michael Jackson to Africa by bringing portraits of MJ to remote villages in Ghana. Everyone he approached, claimed MJ as African even though he appeared white. On the contrary, Todd, who is visibly African American, was rejected as African and called “obruni”, or “white man”. Why do you think this happened? Explain.
Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson’s star-image is a "social hieroglyph," as Marx said of the commodity form, which demands, yet defies, decoding.

Kobena Mercer, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s Thriller”

It’s a bit of a shock to recognize a description of one’s self in a text while researching the phenomenon of Michael Jackson’s stardom. In such a moment, cathartic confusion and denial replace objective thought and reason. Frantz Fanon was to blame. While reading Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, I discovered there was a name for my state of being, one that captured the experience of many African Americans: mental colonialism.
When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives’ heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality.¹

I came to think more and more about this concept when I began working as Michael Jackson’s personal photographer in the 1980s. I had no desire to be chosen as Jackson’s photographer. But I was. Truth be told, I would have rather worked for Patty Smith, Iggy Pop, or even Elvis . . . Costello. I’d just gotten out of art school and I was ready to rock’n roll with all the excesses that accompany that white-dominated world.

I did not realize at the time that the reason Epic record hired me to photograph the Jacksons at a backstage event was because of my age and color. They might have reconsidered if they had known more of my past: I was an acid-dropping surfer who had no interest in team sports, who shared a house with Iggy Pop for a while, and received a Marxist education from an elite institution, the California Institute of the Arts. Unimpressed by the Jackson style, I felt over-qualified and overeducated for this job. Within a week’s time I photographed Michael and his brothers on three occasions and said nothing more than hello and goodbye to Michael at each event. I assumed we had little in common. My quiet reserve drew Michael’s attention and fueled his decision to hire me as his personal photographer, but it was only later that he told me why I was chosen for the job. He summed up his reasons for choosing me to capture his star image in four words: “You don’t talk much.” It was not until much later that I began to understand the pain beneath the surface of Michael Jackson’s carefully managed stardom, the hidden loneliness that both spelled his downfall and ensured his lasting stardom and the public’s fascination with his celebrity.

I gradually saw that Michael’s experience mirrored my own in significant ways. We were both in our twenties, shared family histories, and had a similar upbringing. Both of our families were part of the great black migration from the agrarian rural South to the industrial urban North. My family settled in Chicago, Illinois, and his in Gary, Indiana. Our parents nurtured bourgeois dreams and desires for themselves and their children, and they wanted to emulate the pictures they saw on billboards and magazines of normal white families and, more importantly, of famous white stars, both filmic and musical. To do so we had to follow a strict code: speak the Queen’s English; don’t bring attention to yourself in public; dress in neat and clean attire appropriate for the social occasion; keep your nappy head in order; and maintain the Right Attitude.

The first rules of appearance were superficial and easy enough to achieve, but maintaining the Right Attitude took some time and effort to understand, internalize, and eventually master. The Right Attitude was an intangible veneer that took a considerable amount of practice, skill, and, eventually, self-deception. It was vital to understand this principle if we wanted to increase our value and succeed in the labor market. Simply put, we would need to work twice as hard to get half as far. Thus, we had to work four times as hard to reach parity by burying the blatant unfairness of the workplace deeply within our consciousness, all while maintaining a pleasant disposition as our labor was being exploited. The exceptionally ambitious would need to work eight times harder than whites to get ahead, and perhaps at that point they would have the liberty to reveal something beyond what W.E.B. Du Bois called “the talented tenth,” as long as the climb to the top did not lead one to forget their place on the ladder of race and class.²

As a result of these rules we both knew how to act when outside of our own home or community, and we also realized an added responsibility that accompanied our success. As the first wave to hit the shores of this newly integrated society of the 1960s, we shared a common burden: the first impression. As the first blacks through the door, we had to make sure it didn’t close behind us in a way that would keep others from following. Our presence often afforded the first live impression on a society whose primary attitudes about “blacks” were formed by stereotypical images in mass media. Michael often told me, “Be careful; they are just waiting for us to mess up.”

My first big assignment was to photograph Michael taping a Disney television special at the theme park in Anaheim. The record company directed me to make images that accentuated and helped define Michael’s masculinity. Meanwhile, Michael wanted playful pictures of himself having fun with Mickey, Donald Duck, and the crew. Jackson was receiving an exceptional amount of media attention and speculation about his sexuality, due to the success of his Off the Wall album. CBS Records planned to use photographs as part of their media campaign, prompted out of fear that any question about his sexuality might have a negative impact on record sales. Michael was not part of the conversation; I was frequently and covertly instructed to capture the moments that would masculinize his star image.³

The best I could manage to make Michael look manly, given the situation, was to direct him to give Minnie Mouse, the only female character on the set,
a kiss on the cheek. At that time, during the 1980s, Michael was not one to convincingly contort his face into a scowl or squint his eyes into a cold gaze toward the camera for the macho shot. In any case, no photograph was released without Michael’s final approval. He controlled and defined his own star image, and if anyone suggested he broadcast a more masculine image, it would reflect his interpretation of the word.

MASCU LINIZING MICHAEL
The project of masculinizing Jackson was easier in the more adult, professional setting of the American Music Awards ceremony, held in Los Angeles on January 18, 1980. In a picture that again places the star in the midst of being kissed, Michael stands with his right hand in his pocket, body shifted in toward Patti LaBelle, who is about to kiss his cheek. He smiles almost demurely, staring into the camera, exposing a small portion of teeth, his face calm, his composure cool, as if he is unaware of the kiss about to be planted on his face. But he knows. I was the one who asked LaBelle to kiss Michael’s cheek and she complied without hesitation. His shirt sparkles and glitters, covered with thousands of rhinestones. The sleeve of the shirt peaks out just above the right wrist of the tuxedo appearing like a diamond bracelet, a sparkling contrast to the black material of his coat and his dark skin. But it is not a bracelet; Michael is not pictured wearing jewelry, and he doesn’t wear it privately.

LaBelle’s dress is also sparkling, resembling a costume more than a dress—highly reflective and provocatively cut into a V-line from the neck to below her waist with a sheer material, making her skin both visible and covered. As in Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus*, LaBelle’s collar creates a visual V-line as it sits atop her body, similar to the clam shell Venus (Aphrodite) stands upon; her pearls reference the sea and the provocative plunging neckline stops just above her genitals, while the rest of her body is fully covered in opaque material, a playful reversal of modesty. Venus is depicted as naked, born from the sea, using her hands to cover her breasts and vagina. Smoke enters the scene on the left side of the photograph; in the painting white lines are coming out of an angel’s mouth, though the reference is actually the wind. The partial profile of a woman in a white dress cinched at the waist with a glittering material similar to Patti LaBelle’s dress occupies the left side of the photograph. She is standing close to Michael in an attempt to be captured in the frame of the photograph. In the background, between her and Michael, a man wearing dark glasses looks on, smiling as he gazes onto the two objects of desire. This creates a delicate balance that places Michael in contrast to the love goddess and yet suggests that he is a sort of love god himself, simply because she chooses to kiss him. This framing places him as the object of desire, ordinarily a feminine position, and yet the positioning of a man gazing into the camera eye is typical of advertisements directed at females.

While Michael gets a kiss from the Black Venus, his eyes appear cool. He is relaxed and has the grace of a young Adonis. I requested the kiss from Patti, the
some form of consideration of the achievement Michael had accomplished that evening, while Michael maintained his cool. Not so with Donna Summer on this night. She triumphed over Barbra Streisand, Olivia Newton-John, and Rod Stewart. Michael’s only claims were Rick James, Teddy Pendergrass, Kool and the Gang, The Commodores, and Peaches & Herb. He was still in the chitlin’ circuit and desperately wanted to escape.

Another staged pose of Michael with a prestigious woman—this time, Donna Summer—reveals the odd emotional tension and hidden pain at the root of the image. At this music awards event, Michael had won every category in which he was nominated: Favorite Soul / R&B Male Artist, Favorite Soul / R&B Single (“Don’t Stop ’til You Get Enough”), and Favorite Soul / R&B Album (Off the Wall). He was pleased, but not satisfied, perhaps because he always perceived his victories and accomplishments as tenuous, short-lived.

“Congratulations!” I said at the party afterward held next door, on another stage. “You swept every category. A perfect record. You got the most awards of anyone here.”

“No I didn’t. Donna Summer got three also, and more important ones too. She got Best Female Artist in Pop / Rock and R&B and Best Pop / Rock single.”

His life in the spotlight drove him to be the best at all times, second to none, but his satisfaction was rarely fully savored for fear it might lead to complacency.

“Yes, but she didn’t sweep every category she was nominated in. Only you did that, Michael.”

“Bad Girls is a disco album just like mine. It’s a dance album. What makes mine R&B and hers Pop / Rock and R&B. It’s not fair.” Shaking his head, he repeated, “It’s not fair.” Just then Donna Summer was walking by with her publicist, who asked Michael for a photo. Neither showed much enthusiasm. In the photograph Donna isn’t smiling and she appears withdrawn, wearing a black jacket resembling a man’s tuxedo with a black vest underneath in a sophisticated, androgynous style. A cross hangs low from her neck, her hair hangs in long, flowing, braided tresses. The smile on Jackson’s face appears almost forced, apologetic, or artificial, especially given his previous comments.

The two competitors were forced together by the camera lens, each communicating, signaling their position in the photo by their lack of emotion, although Michael gave ground by displaying a polite, perfunctory smile while she maintained the aloofness of a queen. Neither one shows any hint of deferring to the other, unlike the photos I had taken moments before with Patti Labelle, Sly Stone, and Rick James. Each of those artists, although peers, showed emotion, or
DEVELOPING THE IMAGE

Kobena Mercer observes that Michael Jackson’s image took on the iconic status of classic film stars, representing cultural tensions in a way that transcended the world of music:

In “The Face of Garbo” Barthes sought to explore the almost universal appeal of film stars like Chaplin, Hepburn and Garbo by describing their faces as masks: aesthetic surfaces on which a society writes large its own preoccupations. Jackson’s face can also be seen as such a mask, for his image has attracted and maintained the kind of cultural fascination that makes him more like a movie-star than a modern rhythm and blues artist.¹

As Michael’s fame grew, after a while a bond formed between us, and he started seeking out my help with the creation of his photographic image. Over time we discovered that we had separate yet complementary goals for the photographs to fulfill. Michael needed the images to communicate his effortless stardom and boyish, naïve innocence. He had spoken with Kate Hepburn and Jane Fonda, who advised him to study the classic Hollywood photo books from the 1930s and 1940s so he could understand the visual nuance that constitutes the aura of the star. These were the same books I had looked at when I was younger, in order to learn about lighting. I used my knowledge of photo history and referred Michael to Lewis Hine’s moving images of child factory workers taken at the turn of the century, which outraged the public and resulted in our first child labor laws. During these sessions, Michael would choke up nearly every time he saw those photographs. He repeatedly told me to look at their eyes, to look at their incredible sadness.

In the next photograph, Michael is standing in a room, leaning on a column that extends out of the camera frame. His arms are gathered around the column, left hand clasping right. The fingers on his right hand curve delicately inward. His head tilts toward the camera as he looks into the lens, unguarded, vulnerable. A chair is in the background situated against a wall with patterned designs on the surface. The chair casts a long shadow on the wall, indicating the low position of the sun. Three chairs are in the photograph, suggesting a room of social exchange, yet he is alone in the room. It is late in the afternoon.

I had arranged to photograph Michael in the largest suite of the hotel, the President’s Suite. It is reserved for the wealthy and powerful. American presidents have slept there. In this photo, Michael is wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, and black belt. Although he is a millionaire, he looks like he is from the black working class, save for the studded belt. Michael told me he wanted to
wear expressions similar to the children's faces he saw in Lewis Hines's early twentieth-century photographs of exploited child labor working in factories. The exhaustion and sadness in the faces of the children were undeniable. Michael did not smile once in the forty-five minutes we spent making photographs that day in the President's Suite. We barely spoke, not wanting to break the quiet of the moment. I made minimal gestures with my head and hands to give him direction and would nod and hum approvingly when I was certain of capturing a particularly melancholic image.

In his own quiet way he was instructing me on how he wanted to be portrayed. I wanted to show him and the world a thoughtful, reflective portrait, a counterpoint to the usual image of a grinning black entertainer. Looking back now, I realize I was actually making a portrait of myself, with Michael as my stand-in. Odd: over the years through the study of these images, I've learned more about myself than I care to admit.

In contrast to the somber melancholy of this photograph, Jackson's star image was being pulled increasingly in the direction of glamor and glitz, even as the haunting sadness of Michael's face shines through the sophisticated veneer. I could relate to this duality. Like Michael Jackson, I found myself filled with romantic fantasies and desires fueled by the faces on my television screen: Ginger and Mary Ann from *Gilligan's Island*, Sue Ellen on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and Pussy Galore in the film *Goldfinger*. During my school years I never listened to the black rhythm and blues radio station, instead opting for “white” rock ‘n’ roll. Growing up, I worshiped at the altar of The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin, all playing music my father loathed. He was a jazz and blues man, a race man. Not I.

I eventually came to recognize the African American roots of the supposedly white music and stars that I idolized. During a drunken backstage conversation with Led Zeppelin's lead singer, Robert Plant, he ranted on to me about his heroes, Leadbelly, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon (names I only vaguely remembered from my father's generation), about how black music was the best in the world. Was he kidding me? I nodded my head knowingly, but in my mind I was still convinced that bands like the Rolling Stones, Zeppelin, and The Doors were the best. He blurted out that Zeppelin made millions by co-opting the Mississippi Delta blues. Was this his confession? Why was he telling me? Was I missing something? Couldn't he understand that I was a rocker, in spite of my appearance?

Eventually, with the help of theorists such as bell hooks, Fanon, and Du Bois, I grew to understand the self-loathing that had made me want to be like the white stars I worshiped. Then, as I looked at other photographs I'd made of Michael and
saw how his hair, nose, and skin color had gradually transformed, I thought to myself that, indeed, his racial self-loathing was becoming apparent. It was at this same moment that I began to understand my own racial self-hatred. While playing in the streets and alleys on Chicago’s South Side as a child in the 1960s we would sing out the phrase, “If you’re white, you’re all right. If you’re black, stick around. If you’re black, step back,” innocently sowing the seeds of self-loathing and nihilism. Michael grew up in Gary, Indiana, thirty miles away. His overbearing father, Joseph, forced his sons, the Jackson Five, to rehearse incessantly, and he beat them when they erred. Michael was not allowed to play after school or have friends over at the house, depriving him of the joys of a normal childhood. Joseph commanded him to come home and rehearse, and if it weren’t enough to quell dissent, then he would brandish a .38mm revolver to legitimize his authority. Joseph viewed Michael as his ticket out of Gary, Indiana. I also wanted to escape the constant reminders and restrictions of my second-class status. Black pride was both dream and oxymoron.

This kind of experience and attitude emerged in Jackson’s descriptions of his own upbringing. He recounted how he had to be careful of his actions and be on his guard ever since he was a child, because the press and racist society “were just waiting for us to mess up. Waiting to jump on any mistake we make.” I understood the immense pressure required to be a model citizen and to keep oneself in check, or suffer the consequences of being labeled a “bad Negro”—uncouth, ignorant, and criminal. We both made adjustments and spoke in softer tones and minimized aggressive behavior, which, by default, softened our personae. We were less threatening young black males, thanks to the vigilance of our internalized wardens, policing and under self-surveillance as described in Foucault’s Panopticon: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”

Because of Michael’s celebrity, his overseer was much harsher than mine. As a black pubescent child star he learned that if signs of carnal desire were broadcast and distorted by the press, white parents would stop buying his records for fear of corrupting their daughters. He knew firsthand the pain a family suffers when sales drop and layoffs occur, since it had happened to his own father at the Indiana steel mills. Michael did not want to let this happen to his family and friends at Motown Records—a lot of weight to bear on his delicate twelve-year-old shoulders. In order to escape the negative stereotype of blackness, Jackson overachieved and overcompensated to show that he was different, in a logical response to a corrupt cultural assault.

### THE PAIN OF PERFORMANCE

Both the pain and sheer physical effort of Jackson’s performances come across throughout his career, particularly in those that recall the experiences of his youth. In a photo during the J5 medley of their earliest hits, his fatigue is evident. Michael’s eyes are cast down, mouth open and chest glistening with sweat. His pants sparkle from the reflection of thousands of rhinestones. Light is falling on his body from multiple directions—left, right, behind, low, and high. In back of him below his waist are three large objects, numerous high lights reflect off their surface, and further below are several more cylindrical objects, much smaller in size. A bright light is at the upper right corner of the frame.

This image reveals the almost mechanized work and energy expended during performance. The glitter pants weigh in around ten pounds. A bank of lights come on periodically during the performance, shining a blinding light directly into the eyes of the audience and performer, unleashing a burst of heat on anyone within ten feet. The expression on Michael’s face looks as if he is exhausted, going through the motions, working for a living. Perhaps he wants to be somewhere else—maybe in his mind, at this precise moment, he is. A glaring spotlight is trained on his every move, 40,000 eyes watching, but he’s not there. Meanwhile, he performs the same dance moves to the same song at the same precise moment as he had been doing since he was a child.

When we were in Disneyland Michael told me that Mickey Mouse was the most successful and beloved star in the world and he wanted to be just like him—not another human being, not even another living being, but a cartoon animal. Mickey was an international star, but his persona was a commodity as well as an entertainment character. The price Michael paid in his quest to transform into commodity and character was high. In his quest for such fantastic stardom, he had to repress almost all his carnal desires and impulses, indeed, much of his humanity, to achieve his goal.

Consequently, Jackson maintained an immense degree of self-control to differentiate himself from performers like Rick James, Sly Stone, and even James Brown. All these artists had served time in jail and perpetuated a public perception of the black male as pathological and criminal. Jackson policed his desires and repressed his id in order to, as Fanon put it, “lighten [his] darkness” and become the model minority representative, the Good Negro.

In the pre-civil rights era, black mothers taught their boys at an early age to be quiet and demure in public to ensure their survival. White southern culture viewed these boys as wild and untamed animals. It was not uncommon to see a mother give her son a yank on the collar or smack on the head in the Jim Crow South.
Black boys could be savagely beaten or worse for the (mis)perceived insult to a white woman caused by a smile, laugh, or gaze. A neurotic pattern of internalized suppression would often develop in children as the result of a mother’s loving instinct to protect and help her child survive. As blacks moved from the South to the North these parenting methods persisted. Michael Jackson’s family exercised the extremes of such practices, as his youth was taken from him, both by a culture that inhibited his movement and action and by parents who recognized him as a valuable economic resource, a magical tool for escaping the bounds of racial and economic oppression.

Michael was famous for loving animals and children, perhaps as extensions of his own image of himself. In this photograph, Michael stands facing right, in a stoic profile, wearing a sweater with a family seal or emblem embroidered over his heart. He holds the harness of a white llama facing him with his right hand, while his left hand rests on top of the llama’s head. Bright sunlight illuminates the scene and reflects off the steel chain link enclosing them.

Michael Jackson had a private zoo in his backyard, perhaps in an attempt to establish his own domain or perhaps a connection to his African ancestry. The zoo has its earliest beginnings in Mesopotamia and Egypt, as a way for monarchs and rulers to exhibit their conquests and spoils of war. Private zoos were symbols of power, wealth, and authority. Michael’s coat of arms or family crest on his sweater confirms his own historical aspiration to class affiliation, and yet one wonders: Is this the crest of Gary, Indiana? The photograph shows both Michael and llama sharing space in a chain link cage, one trapped by the force of man, the other trapped by the seduction of capital, culture, and stardom.
“THRILLER” AS PARABLE

Much of Michael Jackson’s meteoric rise to superstardom occurred with his breakout music and dance performance in “Thriller,” which revolutionized, indeed, created, the modern music video. Instead of a stagey performance of a song accompanied by awkward dance moves, appropriate to American Bandstand or The Ed Sullivan Show, “Thriller” was more of a short film, enacting a zombie uprising through Jackson’s riveting choreography and music. This music video resonated profoundly with viewers because behind the dance, it was a parable for a larger social conflict.

The cultural perception of the black male as a wild and untamed animal expresses itself and contributes to the anxiety at the beginning of the “Thriller” video, as Michael Jackson watches an image of himself morph into a beast—a werewolf—onscreen while sitting in the audience at a movie theater. A short while later he leaves the theater only to turn into a zombie in the “real world” outside.

These two mutations, beast and zombie, convey the suffering of mental colonialism and self-loathing, materialized and come to life onscreen. “Thriller” serves as a way for Jackson to exteriorize and exorcise his demons of internalized cultural oppression and self-repression. The historical roots of this dichotomy are evident in the antebellum South's division of “Negros” into two categories: house slaves and field slaves, one good and the other bad. House slaves were viewed as good docile servants, while field slaves were seen as potentially violent beasts of labor. Jackson unleashes his inner “bad Negro” on the movie screen as the growling, howling werewolf, and he takes an immense amount of pleasure in doing so. He is the only person in the audience pictured onscreen who smiles and happily munches popcorn while others around him are terrified of the image. In a sadistic twist he takes pleasure in the suffering others experience as they are repulsed by the image of his cinematic doppelganger. Better to laugh than to cry.

During the zombie segment of the video, mindless bodies lacking souls move in sequence. This is the final tragic outcome signifying a lifetime of suppression that ultimately destroys the spirit, along with any glimmer of independent thought. For the zombie, the internalized thought police have finally won the battle and successfully subdued his free will and consumed his humanity. Michael expresses this condition with syncopated choreography befitting a military drill team. All the dancers hit their marks in unison with sharp precision. Michael Jackson is no longer the sole focal point of our attention, as the whole troupe of dancers turn into a unit with Michael at the helm. We can join in the march of the zombies, forgetting ourselves in order to become something significantly bigger, an army. In later years Jackson adopts the uniform of a decorated military leader. For a while he only ventured out in public wearing some form of uniform. His sole source of warmth and security is found in the cold embrace of the military uniform. Zombie.

Capturing this notion, Nigerian singer Fela Kuti wrote a song entitled “Zombie” and equates this state of mindless being to that of a soldier in the military:

Zombie no go go, unless you tell am to go
Zombie no go stop, unless you tell am to stop
Zombie no go turn, unless you tell am to turn
Zombie no go think, unless you tell am to think.8

Public space is seen as battlefield and he is ready for another attack. Jackson’s superstardom laid siege to his psyche and sense of well-being, leaving him a seeming automaton. This impression of Jackson’s psychological position came to me at the moment that I was also losing my place as insider. I now see that at some point Michael ceased being a mere mortal and morphed into the mythical world of hero and demi-god. He became a star. He had taken a sip from the philosopher’s cup, entering the pantheon of the artist, as described by Thomas Carlyle:

The meaning of Song goes deep. Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect music has on us? A kind of inarticulate unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that!9
Unfortunately for me, my photos did not reflect this transformation in his new star image. I still saw him as a man in this world, similar to myself, and I was caught unaware that he had shape–shifted like an African trickster or shaman. I suppose my photos anchored him to this world while he was blasting off into the cosmos. On my first critical search through these photographs I was looking for proof of his shame and betrayal, but found only my own. Frantz Fanon, Foucault, Du Bois, and other theorists sat on my shoulder, pointing out clues as I sifted through my archive. I had previously thought the place for theory was only in the classroom, not in my home, but true knowledge cuts both ways and knows no boundaries. Traces and signs of mental colonialism and self-commodification were apparent in both my object of study and in myself.

Michael’s transformation of hair and facial features and my own history of hair straightening both demonstrate aspects of Fanon’s theory of race and racism. Michael spoke softly and did not dress in the style of other black youths his age or mimic street culture, careful not to be mistaken for the ethnic stereotype of the criminal black man, behavior that embodied Foucault’s theory of self-policing. I was often called an “Oreo” because of my purging of blackness in grooming, speech, and dress, an indication of the kind of inferiority complex Toni Morrison writes about in her book *The Bluest Eye*, when the narrator observes how “it was as though some mysterious and all–knowing master had given each one of them a cloak of ugliness to wear and they had each accepted it without question.”

RETURN TO AFRICA

In order to understand Michael Jackson’s ceaseless and progressively more desperate attempts to hide his self–perceived ugliness and whiten his image, I sought a global perspective and began to explore perceptions of Michael among people in black–dominated countries. I began to travel to Ghana, so often that I now maintain a studio there. When I first visited Ghana I experienced what it was like to be in the racial majority for the first time in my life. My blackness did not stick out there; it was commonplace. In late 2008, several months before Michael’s death, I took photographs of Michael with me to Africa. I wanted to see if people in a remote fishing village, off the grid, would know who he was and tell me what they made of him. Everyone I approached immediately recognized his face without me saying his name. I asked them to pose with the photograph as if he were their brother, lost in the city, and they were attempting to call him back home to the village. Everyone I approached in Ghana claimed this star as theirs, as African.

Even though the images of Michael Jackson elicited expressions of brotherhood from everyone I encountered, I did not experience the same sense of homecoming, perhaps because I was perceived as an ordinary person, not an icon or a star. My ancestors left Africa as a physical commodity, and now I had returned as the Other, Western on the inside, in spite of my dark skin. I was called “obruni” in the Twi language of Ghana. “Obruni, obruni,” the children called out to me as I passed through the village. Obruni is what they call
Westerners. Obruni means white man. In talking with people in Ghana, my impression was that they were drawn to Michael Jackson not so much because of his stardom as they were moved by a sense of pity for a man whose ancestors were forced to leave Africa. I cannot know if they were simply trying to follow my directions, but to my eyes, their pictures tell the story of a genuine and sympathetic longing to bring Michael Jackson back home.

NOTES
1. Frantz Fanon, Wretched of The Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210–11.
2. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903), 31–76. Du Bois states that “for three long centuries this people lynched Negroes who dared to be brave, raped black women who dared to be virtuous, crushed dark-hued youth who dared to be ambitious, and encouraged and made to flourish servility and lewdness and apathy” (43).
3. Management asked me to be alert for photo ops accenting Michael's masculinity and manhood whenever they appeared. When I first heard these words I almost blurted out, "I ain't no sissy," as I had done to my father, years ago, before realizing this was not aimed at me or my work. I never revealed this directive to Michael.


8. Fela Kuti, "Zombie," www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q76UngzHX3Y, accessed February 23, 2015. Ten years later, I found myself in a similar situation in a meeting with Bobby Brown's manager and the Creative Director of MCA Records, finalizing the image I would produce for his *Don't Be Cruel* album cover, his first solo project after leaving the teen heartthrob boy band New Edition. The manager described the photo he wanted: "Bobby's wearing all black leather and looking tough on top of a Harley Davidson motorcycle in the desert at dusk. He's revving the engine and spinning the rear tire, kicking up rocks and dirt on a hot young babe he's just done, lying on the ground near the rear tire as he is about to roar off into the sunset." Although I needed this job, I could not ethically make this image. I asked two questions: What percentage of teenage girls will buy Bobby Brown's album? If you were a teenage girl, would you enjoy a fantasy of Bobby using you and then discarding you alone in the desert, showering you with dirt and rocks? Point made.


The learning goals in this resource guide may be adapted to meet the standards in almost any subject or grade level. Due to the themes of the exhibition connected to identity and the complexity of some of the content, much of the content is most easily adaptable to middle school and high school classrooms. However, the content can meet the content standards requirements for many of the elementary grade levels.

**VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS**
To see which Visual Arts Standards are met in each activity, please visit the California Visual and Performing Arts Standards at http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/vpastandards.pdf

**HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS**