

The Whitening of Black King Tut: Implications for Educating All Children

By

Wade W. Nobles, Ph.D.¹

And

Vera L. Nobles, Ph.D.²

¹ Wade W. Nobles, Ph.D. is a full professor of Africana Studies at San Francisco State University and is the founder and Executive Director of Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Family Life & Culture, Inc. and Center for the Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement in Oakland, California

² Vera Nobles holds a Ph. D. in Africana Studies from Temple University and has served as a bilingual educator for over 23 years. She retired from the West Contra Costa Unified School District as a Literacy Coach and now serves as an educational consultant throughout the United States

Almost thirty years ago (circa 1979), my wife and I took our children to San Francisco to see the “Treasures of Tutankhamen” exhibit showing at the M.H. deYoung Memorial Museum. After waiting in a long line, we finally entered the great hall where the museum had recreated the initial discovery of the dark tomb entrance and storage areas by presenting the objects in approximately the same order in which they were found. Photomurals of 1922 Carter excavation scenes and replications of contemporary newspaper accounts adorned the museum walls. A hush of awe fell over the crowd as people walked amongst the possessions of the Boy King. Amazed at King Tut’s bejeweled knife, solid gold funeral mask, a gilded wood figure of the goddess Selket, lamps, jars, jewelry, bed, headrest canopic jars, sevati games, and other objects for his afterlife, the crowd looked in almost disbelief at the splendor of Africa.

Then our daughter, Zeta saw the larger than life size picture of Howard Carter and broke the silence with her shrill 7-year-old voice and proclaimed, *“That is the thief. He’s the grave robber. That’s the one who stole all this stuff from Africa.”* It is true that out of the mouths of babes... some people’s great discovery is another people’s robbed grave. And the controversy continues. King Tut is coming back to America shrouded in the on-going debate as to his racial identity.

The Discovery of the Boy King

Howard Carter was born in England in 1874. While trained by his father in the portrait painting craft, he did not want to continue in the family business. In 1891

while still a teenager, Carter secured work as a tracer for the Egyptian Exploration Fund. A year later he joined the archeologist, Flinders Petrie, who thought very little of Carter but trained him anyway in archeology. In 1899, Gaston Maspero offered the tracer turned archeologist, Howard Carter at the age of 25, the job of First Chief Inspector General of Monuments for Upper Egypt. Carter’s responsibilities included supervising and “controlling” archeology along the Nile Valley.

Lord Carnarvon funded Carter as supervisor of excavations in Thebes and by 1914 Carnarvon owned (without purchase; therefore, better considered stole (authors editorial) one of the most valuable collections of ancient African (Egyptian) artifacts held in private hands. Carter worked in the field for Lord Carnarvon for seven years. Carnarvon grew dissatisfied with Carter’s lack of discoveries and in 1922 gave him one final season of support to find King Tutankhamen’s tomb.

In November of that year, Howard Carter unearthed a staircase leading to King Tutankhamen’s burial place. The tomb of the Boy King was the discovery (or should it be called the robbery or heist) of the century and took more than a decade just to catalog. After his discovery of Tutankhamen’s burial place, Carter no longer worked in the field. He retired from archeology and became a wealthy collector of Egyptian antiquities. At 65 years of age, Carter died in isolation shunning the controversy, myths and lies that were started by his discovery or, as Zeta declared, his theft of Africa’s wealth and inheritance.

The Treasures of King Tut as an intact archeological discovery is important to the whole world and equally so is the accurate representation of his image and identity. The identity of King Tutankhamen, Carter's most valuable discovery continues the controversy.

White Privilege & The Whitening of History

The ideology of White Supremacy has poisoned the world and the way in which people live in the world. An unstated, and for the most part, unexamined aspect of white supremacy is the effect of white privilege wherein all human phenomena are filtered through the lens of whiteness and/or white criteria of human standardization. A critical problem of white privilege is "whitening" wherein there is a proclivity to see and claim all human achievement and accomplishment as only found in the experience of white people or indirectly in relation to contact with white people. The extent of "whitening" in discourse relative to ancient human accomplishment and achievement is almost at the level of pathological perceptual distortion requiring therapeutic intervention. Such pathology requires and even demands that imaginary "whiteness" be found where in actuality there is no whiteness.

Pathological whitening seems to be especially true in regards to contemporary discussions about ancient Egypt where Egypt becomes white when in actuality it was Black. The ancient record is clear. For instance, based on his visit to Africa in the fifth century BC, Herodotus³, the so-called

It should also be noted that at the time of Herodotus's visit to Egypt and other parts of Africa (between 480 and 425

Father of History, gave an eyewitness account which described the Egyptians as Black with wooly hair. The opinion of the ancient writers on the Egyptians is more or less summed up by Gaston Maspero (1846–1916) when he says, *"By the almost unanimous testimony of ancient historians, they [the Egyptians] belong to an African race..."* In his book *Egypt*, Sir E.A. Wallis Budge says: *"The prehistoric native of Egypt, both in the old and in the new Stone Ages, was African..."* Karl Richard Lepsius' *Incomparable Survey of the Monumental Ruins in the Ethiopian Nile Valley in 1842–1844* notes explicitly that *"the **Black people** of remote antiquity were the earliest of all civilized peoples and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Egypt were members of what is referred to as the **Black race** who entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia."*

In referring to the bases of their achievements in physical and moral sciences in the Nile Valley, the French writer Count C. F. Volney, in his important work, *The Ruins of Empires*, makes note that *"It was, then, on the borders of the Upper Nile, among a **Black race** of men, that was organized the complicated system of worship of the stars, considered in relation to the productions of the earth and the labors of agriculture; and this first worship, characterized by their adoration under their own forms and national attributes,*

B.C.) Egypt's Golden Age was over. Egypt had suffered from several invasions, mainly the Kushite invasions and starting in 751 B.C., and the Assyrians' invasions from Western Asia (now called the Middle East), starting in 671 B.C. If Egypt, after years of invasions by other people and nations was a distinct Black African nation at the time of Herodotus, shouldn't one at least assume that it was more so (Black) before these invasions occurred?

was a simple proceeding of the human mind."

Many of the leading antiquarians of the time, based largely on the strength of what the classical authors, particularly Diodorus Siculus and Stephanus of Byzantium, had to say on the matter, were exponents of the view that the ancient Ethiopians, the **Black people** of remote antiquity were the earliest of all civilized peoples and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Egypt were members of what is referred to as the **Black race** who entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia.

Then comes the contemporary pathological whitening. In addressing the question of King Tut's image and identity, Dr. Anthony Falsetti, a forensic anthropologist in charge of C. A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory at the University of Florida in Gainesville notes, that skull shapes are the best indicators of ancestry and that "prognathism" and "dolichocephalism" are signs of African origin. He goes on to assert that while greater accuracy would require the exhaustive examination of many many skeletons from 3,500 years ago, the weight of the evidence indicates that Tut had a North African complexion, i.e., a light coffee latte, creamy brown skin pigmentation (euphemisms for not Black). The National Geographic magazine cover, based on the CAT scan of Tut's skeletal remains, also depicts Tut as having a coppery-brown complexion similar to that of North Africans today.

The shape of King Tut's skull is, in fact, "dolichocephalic" and his jaw is "prognathic." Others have noted that the portrait of Tut's daddy, Akhenaton, show

him to also have a very prominent jaw and thick, sensuous African lips.

However, contrary to the testimony and evidence closest to the time of Tut, when asked was Tut Black, Dr. Falsetti said, "He may have been." "However, was he Black by "our standards", he asserts, "probably not." He goes on to state, "I think the TUT-was-Black people are trying to assign a modern cultural relevance to a set of very old human remains." Is the pot calling the kettle black here? Is not claiming that Tut "probably looked like other people in North Africa today assigning modern cultural relevance and racial preference, i.e., whiteness. In representing Tut's very old remains, why would you choose to model people in North Africa today and disregard evidence and testimony closest to Tut and his time? Answer. Perhaps the pathology of white supremacy distorts both one's perception and reasoning such that the whitening of people and events of human acclaim and accomplishment is the requisite condition for discourse.

The Hawass Commission: Continuing the Caucasoid Origins' Theory

King Tut's appearance has been debated since Howard Carter discovered his tomb in the Valley of the Kings in 1922. In modern times dozens of artists have produced competing impressions of his face, using the Pharaoh's celebrated death mask and X-rays of the skull first taken in 1968. There has been little consensus about which is most accurate.

The latest controversial forensic reconstruction of Tutankhamen is the

result of CT scans in January 2005, carried out by Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), under the direction of the Secretary-General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, Dr. Zahi Hawass. Zahi Hawass decided to resolve this controversy by commissioning three independent teams from France, Egypt and the United States, to produce fresh reconstructions using the Computer tomography (CT) scans. Computer tomography (CT) scans chart the contours and topography of the skull and obtain detailed data that allow researchers and artists to create a three-dimensional likeness of the deceased person. Forensic reconstruction and illustrative art are used in archeology to create a likeness of a deceased person from the distant past.

In constructing an image, forensic artists have to give a "guesstimate" of the person's nose, lips, ears, hair, ethnicity and skin color. These gaps are filled in by the overall working assumptions that the artists are using. Anthropologists or archeologists who are also working on the case often supply these data. Sculptor Elisabeth Daynès, for instance, used glass eyes and implanted hair for this reconstruction of Tutankhamen. Skin tone, which could have varied from very dark to very light, was based on an average shade of modern Egyptians. Why Modern Egyptians? Eye makeup known as kohl was also added, as the king may have worn it

The CT machine scanned Tutankhamen's mummy from head to toe and created 1,700 digital x-ray images. The SCA wanted to determine with the scans how King Tut died. The answer to that question is still not

known. Most now believe that he was not killed from a blow to the head as was speculated by many earlier Egyptologists and historians. Nevertheless, the CT scans did give Hawass a chance to commission teams of forensic artists to reconstruct Tut's image as a "North African Caucasoid." There were three forensic teams (American, Egyptian, and French) that each produced totally different results from the same CT scan produced data. The three teams created their reconstructions separately -- the Americans and French working from a plastic skull, the Egyptians working directly from the CT scans. The French and Egyptians knew they were recreating King Tut, but the Americans were not told where the skull was from. Totally ignoring the actual results, Hawass claims that *"The results of the three teams were identical or very similar in the basic shape of the face, the size, shape and setting of the eyes, and the proportion of the skull."*

Dr Hawass said: "The three reconstructions are all very similar in the unusual shape of the skull, the basic shape of the face, and the size, shape and setting of the eyes. The noses of all three are different, although the French and the American versions are more similar to each other than the Egyptian." Each represented some version of a North African Caucasoid.

This Caucasoid hypothesis is completely imaginary and not supported by any first-hand evidence. It completely ignores all of the dark-skinned Africoid paintings of Tutankhamen on the walls of his tomb, his brown and black skinned statues, his Africoid thick lips, and his all-black

family members. Given the historical records, why was a working assumption that Tut's skin tone was the color of a teenage Wesley Snipes, or Mos Def or Paul Robeson or Denzel Washington not considered? And would we, under the guise of forensic reconstructions, accept as all right a "working assumption" that the ancient personages of Izanami and Izanagi (Japanese); King Tongmyong (Korean); Quetzalcoatl and his brother Huitzilopochtli (Aztec); Gluscabi (native America) and Fuxi, Sshennong and Huangdi (Chinese) were all imaged as contemporary North American Caucasoids? I think not.

The Importance of Tut's Identity for Educating All Children Not Just Black Children

So why is the identity of this child who died long ago so important for educating all our children? The importance of correctly portraying the image and identity of King Tutankhamun fulfills a critical mandate of accuracy or near accuracy in recording and representing the historical record of the past for all humans. However, while honesty in history is important, finding and representing truth in the historical past has even greater importance for the human project of educating its young. Unfortunately in systems of inequality, exploitation and domination, education is always designed to teach the oppressed feelings of inferiority, innate inadequacy, helplessness, awe of the dominant class and acceptance of their place. The United States is still a country infected by the poison of white supremacy and as such racial domination in the sphere of education is

definitive and is used to mask the actual denial of the humanity of Black children. This is fundamental. African American children in most schools if not all of our schools are systemically defined and treated as a denigrated, un-welcomed racial group. Hence, the development and education of Black children becomes defined in political terms, i.e., no child left behind, at-risk, school reform, desegregation, bussing, social justice, minimum standards, closing achievement gaps, etc. and not as what is natural and expected from the highest possibility of being human.

This state of affairs hurts all children not just Black children. When other children learn to see and define Black children and thereby all Black people as racial objects and not as being human, they simultaneously craft or define their own meaning as racial (albeit superior) object and consequently limit and diminish their own capacity to reach their highest potential and possibility.

Education when done right is an ongoing process that encompasses teaching and learning specific skills, imparting information, attitudes, beliefs, good judgment, knowledge, understandings and wisdom. One of its chief goals is the intergenerational transmission of the instruments and medium for sustaining and developing life across time, space and place. In its intent, content and consequence, education is the process whereby human communities reproduce and refine the best of themselves by guiding the student to mastery, perfectibility and excellence. Hence, the fundamental purpose of education is "socialization" whereby we give to the next generation the required competence, confidence

and consciousness to effectively contribute to the sovereignty, security, well being and welfare of themselves, their community, people and humanity. In so doing, education should directly result in each generation having an inextricable link to its total past and an unbreakable responsibility for our infinite and collective future.

What Does Tut Have To Do With IT?

So what does the pathological whitening of King Tutankhamun have to do with educating all children? Everything.

The whitening of Black King Tutankhamun continues the process of denying the full involvement and accomplishment of Black people as an important part of human achievement. Consequently, Black children and all children are equally crippled in the contemporary relations in their communities and the world. The whitening of King Tutankhamun disconnects Black children's links to their full and complete past. Note, if you will, that this view of the past is not a simple question of history. Knowing the past directly shapes and inspires a child's sense of the now and their responsibility for contributing to and shaping the future. Black children knowing that the Boy King Tut was Black and ruled an empire translates directly to dreams and possibilities of greatness. White children and other non-Black children knowing that a Black boy ruled the world (and similar achievements are recorded in their own histories) equally translates to respectful relations with Black children and amongst themselves as well as their own dreams of possibility.

In order for teachers to educate children, teachers must reeducate themselves. We have not been prepared to teach truth and honesty regarding the historical role and contributions of African people. When considering the purpose of education, the role of the educator is essential. As stated earlier, education is an ongoing process that encompasses teaching and learning not only specific skills but values, knowledge, judgment, beliefs and other developmental skills necessary to refine and reproduce the best of ourselves.

In Western society, the fact that Egypt is on the continent of Africa is a guarded manipulated secret. To learn the truth is like a rumor squashed. The malicious damage has been done. However, teachers are in a position to assume responsibility to shape the future based on truth.

Children are the most trusting of human beings. Dishonesty in education shatters the link to the full and complete past of all people. It also interferes with the development of children to their full potential. Information about the past can provide children information that shapes their self-concept and gives examples of human possibilities. Not only do children of African ancestry benefit, but all people.

A few years ago, as a classroom teacher, one of the authors received a letter from a parent thanking her for teaching the students and school family about the ancient African past in Egypt (Kemet). In the letter the parent wrote,

"I am honored that you allowed Cory to portray Imhotep...he was

thrilled about his role in the program and I am just glad he was able to learn about Imhotep at an age that is about 30 years before I learned of Imhotep! (Another example of how so much truth has been denied the general public) Thank you so much for bringing that important lesson to the school..."

We have also noticed that non-Black children enjoy and are inspired by the honest history of Black people. In teaching a fifth grade class, White children were equally excited about learning and reciting the important words of Egypt's Queen Hatshepsut and of the multi-talented genius Imhotep. Similarly, when teaching third grade, the Hispanic children recited with pride the proverbs that emanated from ancient African concepts of value and right conduct and which were/are used to instruct children even today. Not only did the learning of Black history inspire non-Black children, it directed positive attitudes toward their Black classmates and it encouraged them to want to learn more of their own full and complete story. In one case after learning about Black history, one student asked when we would learn more about Asian history. When knowledge of the contributions and capabilities of African people is released to the world community, reciprocity of respect can flourish between all groups of humanity. It only makes sense that the people who first peopled the world would have had the time to develop the greatness that the Black Boy King Tut inherited.

Given the requisites of the 21st Century, where we, in fact, live in a world community, it is damaging for all of our

children to be socialized in ways that distort and morph the contributions of any one. Fundamentally, the world today is a world driven by relationships. Relationships between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, between ethnic and religious communities and between economic, class and social interest. The school place like the world is also driven by relationships. Relationships between teachers, students, parents, administrators, tax payers, experts, special interest groups and corporations. How one relates to another is in part shaped by how one defines and gives meaning to oneself and the other. Seeing Black children as the continuation of a people and tradition that made significant contributions to human civilization, gives a different fabric to the cloth of interpersonal and inter-group relations than does the image and meaning of Blackness as the unworthy recipients or perpetual borrowers and beggars of human want.

What should be the role of educators in view of the Whitening of Black King Tut, Africa's stolen people, stolen artifacts, and stolen identity? In many ways it is all the same process. For too long Western society has denied the concept of the achievement of Black people as an important part of human achievement. Artifacts of achievement exist, many remaining in Egypt others stolen and removed to locations throughout the world. However, the true identity of the architects and the people who created them have been concealed and/or whenever possible "whitened" to give the impression that non-Africans and not Black Africans are

the creators of the magnificence of ancient Africa.

When teachers and students are involved in learning about the truth of Africa, everyone benefits. The benefits may come in the form of knowledge of others, a change in attitude about Black people, an improvement in relationships, a desire to learn more, further research to uncover past contributions and much more. Knowledge of the skillfulness of African people before the intrusion of Arabia and Europe into Africa liberates minds and attitudes. These benefits expand for all when we learn, for instance, that the Africans were enslaved in part because of the desirable skills and knowledge that they had which were used to develop the New World. We didn't just pick cotton. Those educated upon a foundation of truth can use their intelligence to see a pattern of dishonesty that developed in the Western world to justify enslaving Africa's people.

While there is no single magic bullet or miracle cure to contemporary

educational problems, teaching the truth about King Tut's identity would and could give teachers a different image of Black people, especially to their students; and it could shape the contours and contexts of teaching and learning that would encourage and inspire educational excellence with all children.

Our children are and will be, in ways that we cannot imagine, citizens of the whole world. To distort their socialization and continue to mis-educate is to cripple them as participants of a just world order. So what does Tut have to do with it? It has to do with our ability to correctly portray the image and identity of King Tutankhamun and in so doing teach the truth regarding the human past as a measure of our ability to give an honest account of Black people's history and contributions. It is one small and great gift we can give to all children.