

Once Upon a Time in America There was Michael Jackson

Sylvie LAURENT

Michael Jackson was a lot more than just a singer: Sylvie Laurent recounts the story of the pop star who became a “monster,” whose quest for white-skinned androgyny reveals in several respects the agonizing indecision of the African-American community in the face of racism and sexism?

It was while leafing through *Life* magazine when he happened upon the photograph of a man’s face burned by bleaching creams that Barack Obama – as he recalls in his first memoir¹ – felt black, irremediably black, for the first time in his life. Such a repudiation of the black self was a gut-wrenching shock to Obama, who would later be accused by some detractors of “not being black enough.” That may account for the president’s silence at a time when much of America was grieving for the late Michael Jackson, and Obama’s evocation, belatedly and through a spokesperson, of the “tragic” nature of the artist’s life. Since his disappearance, people frequently recall Jackson’s desperate measures to whiten his complexion, presumably in a desire to expunge every hint of blackness, which he associated with his father’s virile brutality. But if that were all we had to say about his identity troubles, we would be wrongly reducing his work – on himself and his music – to a racial eccentricity and to the extravagance of a megalomaniac diva. Jackson’s art doubtless involved a more complex approach, whose roots are to be found at once both in the exemplarity of a unique schizophrenia, a masterful madness, certain aspects of which we can try to analyze, and more generally in the painful representation of the self in the African-American world.

Child’s play

Michael Jackson left behind the image of a man tormented by his demons, which stifled his genius and transformed him into a ghostly figure. The last, obscene image of the dying Jackson, of a pale face turbaned in hospital sheets and half-hidden by intubation equipment in an abortive attempt to resuscitate him, is tragically faithful to what he was: a man of masks, evolving in a liminal space between life and death, between self-hatred and fascination with the alter ego he’d have loved to have been.

Jackson was born into a poor working-class family in Gary, Indiana. His mother was a fervent Jehovah’s Witness who raised her children in the strict dogma of a faith that believes the end of the world is nigh and, in the meantime, seeks to keep its followers from being corrupted by the secular society around them. In his autobiography, *Moonwalk*, Michael recounts that he

¹ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

adhered to the cult's precepts until adulthood, deeply convinced that, as his mother always said, his gifts came from God: "I've always joked that I didn't ask to sing and dance, but it's true. When I open my mouth, music comes out. I'm honored that I have this ability. I thank God for it every day. I try to cultivate what he gave me. I feel I'm compelled to do what I do."²

However, Michael had to accept his place in that secular world when in 1967 his father, Joseph, had five of his sons sign a contract with Steeltown Records. He became one of several then, subject to the same rhythm as his older brothers, cloned like them into Motown mini-stars, each sporting an afro and a gold ring on his finger. What belonged to him alone was a dreamworld in which the little prodigy, already made to sing adult lyrics at the age of ten,³ was to live out his destiny. Officially, he had to abjure childhood. Indeed, while the little prodigy sang solo, eclipsing his older brothers, and danced suggestively in the style of James Brown, the title of the Jackson 5's first hit song, *Big Boy*, seemed paradoxical, a revelation of Michael's existential contradictions. In the song he claims he is now a "big boy" and doesn't need to believe in fairy tales anymore:

*Fairy tales, fairy tales
I don't enjoy
Fairy tales and wishful dreams
Are broken toys
'Cause I'm a big boy now*

And yet, from the very first years of his mass media exposure (1968-1979), Michael Jackson gave off quivers of sensual delight whenever he sang about childhood slipping through his fingers. The song *With A Child's Heart* (1973) proclaims his deep-seated faith in the purity of childhood, which "turns each problem into play," the only thing that makes the world bright and bearable.⁴ His appearance as the not very scary scarecrow in *The Wiz* (1978) provided a specific iconography for his artistic identity. This African-American musical rehash of L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* actually provides a *mise en abyme* of the young singer's life, insofar as it is about a young girl whose house is whisked away by a tornado to the magical world of Oz, where scarecrows are no longer scary and lions are afraid.

That was when Jackson met the musical wiz in charge of the film's soundtrack, Quincy Jones. In 1979, Jones, a producer, inspired instrumentalist/arranger and professional Pygmalion from Chicago, realized that this harking back to childhood was a musical gem that must be transformed into creative energy. So on *Off the Wall*, the album Jones produced for Jackson in

² Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*. New York: Doubleday, 1988.

³ In the song "ABC," recorded in 1968, he claims to teach a girl "all about love":

*Let me tell you what it's all about
Reading, writing, arithmetic
Are the branches of the learning tree
But without the roots of love everyday, girl
Your education ain't complete.*

The "teacher" thereupon instructs his pupil to "show me what you can do" – i.e. by vigorously wiggling her posterior: "Shake it baby!" In the song "I Want You Back" he begs a woman he has jilted to give him "one more chance," for he is jealous now that he sees her in another man's arms and life is "one long sleepless night" since she left. And most explicitly in "The Love You Save," he sings: "When we grew up you traded/Your promise for my ring."

⁴ "Take life easy, so easy nice and easy/Like a child so gay and so carefree/The whole world smiles with you/As you go your merry way/Oh with a child's heart/Nothing's gonna get me down."

1979 and the first one on which Jackson sings solo, he let him use that unique falsetto, that prepubescent voice that has inspired dozens of vocalists ever since. Jones added his matchless knowledge of the most effective and brilliant outgrowths of African-American music: jazz, rhythm & blues, funk and, above all, pop, that music so attuned to the times, which James Brown had succeeded in making black. Although Michael continued to sing with his brothers, he cultivated his childish imagination, a fantasy world of outlandish monsters, immaculate children and fabulous creatures. This strangeness, which some call a pathology, can hardly be compared to the neurotic excesses of Elvis Presley or Marlon Brando, for it cannot be reduced to a mere negation or parasitizing of the artist's career, but was also a precondition thereof, even a *raison d'être*. Quincy Jones intuitively staged and scored the psychological divagations of a being whose only way of living among others was to hide behind a filter, a mask, a theater curtain, a disguise, through which he could live out artistically his rejection of the real world. The word "thriller," the title of the best-selling album of all time, means both excitement and terror. In this 1982 masterpiece, Jackson shared with the world his narrative of a children's fairy tale of which he was the hero and in which by definition "the terrible and the extravagant are admissible."⁵

Terrifying and fantastical fairy tales

So he created a character out of his fantasies that reconciled the expression of his gifts, the demands of a music industry that very soon recognized its enormous commercial potential, and his unfulfilled inner need to be the ideal child. Looking closely at his overall oeuvre, from the first years of Jackson's career one can discern his nature as a lost little Tom Thumb, swept off his feet by the wave of his talent, leaving a trail of pebbles in his wake to bring him back to that strange child he never stopped being. The song "Ben,"⁶ for example, that irresistible tune of 1972, is the title song of a horror movie about the friendship between a young introvert and a tame rat. Jackson sings of the solitude of two beings united in a Grimm's fairy tale world, making a pact of eternal friendship against the rational order of the adult world. Indeed, this earthly world has never been the one in which Jackson sought fulfillment, and his penchant for dreaming initially gave off the fragrance of the fantastic and the terrifying, like that of the children's fairy tales that had probably never been read to him as a child.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim explains that the world of fairy tales is one that does not camouflage the complexities of the human soul, but offers a dialectical initiation into moral ambivalence, enabling young dreamers to forge their own personalities. "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent – not good and bad at the same time as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between."⁷ A child becomes an adult, says Bettelheim, when it has accepted life's ambiguities and solidly established its own personality. Michael Jackson clung to the first stage of development, pitting the goodness of childhood against the corruptness of the world around him, a conviction sustained in American popular culture by such talents as Steven Spielberg, whose *E. T.* (1983) was the first in a long series of films in which strange and benevolent beings from far away can only trust children unspoiled by lies. Certain critics go as far as to call this the "Peter Panning of

⁵ A.S. Byatt, "Inquiétante et délicieuse étrangeté des contes," *Le Monde*, June 26, 2009.

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g40WCBaUXR4>

⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Knopf, 1976.

Steven Spielberg.”⁸ Undeniably more psychologically fragile than most young men, Jackson himself was but the hyperbolic incarnation of a pathological idealization of childhood that is peculiar to America.⁹

The Manichaeism analyzed by Bettelheim is at the very core of Jackson’s work, and his personal malaise, his “divided self,” is a mimetic attempt at reconciliation. This incompatibility, this improbable negotiation between ideal childhood and the mortifying experience of life, gave rise to a monster, a creature that distrusted the laws of humanity. Through his art, of which his personal life was an integral part, he sought to embody all these polarities in order to transcend and neutralize them: innocence/guilt, young/old, black/white, man/woman, religious/secular. Like Spielberg, he understood the part the image and the screen play in recreating a child psyche to which everyone can relate, as adults rediscover their inner child.

Critic Michael Dyson sees this as a sign of the “postmodern” nature of Michael Jackson, who was “iconized,” he says, during a televised epiphany that can be dated with pinpoint precision to May 16, 1983, when the strange singer appeared on the TV show “Motown 25.” He danced a breathtaking number climaxing in his famous “moonwalk,” which owed more to the great Afro-American dancers and minstrels – from the brilliant Bill “Bojangles” Robinson¹⁰ to Sammy Davis, Sr. – than to Fred Astaire or Marcel Marceau. Over 50 million people watched the show and were spellbound by the dancing zombie.

The Peter Pan syndrome is regularly invoked to comprehend Michael Jackson and his refusal to grow up. He himself clearly identified with the hero created by Scottish novelist and playwright James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937), even christening his own unreal estate “Neverland,” where he lived for several years, populating it with hordes of children and exotic animals. Actually, however, Peter Pan as presented in Barrie’s play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* is a morbid character, closer to, say, Oskar in Günter Grass’s *Tin Drum* than to a jolly little sprite like Tinker Bell or Walt Disney’s innocent Bambi. In Günter Grass’s novel, Oskar makes up his mind on his third birthday never to grow any bigger. As he tells his story in retrospect, Oskar is 30 years old and lying in a psychiatric hospital. Naturally, Grass’s object is to describe the lunacy of a child in a war-torn Europe overrun by Nazism, so the analogy with Jackson can only be partial. Nonetheless, what they do have in common is not only their *puer aeternus* nature that would deny the passage of time, but also their shared quality of being child prodigies. Oskar is indeed a remarkable drummer, endowed, moreover, with an uncanny glass-shattering scream. In the midst of adults who take them for curious and backwards creatures, Oskar and Michael Jackson refuse to enter the sordid adult world, opting instead to play disaffected marginals living on the fringe of society. Their world is deaf and vulnerable. Their only antibodies are their voices. Michael Jackson made his artistic expression indissociable from this phantasmagorical otherworldliness that functions as a “rebel head inside one’s head.”¹¹

⁸ <http://www.henrysheehan.com/essays/stuv/spielberg-1.html>

⁹ See Chris Jenks, *Childhood Critical Concepts in Sociology*, London, Routledge, 2005.

¹⁰ An early 20th-century tap-dance virtuoso who remained an idol. Country music artist Jerry Jeff Walker wrote a hit song, later covered by Dylan and a great many others, about a street performer he met in a New Orleans jail who used the alias “Mr. Bojangles” to hide his identity from the police.

¹¹ From Pascal Quignard’s article on Grimm’s fairy tales: “L’enfant incorrigible,” *Le Monde des Livres*, June 26, 2009.

*“Le freak, c’est chic”*¹²

What could be more ambivalent and unsettling than an angelic castrato voice in the costume of a beast from beyond the grave. A binary opposition between the factitious world of light, on the one hand, and the dark world of evil and the living dead, on the other, underpins the whole *Thriller* album, especially the title song. In the legendary video clip, he suddenly turns into a werewolf, in keeping with the terrifying legend of a man transformed into a wolf under the full moon, who becomes as powerful and ferocious as the beast of prey. Then we see him dancing among corpses resurrected for the duration of a song, playing the monster that terrifies its fellow monsters. For the production of what he wanted to be a stand-alone film, he drew on artefacts from the horror genre: makeup, special effects, scary music and voiceover. The clip opens with a disclaimer from the artist, that “this film in no way endorses a belief in the occult,” to ward off any accusations that the artist is proselytizing here for the Jehovah’s Witnesses. But the young demiurge exposes nothing short of his life, that of a man who, as midnight approaches under a full moon, in the middle of nowhere after his car breaks down, tells his girlfriend that he’s “different,” before metamorphosing into a werewolf and then a dancing zombie. “Billie Jean” (1982), the autobiographical story of a demented woman who accused him of being the father of her twins, likewise gave rise to a frightening video that cleaves to the horror film aesthetic. And some years later the song “Bad” (1987) again took up this dichotomy between the dark world (the subway, crime, black jackets, certain death) and the peaceful life of friendship and success.

Jackson’s strangeness looms large in every one of his appearances, his videos serving as metaphors for his life. We become voyeurs of this “freak,” this curious and crazy, smooth-faced and androgynous creature – who, however, as immodestly suggested in the clip to “You Are Not Alone,” has had sexual intercourse with his young bride, Lisa Marie Presley. Elsewhere he proposes a world without race, war, family or evil, a utopia he shared with those nostalgic for the 1960s. In fact, not only did he sing with Paul McCartney and buy the rights to a number of Beatles songs, but he explicitly referred to John Lennon, John Kennedy and Martin Luther King when, in regard to his Messianic number “Man in the Mirror,” he explained that everyone is responsible for the world around them and owes it to themselves to make it a better world.¹³

Thus, the “Thriller” clip reveals perhaps better than any of the others the torments Jackson suffered. He cannot keep his youthful features from morphing inexorably into a wolf’s face and then into that of a corpse. The same logic of transfiguration is to be found in a number of his videos through to the end of his career. One would be hard put not to see this as a depiction of the real life of the artist, who had a horde of surgeons transmogrify him into something subhuman and all in all rather cadaverous. Michael Jackson was constantly confronted with his own reflection from childhood on, when, surrounded by his eight siblings, he was forced to resemble his older brothers, dressed and coiffed just like them, his voice fusing with theirs. Later on, in adulthood, his surgical disfigurement was emulated by his sister La Toya¹⁴ and to a lesser extent by his little sister Janet, whose body was subjected to other torments (physical and sexual abuse). He seemed to want to be a cross between Pygmalion’s milk-white Galatea and Dorian Gray’s reflection in the mirror. His face tells the

¹² An allusion to the 1978 smash hit song “Le Freak” by the funk bad Chic.

¹³ *Moonwalk, op. cit.*, quoted in Dyson, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

¹⁴ <http://images.mirror.co.uk/upl/m4/jan2009/8/2/983BF5CF-A49F-35D5-D11AD590904B0812.jpg>

whole story, and Roland Barthes' description of Greta Garbo fits Jackson, too, astoundingly well:

[...] [T]he make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds. In spite of its extreme beauty, this face, not drawn but sculpted in something smooth and fragile, that is, at once perfect and ephemeral, comes to resemble the flour-white complexion of Charlie Chaplin, the dark vegetation of his eyes, his totem-like countenance.¹⁵

Black skin/white mask/black shades/white gloves

Franz Fanon, who noted long before Obama the masochistic desire harbored by some blacks to remove the soot-brown from their complexion, hoping thereby to erase what they deem an alienating identity, provides a "psychopathological" explanation of a phenomenon that seems to have hit the Jackson family (along with many other American blacks) and describes it with a mix of dread and irony: "For several years laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for 'denegrification'; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction."¹⁶

Hatred of one's reflection, born of the white man's denigration of the black, is a tragic trope of American history and literature. In the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison describes the overbearing yearnings of an 11-year-old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wishes she were lovable, i.e. white, blonde, a Shirley Temple look-alike. In desperation, Pecola asks the help of a sham mystic and pedophilic healer, Soaphead Church, who is astonished and outraged at her request:

He thought at once it was the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people brought him — money, love, revenge — this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power.¹⁷

Such a wish, if it existed in comparable form in Jackson, found expression particularly in the appearance he "gave" to his children: at an early age, his daughter Paris conformed to this stereotypical Western ideal of beauty exemplified by Shirley Temple¹⁸. But there are striking visual reverberations of this impossible racial quest, imposed by a society's standards of beauty, in Jeff Koons' three life-size statues of Jackson and his pet chimpanzee Bubbles in 1988. Jackson is shown with his face and part of his body covered in a white glaze, sporting heavy makeup and attired in gold-leaf plated clothes. He is cuddling Bubbles, who is decked

¹⁵ Roland Barthes (trans. Annette Lavers), "The Face of Garbo," *Mythologies*. London: Vintage, 1993.

¹⁶ Franz Fanon (trans. Charles L. Markmann), *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

¹⁸ Jackson "conceived" three children with his white dermatology nurse, Debbie Rowe. The children are blonde and Caucasian: (<http://www.breakingthetape.com/keeping-pace/Shirley%20Temple.bmp>).

out in identical makeup and outfit. The mimicry between the faces of the master and his pet chimp is astounding, and the artist's comments about the statues reveal the whole ambiguity of representations of an ideal of feminine and (therefore) white beauty, for Koons' avowed aim was to pay tribute to the pop star's quest for physical perfection. It goes without saying for Koons, who was not plagued by the same identity crises as his model, that human beauty is alabaster white.

This representation of Jackson, heavily emphasizing his asexual nature, has the merit of illustrating the subtle connection between gender identity and racial identity, particularly in the Afro-American world. It is true that while Jackson's tortured racial conscience found expression in his physical appearance, it was also expressed in his apparent rejection of any virile or manifestly masculine traits. Bleached and powdered skin suggests a coquettish femininity and, traditionally in African as in American history, it is women who are supposed to be light-skinned.¹⁹

Jackson's androgyny most certainly serves as a displacement of his racial complex, and in this respect it inspired other black American artists, including Prince and André 3000, a talented rapper in the group Outcast. In the American racial imagination, the black man's virility is always more or less associated with the threat of the rape of the white woman.

In this sense, flagrantly cross-dressing is a form of protection against an American society that is racist in many respects: the less one subscribes to the oppressor's value scale (on which virility ranks high, as Fanon remarked), the less one feels and is perceived to be black. At the same time, of course, gender confusion transgresses the heterosexual propriety ordained by the dominant order. This confusion of gender and – therefore – of race sustained by the elaborately made-up artist was, incidentally, the subject of an academic colloquium at Yale University in 2004 (“Regarding Michael Jackson: Performing Racial, Gender, and Sexual Difference”), at which the speakers focused on Jackson's “denial” of his own homosexuality, the enigmatic *mise en scène* of his role as paterfamilias and, lastly, his reconstruction of a masculine myth that was acceptable to him in the “Thriller” video.

“The best among us”

The Afro-American writer James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924 and grew up in a poor household in which he was subjected to physical abuse by a stepfather, who disparaged him, as Joe Jackson did Michael, for having too much of the “face of a nigger.”²⁰ Ridiculed both for being black and for being effeminate, Baldwin likewise turned his torments into art. He was on the brink of madness, he recounts, before Paris welcomed him in 1948 and his work began to be published. His writings, novels for the most part, articulate the racial and sexual dialectics that conjointly stifled him in America at a time when the movements to defend the civil rights of blacks and homosexuals were emerging virtually simultaneously. We need to understand, Baldwin pointed out, that the idealization of masculinity and racism are two sides of the same coin.

So the logical strategy is to “live in the other's fantasy” and, “using the metaphor against itself,”²¹ to apply to yourself the perversions and pathologies people attribute to you, or to

¹⁹ See *Couleur de peau et négritude* on <http://www.afrik.com/article1516.html>

²⁰ See James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

²¹ Jean-Paul Rocchi, “Littérature et métapsychanalyse de la race,” *Tumultes*, No. 31, 2008.

forestall them by making yourself harmless. Jackson did both, making himself at once effeminate, to be sure, but also manifestly infatuated on stage with his own penis, which he would grab compulsively with a cry. This gesture is emblematic and perfectly ambiguous. It enables us to understand how it is that lightening his skin, a corollary to the androgyny he owned up to, was perceived by many blacks as a symptom of racism and yet never alienated the community as a whole. Quite the contrary. Baldwin himself in 1985 paid tribute to the “masked” artist’s iconographic sleight of hand in his white glove and black shades: “He will not swiftly be forgiven for having turned so many tables, for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring, and the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael.”²² Baldwin paid tribute to a fellow “freak,” identifying with the monstrosity of the singer who had been roped in and held up for show like a circus freak by the country of the white man. The white man, guilty in James Baldwin’s eyes of his own moral turpitudes, labels as “freaks” those who force him to face his unconfessed desires: “Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated - in the main, abominably - because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.”²³

Michael Jackson never ceased to be recognized as an Afro-American and, what is more, as a hero of the black world. Musically, thanks to his unrivalled talent and undeniable success, he was the first black artist ever to conquer the whole nation without exception, whites and blacks of all ages and from all walks of life. People see him as another black genius in the line running from Brown to Hendrix, from Jackie Wilson²⁴ to Marvin Gaye. The first black man to have his music broadcast on MTV, Jackson was above all the first to dominate the whole entertainment industry, head and shoulders above the rest. Moreover, his success was the fruit of a talent that was obvious to all eyes and ears, his musical innovations constituting milestones in music history. Jackson owed his success to his own genius, but also to the acumen of his arranger, Quincy Jones, a man unanimously esteemed in the Afro-American world. Upon the release of *Thriller*, Jones exulted in *Time* magazine that with Jackson, black musicians had at long last ceased to be second tier, that he had finally given back to all the country’s blacks the place they deserved in society.

It was in fact the Afro-American artists, more than their white counterparts, who were captivated by this strange showman’s talent. At the 1988 Grammy Awards, for example, he enthralled the audience with a gospel-style rendition, set in the atmosphere of a Southern black church, of the opening of his song “The Way You Make Me Feel,” then stopped short to deliver a perfect execution of his legendary moonwalk. The moonwalker then sang “Man in the Mirror,” an ode to the power to change the world. At the end of his performance he was in a trance, exhausted and on his knees, a sublime martyr to his own “superhuman” talent. He was given a standing ovation by Quincy Jones, of course, but also by Prince, Anita Baker, Little Richard and Whitney Houston, in a shared fervor over this black Christ who had given them a sense of pride and mutual recognition.²⁵ The Passion according to Jackson could not but overwhelm a black community sensitive to the language of racial religiousness, even if this rendition looked secular. The catharsis induced by the exhibition of this mystic wholly engrossed in a mad quest for physical transparency was as appealing as it was disconcerting, for there is a Michael Jackson in every black man, a tormented conscience after centuries of

²² James Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” *Playboy*, 1985. Anthologized (ed. Toni Morrison) in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ A member of the Dominoes, he was a big name in R’n’B and black soul music in the 1950s (http://www.history-of-rock.com/jackie_wilson.htm).

²⁵ I have borrowed this description from Dyson, *op. cit.*

racial subjection. Jackson's stigmas, which transpired in sadly clinical detail after his death, could not but arouse terror and pity: he was frail and undernourished, beardless and bald, his bone structure seemed to be made of glass, and through his chemically stripped skin one could make out dozens of contusions and wounds caused by his countless daily injections. A few months before, it was said he had gone half-blind. The insane asceticism that made him want to leave his own body (the "prison of racial egocentricity" as Baldwin put it) may have made him a "hyper-black"

Whether trying to teach Michael Jordan how to dance (in "Jam," 1992)²⁶, singing in unison with the chords arpeggiated by white hard-rock guitarist Slash ("Give In To Me," 1991)²⁷, whether he claims, with slightly sappy good intentions²⁸, that the color of your skin does not matter ("Black or White," 1991) or sows controversy by identifying with the lurid image of the Black Panthers in an eponymous video²⁹, he manifestly never left the black world. Quincy Jones noted his ability to transcend the ambiguous image of black minstrels³⁰ in donning a black suit, bowtie and white gloves, the stereotypical traditional attributes of the black musician in the US, though archly wearing only one glove and thereby effectively sabotaging the age-old game of racial masquerade.

Blackface

In the video clip "Say, Say, Say," Jackson essayed an audacious twist on America's racialized iconography by playing alongside Paul McCartney as two itinerant miracle-potion hawking charlatans and then vaudeville song-and-dance men, back in the days of the Great Depression, when white performers grossly aped black musicians with the aid of clown makeup and racist pantomime.³¹ The duo finds a willing public in California, which is hard hit by the Depression. The political import of this whole setting is only accessible to those who fully grasp the coded language of racial oppression. While Jackson exhibits his undeniable cultural filiation here³², the militant side of his work, generally merely hinted at as in "Say, Say, Say," is sometimes made explicit, as in "They Don't Care About Us" (*History*, 1997), in which "they" refers to "them whites" and "us" to "us blacks." The lyrics denounce police brutality: "Don't you black or white me" suggests that allegations based on skin color are pure racism. Against a hip hop background in which a children's choir intones the refrain in this Spike Lee-directed clip, Jackson is clearly campaigning for the black cause here. He says he is a victim of the intrusive hatred of the white cop who is literally "raping" his black "pride," the very pride so celebrated by James Brown. Moreover, he pushed the racial rhetoric in the lyrics to controversial lengths, using equivocal racial formulas to designate the Jews, whereupon he was accused, like Africa Bambata, James Baldwin and Jesse Jackson, of abetting the rampant anti-Semitic discourse within the black American community. Far-fetched as it may seem, the press saw him as an "angry black man."³³

²⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dma9fvOmbJs>

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqDOsKKhb88>

²⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/16/arts/review-rock-new-video-opens-the-jackson-blitz.html?pagewanted=2>

²⁹ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1d4qm_michael-jackson-black-or-white_music

³⁰ See Sylvie Laurent, "Peaux blanches, masques noirs," *Revue internationale des livres et des idées*, No. 9, January-February 2009.

³¹ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5t2y_m-jackson-p-mc-cartney-say-say-say_music

³² See W.T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Harvard University Press, 1998.

³³ <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/15/arts/in-new-lyrics-jackson-uses-slurs.html?scp=11&sq=Michael%20Jackson%20-%20HISTORY&st=cse>

Jackson, who apparently craved to be white at any price (particularly to his health), thus took up the black mask again in “owning” the essentialist discourse of the black community. And when sales of Jackson’s latest album *Invincible* failed to take off in 2001, Sony chairman Tommy Mottola was subsequently accused of racism. He also mobilized the register of racist injustice when, in 1993, he was accused of pedophilia after confiding that he slept with children. Furthermore, the threat of being put on trial in 2002 paradoxically brought him closer to a black community that was used to being denied justice and which, eight years earlier, had collectively backed football star O. J. Simpson when the latter – in all likelihood guilty of a double homicide – was tried in Los Angeles. So Jackson proclaimed himself a victim of injustice and joined his younger sister Janet in the duo “Scream” (*History*, 1995) to denounce once again the rotten system he lived in and his desire to “scream” against all that calumny.

What was even more remarkable was that the radical organization Nation of Islam proclaimed its support for Jackson, as it had for Simpson, deploring a racist plot, which in turn re-emphasized what Aaron McGruder (creator of *The Boondocks* comic strip about two young black brothers from inner-city Chicago³⁴) called the “re-niggerization” of the de-pigmented pop star. According to a journalist at *The Guardian*,³⁵ Jackson put himself entirely in the hands of Louis Farrakhan’s black separatist movement. To those who have any doubts about the complexities of race in the United States and are unfamiliar with the long history of pale-skinned blacks,³⁶ Jackson is a textbook example. Black consciousness in America, which is more about discourse than skin color, employs codes to which Jackson had always subscribed. In 2003 he went to Harlem to stand alongside black presidential candidate Al Sharpton in inveighing against racism in the record industry. At the death of James Brown, Jackson then joined Sharpton and Jesse Jackson in paying homage to the godfather of soul, whom he had always cited as his greatest influence and ultimate idol.

Antonin Artaud once wrote about Van Gogh’s brutal death: “If Van Gogh had not died at 37, I would not think of calling upon the Professional Mourner to tell me with what supreme masterpieces painting might have been enriched, for after the *Crows* I cannot make myself believe that Van Gogh would have ever painted another canvas. I think he died at 37 because he had reached the end of the revolting story of a man garroted by an evil spirit.”³⁷ Jackson, too, had in all probability reached the end of his artistic career and of a creative energy which even the star’s young talented heirs have failed to rekindle³⁸. After a troubled life of 50 years, at least 20 of which seem quite miraculous, he would never again have offered the world the magic and the madness which, mixed into a powerful alchemical brew, made Michael Jackson modern America’s greatest minstrel.

³⁴ <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3584463360/tt0373732>

³⁵ Gary Younge, “Back Into the Fold,” January 6, 2004:

<http://floacist.wordpress.com/2008/03/18/re-gary-younge-is-michael-jackson-turning-black-again/>

³⁶ Ever since very pale mulattoes first “passed” for white and albinos were put on display at fairs, Afro-American history has been marked by this dissociation between phenotype and race as a social construct. See Charles D. Martin, *The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration*. Rutgers University Press, 2002.

³⁷ Antonin Artaud, *Van Gogh. Le Suicidé de la Société*. Paris: Gallimard, 2001.

³⁸ Will I Am, a member of the Black Eye Peas and producer, worked with Jackson on the remixes for his last album. He also made the campaign video clip for Barack Obama.

Further reading:

- J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness*, Pan Books, 2004.

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