

Metaphor of Hybridity: The Body of Michael Jackson

by

Julian Vigo

Professor of Comparative Literature
Université de Montréal

Julian Vigo (julian.vigo@disfasia.net) is a specialist in contemporary North African and Latin American literature, cultural studies, cinema, postcolonial theory, and gender studies. Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the Université de Montréal, she teaches visual anthropology, comparative literature, performance studies, cultural theory, theories of modernity and postmodernity, and gender studies. She is currently working on two books, one dealing with disappearance in the Americas (New York and Buenos Aires) and the other on "cultural violence" in which she examines the role of "violence" in the restructuring of urban space in Fes (Morocco) and studies the role of shahid (witness, martyr) in Palestine through actions of the suicide bomber and the definitions of her death and life, post-mortem. Her latest book is *Performative Bodies, Hybrid Tongues: Race, Gender, and Modernity in Latin America and the Maghreb* (Peter Lang, 2010). In addition to her academic research and pedagogy, Julian Vigo is also a dj and an installation and video artist and has been making ethnographic film and video in Latin America, the Middle East, the Maghreb, Europe and the United States since 1988.

Abstract

In her study of Michael Jackson, Margo Jefferson states that the task of the black artist "was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face" (97). Jefferson attempts to set up a reading of fluid race and gender of Michael Jackson, all the while focusing on this notion of the black woman embodied by Michael's mother, Katherine, and Diana Ross as if black femininity were at the core of his representations, or as if "black femininity" were in a representational domain of its own. Critiquing Jefferson's study on Michael Jackson, I propose an alternative reading of Michael's body whose performativity went far beyond dance and approached the realm of somatic change which included a blurring of the lines between male and female, between black and white and between human and animal. In the end, Michael Jackson's body defied definition: he was sexless as he interpreted the roles of both man and women; his sexuality was represented as either non-existent or hyper-active, between the media sensationalism of his not possessing a sexuality whatsoever to his preying upon children; and likewise Jackson defied race as he was neither black nor white, paradoxically because he was both black and white.

“To be different is to lead a life of pain and persecution”
—Nip/Tuck

Many writers and theorists have attempted to deconstruct the persona of Michael Jackson from his superstar emergence in 1979 with the studio release of *Off the Wall*—from Jean Baudrillard to Margo Jefferson to Bernard-Henri Lévy to all media sources and any pop psychologist who wants to comment about any number of newly generated “syndromes” or social behaviorisms in the past twenty-five years. However, no treatment of Michael Jackson had ever been so extensive and post-mortem in the clinical sense of the word as how Jackson’s body was textually treated after his death 23 June, 2009. Jackson’s body was, in a tradition reminiscent of 19th century anthropology, diagnosed from afar—ETV, Geraldo Rivera and every media pundit with a clip-on microphone espoused Jackson’s illnesses: how he was “emotionally” a fourteen year-old child who just wanted to recreate himself as Peter Pan in both thought and physical incarnation, that he was bulimic, that he had body dysmorphic disorder, that he tried to look like Diana Ross, that he bleached his skin, among a myriad of other speculations. Jackson’s life and body were analyzed ad nauseum to the point of revisiting his legal and financial woes and his legal troubles were revisited in a scene reminiscent of a very dark Christmas Carol such that it was clear that the “truth” about Jackson would only be revealed by attaching specific meaning to his body, in all its dimensions and polymorphic positionings.

Herein I propose an alternative reading of Michael's body whose performativity went far beyond dance and approached the realm of somatic change which included a blurring of the lines between male and female, between black and white and between human and animal. In the end, Michael Jackson’s body defied definition: he was sexless as he interpreted the roles of both man and women; his sexuality was represented as either non-existent or hyper-active, between the media sensationalism of his not possessing a sexuality whatsoever to his preying upon children; and likewise Jackson defied race as he was neither black nor white, paradoxically because he was both black and white. Jackson modeled his body after the coincidences of its condition, of its somatic health (and disorder) and he sculpted his identity into and around these narratives creating a being that put into question his markings within a culture rather obsessed with names, a culture where identity is singular or, at the very least, hyphenated. Michael Jackson’s body reveals a life which attempted to release the fixed corporeality to a specific tradition of identity within a social landscape wherein naming is everything, where names reveal and where play and gesture are secondary. While Jackson’s music, dance and video reveal a body that makes high art from street dance and which creates a musical discourse of racial equality that denies the centrality of color and ethnicity, Michael Jackson’s bodily transformations went even further in much the style of Barney’s *Cremaster* in vivo or Orlan’s autobiographical scriptings on the skin.

In her study, *On Michael Jackson*, Margo Jefferson describes Jackson as feminine, as womanly, as effacing his blackness and his nature. Attempting to understand how Jackson invented himself as a performer and as a human—in part as a consequence of his childhood, in part because of his extraordinary relationship to his fans—, Jefferson’s book focuses upon the specifically American history of transformation of freakery within our culture, putting Michael Jackson front and center of this cultural and historical metamorphosis.

Jefferson contends that Jackson shifted the metaphors of black self-hatred around, pushing it into the past while ironizing the paradoxical relationship between “black” and “white”: “What’s the point of calling someone an Oreo (black on the outside, white on the inside) when he isn’t even trying to be black on the outside?” (82). Throughout her attempt to deconstruct Jackson’s “freakery”, Jefferson reconstructs yet another freakery: that of the “new kind of mulatto” (14) which is far from “new”. Jefferson’s work elides the social history of the “mulatto”, of ethnic hybridity in a country where racial purity is nothing other than a fiction and where the “mulatto” is certainly more the rule than the exception. Indeed, Jefferson’s central argument collapses on itself since although she is correct in asserting that Jackson did not pretend to be white because he somatically changed his body to be neither, she is terribly mistaken in assuming a seamlessness in the language of science and ethnicity. Jefferson’s study skips from social to biological discourses of “race” without clarifying their interconnectivity and the way in which language of “race” is created by the very social discourses she propounds. When she writes: “Biology defines a mulatto as the sterile offspring of an animal or plant species” (14), Jefferson slides across the scientific specificity of this term, dropping her sentence into the vulgar mire of 19th century racializations in which the term “mulatto” in popular culture is uniquely related to the production of something in between. Jefferson attempts to nail down, throughout the entirety of her book, these very dichotomized, dare I say, outdated identities. She is asking 19th century questions in an era when the identifications of “pure race” (biological or sociological) are now seen as conservative attempts to re-racialize a subject whose body and culture was already in the throes of post-racialism: Was Jackson black or white, man or woman, gay or straight? Questions that elide how Michael Jackson’s somatic and performative lives broke down these very barriers by eluding them and by re-inventing his race, gender, sex and arguably his humanity.

The paradox of Michael Jackson is that all parts of his life were rendered public, to include his body. As a result of his enormous fame and the painful coincidence of a family that consistently exploited his talents and his body, he was propelled from an early age to perform various sorts of on and off-stage «confessionals» about his skin, his plastic surgeries, his hair, his skin disease (Vitiligo), his sex, his sexuality and even his religious beliefs. For Jefferson, Jackson was a performer in denial of the “real”. Jefferson’s volition to create and believe in a real results in her not seeing that Michael Jackson was product of this rupture between life and performance, between the real and the artificial.

The lines between each of these constructions are always blurred and the reality of Jackson's body was as much about acting, performing and mutating the organic as the theatre of Jackson's musical performances and videos was about harnessing a certain "naturalness" of movement, expression of love and re-framing physical, sexual gestures that otherwise would be "out of place," even vulgar. There was a certain symbiosis between the "realness" of movement and emotion that Jackson's music and performances evoked and the unreality (according to many) of his physical appearance. There was, I would argue, a conscious deconstruction of the pathos within Jackson's performativity and the very body he created.

Jefferson begins her book by comparing Michael Jackson to P. T. Barnum's collection of freaks from the early 19th century, reminding the reader that the freak in early American culture was the "African" as Barnum would typically put an actor of European origin in blackface and exhibit him with the title "What is it?" Later this act was changed and an actual African-American played by William Henry Johnson, as "Zip the Pinhead" represented the "missing link"—fact and fiction are blurred and racial identity is as real in early stage representations as it is fictional stagings (12). Freakery is not about representing the truth of visibility but rather exploiting the fictions of visibility. Despite ironizing this juncture between real and invented, however, Margo Jefferson returns to the typical dichotomies of "normal" and "freak" transposing 19th century notions of strangeness onto late twentieth and early twenty-first American culture: "Barnum's museum exhibits, ethnological curiosities and circus sideshows also set the pattern for our daytime talk shows. The difference between then and now? Barnum's people were supposed to be freaks of nature, outside the boundaries of The Normal" (8). Comparing Michael Jackson to this traveling freak show of old, Jefferson attempts to create parallels between these 19th relics and contemporary television shows like Fear Factor or Extreme Home Makeover. She sees these shows as "updates" of older talent competitions where "the backstage tale, the life story, matters as much as the performance" (8). Jefferson suggests that Michael Jackson is not an irreducible part of the dichotomies that have made him up—either child or pervert; either humanitarian or predator; a child star or a psychotic man fearful of aging. Jefferson asks: "What if the "or" is an "and"? What if he is all of these things?" (18).

As much as I find this part of Jefferson's critique insightful in forcing the reading to abandon the traditional modalities for reading "either-ors," Jefferson nonetheless creates moral dichotomies between real and imitation and between nature and fakery, ultimately classifying Michael Jackson as a mimetic fraud who hides behind a mask of cosmetic surgery, skin lightening, and increasing "effeminization", despite Jefferson's list of endless rock stars who have followed this path of gender-bending since the beginning of rock and roll. We must remember that both Little Richard and Elvis Presley threatened the status quo: both artists' bodily movements and costumes were considered "over the top" during the entirety of their careers as their dance moves imperiled static notions of masculinity where "manly hips" simply didn't move, as in the case of Elvis Presley, and where make-up and wild hair designs were a constant source of gossip surrounding Little Richard.

Though Jefferson brackets Little Richard's performances as somehow part of "black masculinity" to include his trademark screams during his concerts ("You're gonna make me scream like a white lady"), she separates very starkly Michael Jackson's odyssey into gender bending. I find this separation suspicious at best given there is no real distinction between these artists which she claims "few black men followed". If anything Little Richard made it possible for the multitudes of gender blending performers who were his contemporaries and those who followed: James Brown's hairdos, the Freddie Mercury's costumes and on-stage flamboyance, Sylvester's falsetto bravado and David Bowie's similarly extravagant and transgendering use of makeup and gestures. Michael Jackson did not innovate gender or racial bending as the history of American music is riddled with similar performances that were admittedly less intense and more infrequently performed.

Jefferson's study takes this concept of freakery from the confines of scientific discourses of medical pathology and from the popular narratives of social exclusion current in American culture and she moves this concept and applies it towards the biographical, attempting to demonstrate how Michael Jackson's childhood was a form of freakery. Likewise she shows how Jackson's entry into Motown and his subsequent move to Encino, California, allowed him to know similar child freaks who, like him, had lost their childhoods to show business—Brooke Shields, Elizabeth Taylor, Liza Minelli, Tatum O'Neill. These people became part of Michael Jackson's menagerie of friends throughout various parts of his adulthood and resultantly, Jackson's existence tended toward two extremes: the distention of hyper-performativity and "adult-like" professionalism on stage and in the studio and antithetically, his reclusion and performativity of childhood acts in his private life where water balloon and water gun fights were part of his quotidian existence. Jefferson portrays Jackson's "loss of childhood" as its own sort freakery in a world where this six-year old boy went on to embody forever the boy who "was loved by other boys and by their mothers" (21). She takes this childhood embodied in the adult body of Jackson even further by comparing his body to that of Sunset Blvd.'s Norma Desmond who was "freak version of its younger self...A travesty looking very much like an aging transvestite, a freak" (27).

In the chapter "Alone of All His Race, Alone of All Her Sex," Jefferson conflates black masculinity with hyper-masculinity as if the two are mutually interdependent despite the proof to the contrary: that most every successful black artist had in fact exploited the play between masculinity and femininity (ie. Little Richard, Rick James, Prince) until the era of hip-hop and to include a resurgence of this gender play with artists like Kanye West. Likewise, Jefferson's interpretation of Michael Jackson's crotch clutching is laden with the weight of an extremely outdated interpretation of black masculinity that she views as always—or at least is intended to be—macho:

In retrospect, the crotch clutch seems at once desperate and abstract. It is as if he were telling us, "Fine, you need to know I am a man, a black man? Here's my dick: I'll thrust my dick at you! Isn't that what a black man's supposed to do? But I'm Michael Jackson, so just look but you can't touch." (102)

Jefferson, it seems to me, fails to see how Michael Jackson was consciously subverting race and gender in his performances for which the “crutch clutch” was never about blackness, and hardly about sexuality. In watching his Dangerous World Tour performance shot in Bucharest, 1992, I am reminded that Michael Jackson’s one gesture that was never about race or sexuality was precisely his crotch thrust. In his yellow unitard over back pants I recall how when we were children, my siblings and I would wear our underclothes on the outside in attempting to emulate any number of super heroes—all reference to sexuality was annulled by the neutering of sex organs by the mere absurdity of costume. In a similar way, Jackson’s employment of mobster fashion with an external unitard mixed with the pastiche mob violence of a Broadway show tune number annuls the sexuality of the crotch while heightening the sexuality of every single mobster-esque gesture from the faux fireworks which symbolize machine gun fire to the violent turns and twists of each spin.

This curious mixture of “inside-out” wear is both costume and play for Michael--the crotch grab becomes an innocent act of desexualization rather than of sexualization. We see this again in his Budapest concert where onstage Jackson’s body retains a purity of movement and where the thrusts, the twists, his primal screams and high pitched “heees” are much more about being in the presence of this icon and his movements rather than witnessing some sexualized gestures. Certainly there is more sexuality onstage in this concert demonstrated by what Michael Jackson does not do than what he does. Michael Jackson’s concert opening contains more sexual reference and play of “pent up sexual energy” masked as desire than than all of the crotch grabs of this concert combined. Jackson plays with stasis and various rhythms creating all the plays of sexuality and even the sexual act as each opening move is choreographed as part his dance: he propelled onstage by an underground catapult and as the lands, he stands perfectly still for two minutes looking towards his right, his aviator sunglasses masking his interiority, his long hair resting on his shoulders likewise is motionless, and his arms slightly bent and his fists cocked as if ready for action. The crowds scream hysterically as this icon rendered life-statue remains motionless, completely fixed and their screams become admonishments to wake him from his stasis reminding him to move. Little by little these screams turn to chants of “Michael, Michael”. His frozen body teases the crowd as if a challenge for them to break him with their adulation and cries, until two minutes have elapsed and then suddenly he quickly jerks his head left and the crowd escalates its screams. Just as quickly he moves both hands up to the temples of his sunglasses and once again remains still as he reduces his rhythm ever so slowly taking off his sunglasses. The crowds get even wilder and by the time he has fully removed his glasses, the tears and screams are insurmountable. It is then that he immediately turns into his speed of light spin left followed by his signature leg kick which initiates the song “Jam.”

In attempting to separate phallus from penis, Jefferson creates a solipsism between black masculinity as real or as symbolic, viewing the real and symbolic as somehow always separable where, for Michael Jackson, the symbolic and real are interrelated and they play off one another attaining their meanings from this very type of reflexivity. Just as they do in “real life”. Margo Jefferson theorizes the penis as sexual in Jackson’s performances and then as quickly as she engages this idea, she abandons it to suddenly proclaim that his crotch thrust is phallic, not sexual: “It wasn’t real, it was symbolic. Not a penis but a phallus” (102).

It would seem that Jefferson misses the mark on understanding how the phallic can be both symbolic and poetic—especially in the gesticular and corporeal movements of dance. For instance, Michael Jackson was conscious about keeping his body free from too much musculature, rendering his body fit, agile while also slender and even androgynous. His dance flows onscreen and onstage and his nubile movements allow for any dancer—be he a classical ballet dancer to one trained in the Cunningham technique—the ability to transcend the clichés of gender. Jackson strikes a pose, hand on crotch, right hand in the air, pausing while singing “Human Nature”. He renders the private public turning the sexual on its head. Or as he once described his dance moves to Oprah, “I don’t think about it...I just do it.”

What is most problematic in Jefferson’s reading of Michael Jackson’s body is this intent of inscribing race onto Michael Jackson for whom race was the center of his deconstruction in song, dance and interviews. He would often throw back questions at his interlocutor saying, “I bet if everyone who has had plastic surgery were to go on vacation, Los Angeles would be empty” or “People are always changing the color of their skin...tanning”. Jefferson cites Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* regarding the task of the black artist which “was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face” (97). “We create the race by creating ourselves”. Yet Margo Jefferson attempts to set up an incredibly racialized reading of fluid race and gender of Jackson while conversely focusing on this notion of the “black woman” she maintains is embodied by Jackson’s mother, Katherine and Diana Ross. Jefferson points to black femininity as the core of Jackson’s representation of gender as if “black femininity” were in and of itself a representational domain of its own, or at least the specific focus of Jackson’s mimetic changes which certainly seemed to mimic an imagined “raceless woman”. The very same notion that the crotch represents the penis or that Diana Ross must somehow be the referent for all black femininity are positions postulated by Jefferson which impose racialization despite the lack of substance for such arguments: she attempts to situate in the very constructions of “normative identity” (in all its alleged referents) that Jackson’s performances and body actually deconstructed. Simply put, Michael Jackson was a hybrid of gender, ethnicity and sex onstage whose corporeal interpretations refused belonging or stasis.

The moonwalk, like so much of Jackson's choreography, touched upon the very magical realism of his performances, his constructed worlds of peace and equality on and off-stage: his somatic transformations and the heterogeneity of his gestures embodied his defiance of gender, race and anthropomorphism. As Michael Jackson co-opted the moonwalk from popular American cinema the ghettos, this dance has become the metaphor for Jackson's ability to bring the unreal into the sphere of the real and in a majestic mixture of fantasy and fiction, he somehow manages to bring the moon to earth through dance.

What started this journey of bringing the fantastic to earth, however, was born through the very medium of that brought reality and fiction together: cinema. Jackson's fame was made by his music, but moreso it was sealed by his video work. Michael Jackson's videos brought to the fore issues of social and racial inequality in the United States as seen through cinematic tropes as he borrows from an expansive tradition of cinematic traditions of song, dance and horror in working through divisions of race, class and social justice in American society: Jackson invokes racial and species division from *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) as replayed in *Thriller* (1983); he invokes Fred Astaire from *The Band Wagon* (1953) as the lyrics tell a story of domestic violence while the video which recreates a 1920s gangster scenario in *Smooth Criminal* (1988); and *Scream* (1995) takes on the esthetics of Japanese sci-fi Anime as this song autobiographically decries Jackson's treatment by the media during the child sexual abuse accusations made against him. Jackson borrows from cinematic traditions that ignore color barriers, he employs dance techniques that likewise bring together a grand history of the American musical in film and Broadway, and he creates a hybridized form of dance and visual media that bars all specificity to race by forcing the spectator to realize that no one dance move or note can be reduced to any single meaning or origin. By bringing to the fore the rich history of music, film, and dance in the United States in the context of historical and fictional themes of racial, gangster and biological divisions, Michael Jackson's videos offer a paradisiac, fictional world of racial and cultural hybridity, where color no longer matters and where the outside simulation of the somatic body or the gesticulations of the dancer, invoke dialogue by virtue of its sheer spectacle. Jackson's videos bring together such a diverse range of cinematic and performative traditions such that just as one questions who "owns" that particular art form, it becomes quickly clear that what he presents is a product of a cultural heterogeneity of the United States and international cultural constructions.

For instance, the moonwalk whose origin has been the focus of much discussion, is a dance form which was not solely invented in the tradition of African-American dance or in the ghetto despite insistence by many people, to include some of his fans. Instead, Michael Jackson recuperates the moonwalk in its plurality of meaning and origin and demonstrates this dance's rich heritage throughout his video work and live performances as he deconstructs racial specificity by bringing it the fore within gangster mafia culture and during his first live performance of the moonwalk at Motown 25. The various manners through which Jackson employs the moonwalk strips it of all specificity, deprives it of any type of univocality.

We observe the early forms of the moonwalk from as far back as 1932 with Cab Calloway, as performed by the mime masters Etienne Decroux and Jean-Louis Barrault, throughout Marcel Marceau's mime performances, in the films *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Les Enfants du paradis* (1944) and *Showtime at the Apollo* (1955), popularized by performers such as Bill Bailey and Fred Astaire, and in contemporary breakdance of the 1980s as represented in television and film such as *Fame* (1982) and *Flashdance* (1983). The historical plurality of this dance move's performance dilutes the specificity of meaning. Michael Jackson capitalizes on this movement's rich history and renders the moonwalk as not black, nor white, but as specifically his own. Jackson's body became a *tabula rasa* for cultural and racial exchange that forever cast doubt upon his real somatic illness or plastic surgeries while likewise casting his music and dance as universal truths.

Certainly Jefferson acknowledges how Jackson's body becomes similar to that of a cyborg in her citation of Keith Haring's famous journal entry about Michael Jackson, which foresaw in many ways this performer's continued metamorphoses:

I talk about my respect for Michael's attempts to take creation in his own hands and invent a non-black, non-white, non-male, non-female creature by utilizing plastic surgery and modern technology. He's totally Walt-Disneyed out! An interesting phenomenon at the least. A little scary, maybe, but nonetheless remarkable, and I think somehow a healthier example than Rambo or Ronald Reagan. He's denied the finality of God's creation and taken it into his own hands, while all the time parading around in front of American pop culture. I think it would be much cooler if he would go all the way and get his ears pointed or add a tail or something, but give him time! (179)

However, all throughout her analysis, Jefferson maintains the real in all her expectations of it: the real "masculine", the real "black masculinity", and the implied betrayal of an "African American community" which was eclipsed by Jackson's work simply because his work did not speak to race, it spoke to the end of race and division. Jackson even played consciously with color in each of his concerts through his choice of band members and dancers. His lead guitarists were always women who would wear these huge masks which often transformed them into more animal looking creatures and the dancers were always a mixture of Latino, African-American, and lighter skinned dancers. Jackson de-emphasized race by emphasizing the esthetics thereof and by bridging the white/black dichotomies with something far more radical: the human-animal divide.

More central to Haring's statement here is the liminality that Jackson's body presents to the spectator—not the body of race, but rather the body of human. For much of Jackson's public and private persona was that of an animal lover; however, if we look a bit more deeply at his facial features, we notice how much of what Jackson's surgeries accomplished was rendering his body more and more feline as could be seen in his 2004 trial.

And certainly the Oprah Winfrey and Martin Bashir interviews revealed this performer's opulent lifestyle as a blatant form of freakery in an of itself by showing Michael Jackson's animal fetishes from his close relationships with animals he rescued: Bubbles the chimp, Louie the llama, Muscles the snake, and Bubba the lion. There was always something suspect about this man who built a huge sanctuary for himself in a place he called Neverland, fashioning himself a modern day Peter Pan, holding dozens of wild animals and somatically changing his body little by little into something that went far beyond "human-like". Might Keith Haring have been correct in his reading Michael Jackson as trans-human, as cyborg? Or could it be that Michael Jackson's performances off-stage had slowly become his reality, reversing a trend his parents had established for him with this child-star living life only through performance for the masses?

This division between animal and human, which metaphorically represented racial division in his work from the 1980s, came to represent in the 1990s a metaphor for divide between adults and children, between animal and man. Jackson found solace with children and animals, as he often stated in interviews, simply because they didn't want anything from him. This dichotomies of Michael Jackson double identity are best revealed through his somatic transformation from young African-American kid to a superstar who transgresses sex, gender and race. With Jackson we are given myriad and opposing realities constantly from his on-stage and off-stage personas: real/performance; childhood/adulthood; passivity (life)/ aggression (stage); live performance hyper-sexuality/ "real life" interview mode and asexuality. After studying Michael's "interview persona", it is shocking to them watch him on-stage as the differences are shocking as this sweet-voiced, giggling "boy" is transformed into a virile, dextrous and extroverted performer whose authenticity came from neither one performance nor the other, but instead his "realness" was heavily steeped in his transgressions from public to private selves, and then from private to public selves. Certainly, as we are part of an extremely superficial culture, Michael Jackson's performances only embraced all that was part of America in both the good and bad senses as he stretched the limits of representability both as victim of an abusive childhood and as a superstar who went on to economically support the entirety of his abusive family, even in death. Michael Jackson was a mutant of various identities with which he constantly struggled. In private he struggled with his childhood as the son of abusive parents and as a victim of sexual violence. In public, he was the subject of racial specificity within a society struggling with the language of race; he was the subject of somatic transformations through plastic surgery; he embodied the coincidence of his skin disease, Vitiligo, which organically transformed his skin, casting doubt throughout his adulthood as to the veracity of this disease; and he defied sex and sexual specificity as this Jehovah's witness retained an asexuality and androgyny that put some at discomfort simply because there had been no prior reference either mimetically or historically. Jean Baudrillard contemplates this performers body:

Michael Jackson is a solitary mutant, a precursor of hybridization that is perfect because it is universal—the race to end all races. Today’s young people have no problem with a miscegenated society: they already inhabit such a universe, and Michael Jackson foreshadows what they see as an ideal future. Add to this the fact that Michael has had his face lifted, his hair straightened, his skin lightened — in short, he has been reconstructed with the greatest attention to detail. This is what makes him such an innocent and pure child—the artificial hermaphrodite of the fable, better able even than Christ to reign over the world and reconcile its contradictions; better than a child-god because he is child-prosthesis, an embryo of all those dreamt-of mutations that will deliver us from race and sex (21-22).

Yet what was freakish about Michael Jackson was that he brought the historical metaphors of hybridity—very much part of American history—to the fore and evidenced that which we all knew, but didn’t dare act or say. He took corporeal metamorphosis outside the simplistic container of black and white and moved it into the celestial spheres of invention and spectacle that transcended all human divisions, to end all races:

As a superstar, it was most difficult for Jackson to convey the childhood he never had living a life that most on this earth could never imagine. How to portray childhood cruelty from the mouth of a God who “has it all”? Jackson did, however, accomplish this task, the transmission of his childhood story, through the very recreation of his childhood as an adult—a form of freakery that few could understand: he entered into child sphere of reclusion that made the prospects of skin bleaching appear normal to many and that sadly left his life open for those who attempted to extort and slander him. The menagerie of animals and the roller coaster rides at Neverland were indices of a man-boy who refused to grow up and likewise his affection for these animals displayed both a childhood innocence (even regression) and his anthropomorphic regard for these creatures whom he viewed as his boyhood self. Michael Jackson’s animals were largely saved from circuses and zoos and as such he spared these animals from the life he had: that of circus performers. Inevitably, Jackson re-creates the scene for the salvation of his own childhood through his salvation of these animals—to give them, in a sense, their own childhood. And dialectically, Michael Jackson recreates his face through plastic surgery to resemble that of an organic other, to take back control of his body from nature and make with it his own, to make the line separating the real and artificial slowly fade. He enacted humanistic performance and song through a trans-human body.

Michael Jackson's performances were invested in making the artifice look real, even when the artificial was so painfully unreal, as can be noted in the introduction of his HIStory Tour (1996-1997) when the spectator is given a ten minute prelude to his stage entrance: a huge screen which has a virtual reality shuttling through the world of Michael Jackson as seen from on a roller coaster passing Geeza, a large Buddha statue, New York's Chrysler Building, the Parthenon, a statue of Mercury, and then suddenly, the viewer is no longer subject but is once again spectator, floating high above in the Cistine Chapel, watching geysers of fire emerging from the earth as a space capsule float above space, animated cranks and wheels of Chaplin's Modern Times, an Egyptian obelisk covered in cameras and video screens. The audience awaits Michael's landing as they scream his name and we hear his voice: "Mission control: What is my TOA?" and he makes one last stop on earth as the video screens along the way have fans faces screaming "Michael", the simulation of fandom amidst the simulation of fandom. At last, the cockpit of the spaceship emerges from the stage and what was "real" was clearly not as Michael emerges in a golden suit: he is not human, he is android. He peels off the first layer of body armor and then his helmet, busting out into "cream" with his body still partially confined by silver leggings that are held on by dozens of straps, and of course Michael's signature loafers.

Jackson's concerts are, in their totality, a wonderfully strange mixture of high-tech showmanship, performatives of the hyper-masculinity with his dancers costumed in military and mafia dress, and of course Jackson's own corporeal and gesticulative transformation from femininity to masculinity to androgyny. What makes his shows so transformative for the viewer is how Jackson mixes an array of fantasy, mafia and outer-space themes in one performance while his songs actually touch upon very real issues that are either autobiographical or overwhelmingly common themes of human nature: from the sexual tone of a groupie "Dirty Diana" to the ecological call of "The Earth Song" to his song about the non-importance of color in "Black or White" to the humanist song which invokes Ghandi's "be the change you want the world to be", "Man in the Mirror." Between the realness of his music which imagines a world of social justice—no matter how schmaltzy some might find these themes—and the extraordinary vision of technological and performative displays of excellence and other worldliness, Jackson has created the perfect space on stage for realizing his Neverland with his fans as the concert becomes a dreamscape for imagining possibility. Similarly, the finale of his Dangerous Tour is laden with as much fakery and kitsch, bookending his world of imaginary power of the real: while singing Change he dons a white spacesuit, helmet and then straps on a rocket ship (when the body double takes over through a lovely trompe l'oeil of stage imaginary), and he launches off giving his fans a finale that is prohibitively unreal. While no insurance company would back Jackson himself launching off-stage, a body double takes on the body of Michael Jackson, the crowds tricked into believing that it is he who is launching off, and the dream of spectacle realized through a body double.

Bernard-Henri Lévy maintains that Michael Jackson did not die from a drug overdose, instead, he states that “ he died because of his desire not only to invent a vaccine against life, but also to want to inoculate himself with it.” What Michael Jackson was, must be spoken in the present tense because although he is gone from this earth, what he represented is very much alive and part of American culture in the inevitability to name or be named, to frame or be framed. Even the media hype surrounding Jackson speaks to the impossibility to remain silent since the Fifth Amendment does not apply to superstars. Instead he was rendered an archeological artifice his entire life forced to answer questions that go beyond the scope of fame and enter into the framework of our postmodern circus, that of tabloid journalism. Certainly, to some, Jackson is a freak. To others he is a hero, an artist, an innovator, a peacemaker, a philanthropist. But what if he is all of the above?

The truth about Michael Jackson is that he was our freak, every bit as much as we were his. His moves, his dance, his music, his media performances, his mixture of kitsch and humanistic discourses of world peace and love are a huge part of our cultural landscape and language. Likewise, his body and artistic work create an order and cultural logic that shatters the univocal treatments of identity and more importantly, that proposes both physical and emotional change as part of the landscape of humanity’s future. In the months following Michael Jackson’s death we heard one armchair analysis after another about his “body dysmorphic disorder”, that Michael Jackson did not accept his body. These kinds of readings struck me as both irresponsible—for how can the dead be psychoanalyzed—and careless since the readings that every “specialist” lent to Michael Jackson were uni-directional: each analysis was inevitably about Michael Jackson’s inability to accept himself, never about our culture’s inability to accept difference. I think the dysmorphic disorder that needs further interrogation is not that of Michael Jackson but rather that of a culture that claims to be the freest in the world whilst this very culture kills its own creatures. In his refusal to be named, Michael Jackson died. In our refusal to let him name himself, we killed him.

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