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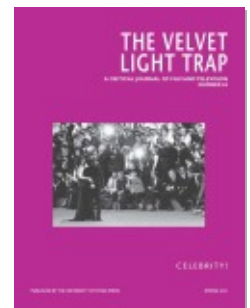
Reclaiming the Freak: Michael Jackson and the Spectacle of Identity

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 3-4 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0078>



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Reclaiming the Freak: Michael Jackson and the Spectacle of Identity

Grimacing maniacally, he swung the newest addition to his family, “Blanket,” over the railing of his Berlin hotel room balcony. Tiny, chubby, cream-colored legs kicked into the air four stories above the concrete street below, the infant’s face obscured by a towel draped over his head. It may seem gauche to revisit the infamous moment depicted in this photo, given the sudden and shocking death of pop superstar Michael Jackson. In countless discussions that have followed his death fans have attempted to grapple with their own complicated feelings about the icon by choosing to focus on *Thriller*-era Michael and trying hard to erase memories of Michael in the post-*Dangerous* years, that uncomfortable period exemplified by moments like Jackson’s awkward kiss with Lisa Marie Presley at the 1994 MTV Movie Awards and his cringeworthy interview with Martin Bashir in the documentary *Living with Michael Jackson* (2003). As journalist Greg Tate so astutely notes, “The unfortunate blessing of his departure is that we can now all go back to loving him as we first found him, without shame, despair, or complication.” In contrast to this impulse to erase the messier parts of Jackson’s legacy, I propose that we celebrate his freakishness as a vehicle that permitted him access into social spaces and identities typically denied to black male entertainers while allowing him to sidestep the pitfalls that tend to punish nonnormative expressions of race and gender.

“Freak” as Strategy

At the televised public memorial for Jackson that aired on 7 July 2009

Brooke Shields seemed to address lingering questions about Jackson’s sexuality (or lack thereof) in her comments about her platonic friendship with the late singer. “Yes, it may have seemed very odd to the outside, but we made it fun, and we made it real.” Comedian Eddie Murphy had joked about the unlikely couple in his 1987 comedy special, *Raw*. Directing his comments to the white members of the audience, Murphy teased, “This nigga took her to the Grammys, and nobody said shit. If I took Brooke Shields to the Grammys, y’all would lose your minds. ‘Cause y’all know Brooke would get fucked that night . . . and Brooke knew, too.” As Jackson’s friend and contemporary and himself a crossover star due to the immense popularity of films like *48 Hours* (1982) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), Murphy knowingly acknowl-

edges the differences between the public perceptions of his own sexuality versus Jackson’s carefully cultivated reputation for being sensitive, childlike, even asexual. Furthermore, the very idea that Jackson might bring Shields back to his place for a late-night rendezvous was certainly offset by the idea that the oxygen chamber he used for a bed might make the deed slightly more difficult or that pet chimp Bubbles might burst into the room at an inopportune moment. America’s shoulder-shrugging acceptance of Jackson’s romantic escapades with Brooke Shields, Tatum O’Neal, Madonna, Debbie Rowe, and Lisa Marie Presley did not necessarily signal the arrival of a postracial America as much as the acceptance of Michael Jackson as some kind of bizarre, raceless, sexless, man-child freak. And even



Figure 1. Michael Jackson dangles his new baby son, “Blanket,” over a hotel balcony railing (AFP, 2002).

when playing Peter Pan got Jackson into hot water with charges of child molestation, his weirdness once again served as a defense, because Jackson's freakishness had long ago surpassed anything so comprehensible as pedophilia.

In addition to freeing him from connotations of hypersexualization, Jackson's freakishness allowed him to offer a paradigm of black masculinity not typically highlighted by the media. In a society where a television show like *Maury Povich* includes the pronouncement "You *are* the father" represents black men as reluctant parents at best, Jackson's intense longing to be a daddy—going so far as to utilize not one but two surrogates—provided a counterexample of a man who not only accepted but *pursued* paternity in the absence of biological paternity. Notably, this single black father and the women who carried his children managed to avoid labels like "baby's daddy" and "baby's mama." In the three-ring circus that was Jackson's life, such terms seemed woefully inadequate to describe the wacky arrangement.

It is this very *strategic* navigation of racial categories that led not only to Jackson's immense popularity across demographic groups but also to the vitriolic criticism hurled at him, illustrated perhaps most perceptibly in the routines of black comedians who attempted to decipher Jackson's behavior. Underlying the ridicule has always been a kind of righteous indignation at Jackson's willful traipsing across racial and gender lines, anger at the way he flaunted his ability to escape the same traps that routinely befall other black male celebrities. The rules that have unfairly applied to every other black man just wouldn't stick to Michael. In his 2004 comedy special *Never Scared* Chris Rock incredulously demanded, "What kind of black man gonna come to court twenty minutes late?!" Katt Williams gets at the heart of the matter by not only attacking Jackson's refusal to adhere to racial categories but calling out his strategic shifting between boundaries rendered permeable by the powerful force of pop superstardom. In a particularly vicious (and funny) bit Williams engages in a lengthy diatribe where he blasts Jackson's claims that he suffers from vitiligo, a skin disease that results in depigmentation of the skin. After arguing that Jackson underwent a purposeful process of skin bleaching, Williams reads Jackson's tactic as a strategic attempt to appropriate white privilege: "You

mean I can get my credit rating up to 720 by catching this shit?!"

Williams's pointed attack expresses indignation that Jackson had found a loophole in the racial contract, one that allowed him to switch among various categories of identity at his convenience. Williams's remarks characterize Jackson as a willful schemer in the game of racial construction, a shape shifter who willfully, gleefully moonwalked across boundaries of race. For instance, Jackson never hesitated to adopt a more conventional trope of black masculinity when appearing at his 2005 sexual molestation trial or when accusing Sony CEO Tommy Mottola of racism for mishandling promotion of his 2001 album, *Invincible*. Even after decades of (alleged) skin bleaching, nose jobs, sleepovers with Macauley Culkin and Emmanuel Lewis, matching outfits with Bubbles the Chimp, dangling his child off a balcony, and general *weirdness*, Jackson attempted to define himself straightforwardly as a black man victimized by institutionalized racism.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Freak

During his speech at Jackson's televised memorial the Reverend Al Sharpton turned to Jackson's three children and compassionately said, "Wasn't nothing strange about your daddy; it was strange what your daddy had to deal with." But Michael Jackson *was* strange, and to ignore that is to ignore a crucial element of Jackson's persona, the full integration of elements both utterly freakish and heartbreakingly human, the one often working in service of the other. The achingly touching speech that Jackson's daughter, Paris, gave in honor of her father was rendered all the more poignant by the fact that it was the first time we had ever seen the child without her omnipresent veil or carnival mask. It is this duality of Jackson that we must not forget and that we cannot afford to lose. We must, in the wake of his death, reclaim the freak.

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