

Embodying Agency and Resistance: Michael Jackson and the Dream of a “Thrilling” New World

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While the whole European tradition strives for regularity—of pitch, of time, of timbre and of vibration . . . the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all contents in ever-changing paraphrases is considered the criterion of intelligence and personality.

Ernest Borneman (qtd. in Pratt 86)

It is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. It is as an actual being that he is a threat.

Frantz Fanon (163)

Through his artistry and deployment of his own racially and sexually ambiguous body, Michael Jackson and his work challenge and subvert stereotypical notions of African American masculinity. He and his work also share the related functions of inviting the viewer/listener to practice tolerance and generosity toward others, to transform him/herself, and, in doing so, to begin to “heal the world.”¹ Through his embodied artistry, Jackson registers his agency and resists racist stereotypes, while reclaiming and celebrating the black body that, as Fanon states, historically has been the site of attack and denigration (163). Through the playful stylization and manipulation of his appearance, Jackson further asserts and broadens his own embodied subjectivity and helps to open social space for others to embody and enact their subjectivity as they choose. In his 1983 music video, “Thriller,” Jackson draws from and subversively employs elements and references from black culture, American popular culture, and American history, and through appropriation and “semantic play,” (Mercer 98) the texts of this short film and Jackson’s own body articulate a message of resistance, agency, and tolerance.

Kobena Mercer states that Jackson is not a black “crossover” artist, who has styled his music for the taste of white audiences but that he has, rather, made black music popular within “white” music markets (95); in doing so, Jackson avows, underscores, and shares with the world his black cultural heritage. The music of “Thriller” and that of black and popular music generally has

¹ Several of Jackson’s musical projects, including “Heal the World,” “We Are the World,” “Man in the Mirror,” and *Captain E/O*, together articulate these messages. *Captain E/O* even proclaims, “We are here to change the world” and “You are just another part of me” (qtd. in Fernandez 249). In addition, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Jackson devoted considerable energy to humanitarian causes around the world (Brackett 341).

its roots in the blues, a musical style dubbed the “blackest” of black music (Pratt 87, 75). Ray Pratt states that the blues are characterized not only by content that “represents a catalyzation of the desire for a kind of freedom as yet unfulfilled,” but also by its sensual and expressive delivery (83-84). Pratt further argues that in the blues, one should not hear sadness, but rather the “laying of sadness to rest” (85). While the tone of Jackson’s “Thriller” betrays a measure of optimism, its lyrics do indeed express a longing for the love and companionship of another. In their sensuality, Jackson’s cries, moans, and coos also seem linked to the expressive, individualized vocalizations characteristic of the blues (Pratt 86).² Such vocalizations, Pratt argues, have their source in the music of slaves, who communicated through their music a complex message of resignation, desire for freedom, and resistance (87). Such music celebrated individuality and difference, even as it fostered the development of community among a mass of people (Pratt 87). In oral cultures the body is the site for the assimilation and communication of information (Pratt 86), so too is the individuated site of Jackson’s body, whose expressive cries encode a history of oppression, resistance, and the desire for freedom, and whose message seems aimed, at least in part, toward protecting difference, fostering tolerance, and building community on a global scale.

Not only does the music of Jackson’s “Thriller” seem to pay homage to black culture and history, but the video also seems subtly to invoke narratives of black spirituals and African American history. Spirituals often took the form of Christian songs of deliverance, and Pratt notes that Christian slaves identified themselves with the Israelites about whom they sang and their oppressors with the enemies of Israel (57). According to Old Testament narratives, God punished Israel’s persecutors, and some slaves believed and perhaps hoped that there would also be a “day of reckoning” for those who persecuted and abuse them (Pratt 57). Although

² Mercer links Jackson’s music to the soul tradition in which, he states, sensuality articulated through the body—through movement and vocalization—is primary in importance, while lyrics are secondary in significance (97). In such a reading, not only Jackson’s vocalizations, but also his dance situate his musical performances within black tradition and culture.

"Thriller" does so in a comic manner, through the narration of actor Vincent Price, it too warns of a time of "darkness" and judgment when "whosoever shall be found without the soul for getting down must stand and face the hounds of hell and rot inside a corpse's shell" (qtd. in Mercer 98). Read in the context of Jackson's ideology of tolerance, those "without the soul for getting down" might be those who cling to racist and other discriminatory beliefs and practices, whom the video seems wryly to suggest might someday themselves face the sort of "hell" that their exclusionary practices have created for blacks and others who have experienced discrimination.

"Thriller's" opening scene alludes to such a period in modern American history marked by discrimination against blacks. "Clean-cut," dressed in 1950s style clothing, and accessorized by a late model car, Jackson and his date ride and then walk along a wooded, well-paved street in an area that seems more likely to be suburban rather than urban or rural. While it is true that the 1950s were marked by the production of horror films, such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) to which this scene perhaps refers (Mercer 101), and Jackson intended "Thriller" to be a parodic, comedic horror film, it is also true that by situating this scene in the 1950s (qtd. in Kramer), "Thriller" also invokes a period marked by the real horror of literally and figuratively violent, even deadly, racism.³ In the 1950s, while blacks in the South faced de jure segregation, those in the North often experienced de facto segregation. The 1950s witnessed the exodus from cities to suburbs of middle class, often white, Americans, who took their capital with them, with the consequence that cities had fewer resources to serve their inhabitants, who had increased in numbers as the rural poor migrated to urban areas (Wills 50-55). "Thriller's" depiction of a young, black couple in a vehicle associated with suburban life in a suburban setting is a little bit ironic, since the 1950s were marked more by African American migration to the cities than to the suburbs, and *relatively* few African Americans enjoyed the lifestyle suggested by the appearance

³ Charles Wills cites the 1955 racially-motivated murder of 14-year-old African American Emmett Till, who was kidnapped, shot, and dumped in a river in Mississippi by two white men, who were acquitted of their crimes, although their guilt was certain (49).

of the video's young couple (Wills 54). In the 1950s, Southern blacks fought for educational integration and the right to vote and, in the process, often encountered violence perpetrated by whites (Wills 70-71). Such resistance marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, which would erupt in the 1960s from the powder keg of the preceding decade (Wills 118-119). Particularly given his African American heritage, Jackson's allusion to the 1950s—however subtle—seems highly charged and lends deeper significance to the video's cheeky invocation of a "judgment day."

Equally significant within the opening scene is Jackson's parodic play on notions of African American masculinity. Black theorist Frantz Fanon has written, "It is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me" (134). In this scene, as he transforms himself from gentle young man into monstrous, ferocious werewolf, Jackson plays to the rather grave "pre-existing" interpellation of "the black man" as bestial, sexually aggressive, criminal, dirty, dangerous, and lacking intelligence (Johnson 127, 134). His transmutation is marked by the darkening of his skin tone; coarsening and thickening of his skin, hair, and nails; complete transmogrification of his face; deepening of his voice; manifestation of sexual aggression; and loss of speech or the reversion to a pre-verbal form of communication. As Mercer states, such a metamorphosis is absurdly "hilarious"—the disjunction between Jackson as a sweet "boy-next-door" figure and sexually rapacious beast is so profound as to prevent it from being read as anything but ridiculous (103). Performing racist stereotypes of black masculinity becomes a means by which Jackson exposes and undermines them.⁴

⁴ As if to emphasize further the perversion of such stereotypes, the video abruptly shifts from the image of Jackson-as-werewolf/sexual predator standing erect over the supine body of his date, from whose position he is photographed, to that of a contemporary (circa 1983) audience of movie goers among whom is Jackson, who with eyes fixed on the movie screen, "rapaciously" devours a tub of popcorn and seems barely cognizant of his beautiful date—suggesting that his appetites for food and visual stimulation are perhaps more intense and "threatening" than his sexual appetite.

Embodying ambiguity of race and gender—"confusing" their respective boundaries—is a means by which Jackson further troubles exclusionary categorizations. Vera Kutzinski writes, "The way to rescind borders is to cross them and, in doing so, blur them, confuse them, make them permeable, open for traffic from all directions" (qtd. in *Awkward 2*). In the words of Mercer, Jackson "steps outside the existing range of 'types' of black men," (106) expanding notions of masculinity—in particular black masculinity, whose boundaries have been more "heavily policed" than those of white masculinity.⁵ Judith Butler proposes that

To be excluded from the universal, and yet to make a claim within its terms, is to utter a performative contradiction of a certain kind . . . The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the "who," but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal ought to be inclusive of them (191).

Even as Jackson casts himself as "outside" conventional notions of the "universal" of black masculinity, he yet identifies as a black man, and, in doing so, expands the terms of the universal and creates social space not only for himself, but also for others who also make claims upon black masculinity, yet seem to exist outside the historical limits of this "universal" term. Mercer further argues that Jackson's donning of a "monstrous mask" in the production of "Thriller" and the metamorphic change that occurs through this act are suggestive of the surgical alteration of his physiognomy as well as the artificiality—the constructedness—of Jackson's celebrity persona. Almost invariably, Kathy Davis states, people of color, who undergo cosmetic surgery, are criticized as "attempt[ing] to deny, efface, or transcend" their racial identity (83-84). Following Mercer, Michael Awkward argues that "unnatural" interventions upon the black body should not, however, be read as transgressing "an ideological blackness" (178). Such "inscriptions" do, however, challenge and contravene essentialist notions of blackness and "absolute racial

⁵ As I discuss below, Michele Wallace (304) and Isaac Julien (259-260) are among the cultural critics who have written about the African American community's historical hesitation to acknowledge "non-normative" sexuality.

difference" (Awkward 178). And Jackson's refusal to be circumscribed by "overdetermined" boundaries based on "color" or race is consistent with such a critique.⁶

That Jackson performs androgyny as a black man further emphasizes the resistance of such an embodiment. Michele Wallace suggests that within black culture, it is "intolerable" for a black man to "speak from" the position of androgyny or to adopt a demeanor and/or practices socially coded as "feminine" (304). Further, Isaac Julien suggests that the black community has historically remained silent about the sexuality of black gays and lesbians (and presumably anyone else who does not identify as heterosexual) (259-260). For Jackson to project an identity opposed to normative heterosexual black masculinity reveals a certain intrepidity that makes this act doubly resistant, since, through such self-stylization, he risks criticism from within and without the black community.⁷

Mercer dubs the resistant, altered, ambiguous body of Michael Jackson a "social hieroglyph" that "demands, yet defies decoding" (95). The text of Jackson's body yet speaks, however, even if in an oblique and enigmatic manner. Through his physical form and music, which is also performed and realized through embodied vocalization and dance, Jackson engages in ludic appropriation, allusion, and subversion. By means of such a playful deployment of cultural signs and meanings, he and his work reveal the constructedness of social reality (Mercer 96), a crucial step in the deconstruction of exclusionary beliefs and practices embedded in the social

⁶ In "Black or White," Jackson states, "I am tired of this stuff . . . I'm not going to spend my life being a color" (qtd. in Davis 82). It should perhaps be acknowledged that according to Awkward, although generally Jackson's speech and actions suggest his belief in the social construction of race and gender, occasionally, Awkward states, Jackson makes pronouncements that seem to endorse an essentialist position on such subjects. (190).

⁷ Since he was accused of child molestation in 1993, Jackson's social position has been even more destabilized. In this paper, I have deliberately avoided addressing this subject, which seems, at best, only tangential to my thesis. Whether or not Jackson suffered greater media vilification than a heterosexual white male performer is certainly an interesting question, but it is beyond the scope of this paper and would require a great deal more research than time permitted for its completion.

matrix and the creation of the sort of world for which Jackson's music proclaims a longing—a
"thrilling" new world marked by and built upon tolerance, peace, and freedom.

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