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Please be black, Michael

‘Looked at one way, Jackson is a bizarre but freakishly gifted misfit.
Looked at another, he is one of the most illuminating figures
to stand on America’s postwar landscape.’

The record sales were promising. The biggest grossing record of 1983 was in prospect. Epic Records executives were bowled over when they saw the glossy new video for “Billie Jean.” The video featured a jheri-permed Michael Jackson wearing eighties-style shoulder pads, a red bowtie and correspondent shoes sliding across a road surface that lit up as he passed across it. The single from the *Thriller* album was already a charts success, but the video would give sales new momentum. The execs’ delight quickly turned sour with the news that MTV was refusing to feature the video. Why would the then fledgling 24-hour music-only cable channel reject one of the world’s most popular artists from its playlist? Could it be something to do with the fact that Jackson was black?

Jackson (1958–2009), then 25, was on his way to the stratosphere after a childhood in showbusiness and adolescence in no-man’s land. A prodigious singer and dancer, Jackson had been performing theatrically practically since he was old enough to walk. His father Joe had organized Michael and his brothers into the Jackson 5 and signed them to a small independent label called Steeltown Records, which released two singles in 1968. Although neither sold well, they caught the attention of Berry Gordy, the owner of Motown, then a major force in the music industry with a roster that included Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, the Temptations, and several other leading African American artists of the time. In the Jackson 5, Gordy must have seen the kind of raw material that could be dropped onto his well-calibrated assembly line for immediate processing. The Jackson 5 was punchy enough to accommodate the bass-driven rock impulses that were running through black music and which came to be called funk.

Gordy introduced the band as Diana Ross’s discovery, titling the first album *Diana Ross Presents the Jackson 5*, which was released in late 1969 and contained the memorable “I want you back.” Always a man with his finger on the pulse, Gordy felt the Jackson brothers were perfect for the 1970s. He’d watched the way the Monkees, a band comprising four white actors, had been put together to feature in a tv series and make records – which they performed in the series. It was, in the 1960s, an impudent and transparent marketing strategy. But it worked like a charm. Gordy envisaged a similar career for the

Jackson 5. By 1971, he had placed the band at the center of a cartoon series, which aired on Saturday mornings and which featured actors speaking the dialogue of the brothers. Jackson 5 merchandise proliferated. The age span of the band members (seven years separated the oldest, Jackie, from Michael, the youngest) meant the band appealed to a wide spectrum of fans.

Joe sensed his sons had even more commercial potential than the usually prescient and always opportunistic head of Motown realized. In his autobiography, Gordy wrote that, from 1973, after four years with Motown, "Their [the brothers'] father, Joe, went from being quietly behind the scenes to having many complaints and demands. It was everything from wanting a say in how they were produced, what songs they did or didn't do, to how they were being promoted and booked" (p. 347).

In 1975, Jackson moved his sons from Motown to CBS's Epic label (later acquired by Sony). By then, the band had been recording and performing for four years; Michael had detached himself temporarily for solo work, but was not yet a star in his own right; record sales for both him and the band had sagged in the previous two years. There was every reason to suppose that consumers had grown tired of the precocious child and his competent but unspectacular brothers. Yet, the move suggested that major media corporations like CBS were aware of the commercial potential of African American performers and were eager to exploit a mass market rather than the more specialist market Motown was able to reach.

As well as working with the band, Michael continued to pursue a parallel career as a solo performer, though with indefinite results. His collaboration with the trumpeter, bandleader and producer Quincy Jones proved a turning point. The first fruit of the collaboration was *Off the Wall*, an album described by Barney Hoskyns as "a triumph of studio-crafted miscegenation ... the first real mass-audience black/white album" (p. 301). (Miscegenation refers to the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types.)

Released in 1979, the album effectively relaunched Jackson as a newly matured entertainer. It was his fifth solo album and has, to date, sold 20 million copies. On the sleeve was an image of a formally attired Jackson, his nose narrowed slightly by a rhinoplasty, but his face not yet blanched. Coincidentally, around the same time, Chic's "Le Freak" became the biggest-selling single in Atlantic Records' history (4 million copies); the band, like Jackson, projected the image of unapologetic middle-class black sophisticate. (*En passant* the gay subtext of Chic's "Good Times" was also consistent with the liberating mood of the period: "Boys will be boys/better let them have their toys".)

And, also coincidentally, there was a change in the aspirations and social mobility of black Americans. Against a backdrop of Reagan-inspired cutbacks in federal regulation and intervention, a warrantable black middle class emerged. These were people who were not prepared to camp on the edge of society, but wanted to get involved. The market took note. In 1985,

Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez wrote, “Advertisers promote consumption of their products as a shortcut to the good life, a quick fix for low-income consumers (p. 128).

Their book *Minorities and Media* was an analysis of how and why the media’s portrayal of ethnic groups changed in the period: “The message to their low-income audience is clear,” they wrote, referring to the manner in which advertisers had begun to take notice of previously ignored segments of the market: “You may not be able to live in the best neighborhoods, wear the best clothes, or have the best job, but you can drink the same liquor, smoke the same cigarettes, and drive the same car as those who do” (p. 128).

Later Alan J. Bush and a research team were to reveal: “African Americans are more favorably disposed [than other ethnic groups] toward advertising, watch more tv, and rely on advertising to help choose the best product” (p. 22).

Jackson, as much as any other visible figure of the time, symbolized not just unmistakable affluence and conspicuous consumption, but an extravagant, flamboyant prosperity. His lavish eccentricities, though not yet the stuff of legend, were beginning to surface. He’d also shown a willingness to submit to and operate within white parameters (he’d left a black-owned label to join CBS), while remaining defiantly and incomparably individual.

When Rick James died in 2004, MTV featured an obituary on its webpages. It described James as “an American funk and soul musician from Buffalo New York, who worked as a singer, keyboardist, bassist, record producer, arranger, and composer during his long career.” It referenced James’ associations with Motown in the late 1970s. “James was famous for his wild brand of funk music and his trademark cornrow braids.” There was no mention of James’ dispute with MTV over the cable channel’s refusal to play his track “Superfreak,” which was a big seller in 1981 (and which was sampled for MC Hammer’s 1990 hit “U can’t touch this”). James criticized MTV for excluding videos by black artists, using the phrase “blatant racism” to describe the practice.

Actually, it wasn’t that blatant; the channel had featured black artists, including Tina Turner. But many of the artists featured were from England, where music videos were made to accompany practically every new single. This explains why so much of MTV’s early playlist had an English quality. Duran Duran was the most conspicuous English act, but there were also black artists like Joan Armatrading and Eddy Grant on MTV in its first two years. Another English artist, David Bowie, joined James in asking for more black artists. Three decades later, black music had become a rich profit center for the record industry and a key source of cachet for the now-global tv channel, which had improbable origins.

Not being a businessman, I often marvel at the ingenuity of entrepreneurs who can conjure up what must strike most people as laughable ideas and turn them into moneymaking endeavors. Imagine this, for instance: two tv execs

leave a movie theater in 1977 after seeing John Badham's *Saturday Night Fever*. With a perfunctory plot and almost ceaseless disco music and dancing, the film sounds irritating beyond belief, but became a huge global success and launched the career of John Travolta. Impressed by the music that throbbed throughout the film and the nifty footwork of Travolta et al., one exec suggests to the other that they start a tv channel on which they show nothing but the kind of material they've just witnessed. The other scoffs: "Look, that was 118 minutes and it was held together by a plot, even if it was a pretty thin one. Why would anyone want to watch music clips nonstop without even a story to sustain their interest?"

Four years later, in 1981, MTV began transmitting. Fanciful as the *Saturday Night Fever* scenario seems, it actually isn't too far from the truth: MTV was started by John Lack, who worked for Warner Cable, Robert W. Pittman, an NBC radio programmer, and Les Garland; together they dreamed up the idea, having taken note of a similar set-up in New Zealand, which showed pop videos and, in turn, promoted record sales. In fact, the distinction between promotional material and entertainment was smudged if not erased by MTV, which showed only music clips, including concert footage, interspersed with chat from video jockeys, or VJs.

The program content came from record companies, which were eager to grab what was effectively free advertising from the new cable outlet, owned by Warner Amex (i.e. Warner Communications and American Express). Pop videos were not then at the point where every commercial single was augmented by a video, but they were moving in that direction, especially in the British recording industry. MTV's income came from advertising revenue, which went up in proportion to their viewing figures, and its share of cable subscriptions. So all parties benefited from each other.

While it seems a perfectly brilliant concept today, in the late 1970s it must have seemed preposterous. In fact, it must have seemed that way in the first year of operation, too: fewer than one million viewers subscribed to the channel. Now, there about 350 million viewers, mostly aged 18-25 with no dependants and with disposable income – the kind of demographic that advertisers yearn for. MTV's global venture started in 1987 with MTV Europe and continued with such stations as MTV Mandarin, MTV Japan and MTV Africa. It has more imitators than the iPad: other channels have hijacked the all-music idea, leaving MTV to mutate into a reality tv station.

One of MTV's abiding images is a mockup of the moon landing, with a flag bearing the MTV logo being planted on the moon's surface. The allusion is direct: in 1969, the Apollo 11 satellite beamed images from the moon's surface into people's living rooms. Over the next decade, technological developments made it possible for television companies to distribute globally by bouncing signals off satellites. HBO, for example, began its service in 1976, transmitting from the Philippines the heavyweight title fight between Muhammad Ali and

Joe Frazier known as the “Thrilla in Manila.” Other channels to use satellite broadcasts included The Christian Broadcasting Network, later to become the Family Channel; the Star movie channel, CNN, which specialized in news; Nickelodeon, which featured only children’s programs; and ESPN, the sports-only channel. MTV was part of the proliferation. Spot the odd one out: only CNN offered hard news; the others provided content for leisure, relaxation, enjoyment – in other words, entertainment.

A year after MTV’s launch, a newspaper adopted a similar brief: downplay politics and world events and concentrate instead on material that amused, indulged and gratified consumers. Seven years after the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon amid the Watergate scandal, six years after the end of the Vietnam War, and two years after the seizure of 52 American hostages in Iran, Americans were in need of some lightening news. At least, Al Neuharth thought so. Ergo *USA Today*. It had four digestible sections, News, Money, Sports, and Life, each packed with short (300 words tops) articles, eye-catching graphics, color photographs, advice columns, film and music reviews, extensive sports coverage and even some political news. The newspaper struggled at first, but now outsells the *New York Times* and has an international edition. *USA Today*, like MTV, both reflected the changes in both popular taste and the market and, as powerful media in its own right, catalyzed further changes. One of the more important ones was the multiplication of entertainment-centered media that were also fully functioning advertising vehicles.

“The point I always made was that MTV was originally designed to be a rock music channel,” said Buzz Brindle, the channel’s director of music programming in the early 1980s, who must have grown weary of explaining the absence of African Americans. “It was difficult for MTV to find African-American artists whose music fit [*sic*] the channel’s format that leaned toward rock at the outset.”

Maybe MTV had an agenda for its music. But it also had an agenda for its customers. No, not the people who watched the tv for pleasure: the advertisers who paid MTV to screen commercials and so provided it with its *raison d’être*. “In the 1980s and 1990s, advertisers could reach desired consumers instead of addressing a mass market,” Jennifer Fuller points out (p. 290).

Media markets segmented, enabling a specialist tv channel like MTV to offer its advertisers a direct route to the youth market at a time in history when young people were becoming the most sought-after consumers (sought-after, that is, by ad agencies and their clients). Fuller again: “The most coveted demographic was young urban whites” (p. 290). One of the most revealing acknowledgments of this is an ad for MTV that ran in the business sections of newspapers, and was quoted by Thomas Frank in his essay “The new gilded age”: “BUY THIS 24-YEAR-OLD AND GET ALL HIS FRIENDS FOR ABSOLUTELY FREE,” its headline read (p. 150).

When Garland eventually decided to allow “Billie Jean” onto the MTV playlist, he didn’t explain his change of heart, though it was thought to have been influenced by the prospect of CBS, the owner of Jackson’s label, murmuring that it could withdraw its full roster of music. “CBS Records Group President Walter Yetnikoff had to threaten to remove all other CBS videos from MTV before the network agreed to air the video for ‘Billie Jean’,” Nadra Kareen Nittle summarized the circulating story in her “MTV and Black Music: A Rocky History” (May 9, 2011).

Garland dismissed this as myth: “There was never any hesitation,” he was quoted by *Jet* magazine in an article titled “Why it took MTV so long to play black music videos” (October 9, 2006). Garland claimed: “I called Bob (Pittman, MTV co-founder) to tell him, ‘I just saw the greatest video I’ve ever seen in my life. It is off the dial it’s so good’.” Yetnikoff has been silent on the issue. But, *if he did* make the threat to Garland, real or imagined, it was one of the most influential statements of intent in cultural history.

The commotion kicked up by James was probably embarrassing, but containable. Yet it ensured that there was at least awareness that MTV did not feature black artists, certainly not in proportion to their presence in popular music. MTV would certainly have become sensitive to criticism, especially at a time when the African American population was evolving into an exploitable market for consumer goods. To snub a conspicuous and, by common consent, talented performer such as Jackson could have been fatal. “Fortunately, Michael Jackson helped us to redefine the musical parameters of MTV,” reflected Brindle. Whether his use of “fortunately” suggests MTV made an auspicious decision, or was just lucky, we can’t know. But the meaning of his statement is clear enough.

Within months of screening Jackson for the first time, MTV received another video from Epic, this time an extended 14-minute film directed by John Landis, featuring former *Playboy* centerfold Ola Ray and a voiceover segment from Vincent Price, best-known for his starring roles in Hammer horror movies. *Thriller* became a classic of the new pop video genre, though in many ways it was a gamble. The album from which the track was taken was released earlier in 1983 and sales, while impressive, had begun to plateau.

MTV was in its third year of operation and was far from a proven commodity. The model of coupling a record with a video was still relatively new; today, of course, it would be unthinkable to release one without the other. CBS saw no purpose in making a video so long after the release of the album and with sales already at a respectable level. Jackson offered to pay Landis out of his own pocket. “But I wouldn’t let him,” said Landis. “He was still living with his parents in Encino behind a supermarket.” Landis raised the \$500,000 production costs by filming a 45-minute documentary called *The Making of “Thriller”* that he could sell for theatrical release. Like a movie, the video had a première in December 1983.

Thriller became the top-selling album in history (110 million copies to date) and turned Jackson into one of the world's leading entertainers. *Bad*, his follow-up, was considered a virtual failure, selling 30 million copies. The tour to promote it in 1987 was watched by a total of 4.5 million people. The video of his single "Black or white" was simultaneously shown to an estimated 500 million television viewers in 27 countries in 1991. A six-album deal with Sony was worth up to \$1 billion. Jackson's rare public appearances, though fleeting and uneventful, were accorded a status akin to a royal visit. Measured on any scale, Jackson was the biggest pop act in the world. He was well known, but not known well.

There were no headlines about booze-and-drugs, rehab, sex parties and the now familiar antics we associate with celebs. If anything, Jackson eschewed these kinds of activities. As far as we know. If anything, he took the Greta Garbo (1905-90) approach, jealously guarding his private life. This disinclination to open himself for public inspection played no small part in deepening the fans' interest in him. One of the most perplexing aspects of Jackson concerned his physical transformation: as well as changes in several features of his face, his complexion seemed to be growing pale, at times even ashen. In a 1991 interview with Oprah, Jackson said he suffered from a skin condition called vitiligo, but few accepted that he hadn't undergone some sort of treatment: his face seemed to be in a state of perpetual alteration. Was he a black man trying determinedly to become white?

We'll never know whether Jackson actually wanted to rid himself of all traces of his ethnicity. An African American so successful that he could have almost anything in the world, he seemed to pursue the one thing he couldn't have and, in the process, confirmed that whiteness remained a precious commodity in the land of plenty. In his book *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness*, J. Randy Taraborrelli quotes Don King, the impresario, who promoted a world tour for Jackson and his brothers, and sensed Michael's unease: "It doesn't matter how great he can sing and dance ... He's one of the megastars in the world, but he's still going to be a nigger megastar" (p. 377).

Have you ever thought what's happening when you watch a music video? Are you being entertained, or held captive in front of a three-minute commercial? You could ask a similar question of sports: does enjoying the competition implicate you in witnessing advertisements for cars, beer, razor blades, and all the other kinds of products aimed at the sports fan market? Does it really matter? After all, television keeps us engrossed, absorbed and amused. We usually have little inclination to analyse whether the hidden persuaders are surreptitiously bending our shopping preferences to their own requirements. Advertisers and tv companies figured this out long ago. MTV was, in its own way, a prototype. As its imitators proliferated, blurring the difference between

entertainment and marketing became passé: making the two one and the same thing was the task. The band Dire Straits satirized the tightening relationship between pop music, television and consumerism in their 1985 track “Money for nothing,” in which they boast of getting to “play the guitar on the MTV” while acknowledging their unwritten responsibility: “We gotta install microwave ovens/custom kitchen deliveries/we gotta move these refrigerators/we gotta move these color TVs.”

Dire Straits reaped the benefits of MTV when their record reached the top of the charts, though the band was far from the biggest beneficiary of exposure on the channel in the 1980s. Madonna profited from being banned by MTV. This is not nearly as ironic as it sounds: a prohibition makes something or someone immediately more fascinating than they were before. Madonna was already pretty fascinating by 1990 when her “Justify my love” was considered too risqué. Already one of the world’s most successful entertainers, Madonna was intent on transforming herself into a brand. As *Forbes* writer Allen Adamson reflects in his “What Madonna can teach Lady Gaga”: “She was a genius at knowing how not to be too far out in front of the curve, and being able to sense when her current brand of entertainment had run its course.” At the time of Adamson’s article, February 14, 2011, Madonna was a 52-year-old mother of four and had just completed directing the film *WE*. Her first album *Madonna* had been released 28 years before, in 1983. Her rise coincides perfectly with the ascent of MTV; theirs was a most exquisite symbiosis.

If someone at MTV had looked to Madonna’s divination for guidance, their faith would have been well-served: her genius – I follow Adamson’s usage – was not so much for predicting the future as for shaping it. Morphing from one persona to another with each new album, she sensed consumers’ appetite for endless novelty, change and excitement of the senses. Scandals were an effective way of satisfying all three criteria. In 1989, for example, the year before the MTV ban, she had drawn the wrath of the Catholic church with the symbol-laden video for the title track of her album *Like a Prayer*. The track became a *cause célèbre*, especially after Pepsi, outraged by the video, cancelled a \$5 million endorsement contract with Ms Ciccone.

MTV must have hesitated about screening “Like a prayer,” but erred on the side of abandon. Madonna’s videos were, like Jackson’s, events rather than just visual accompaniments to music. The music video’s spectacular rise through the 1980s was in no small part attributable to her genius, though we should consider whether Madonna would still be influential today were it not for MTV. Perhaps she would have become another Streisand, or Cher, regardless; or even continued performing like Annie Lennox, or Debbie Harry. Equally, she may have slipped out of the popular consciousness in the way of Pat Benatar or Linda Ronstadt, both admirable singers, but neither as well known or as influential as they were in the early 1980s.

Let's keep perspective: MTV pushed advertisements at its audiences in the guise of entertainment. Perhaps that's harsh. MTV's output didn't just appear to be entertainment: it was. After all, we, the consumers, define what is or isn't entertaining. During the 1980s, our tastes changed so radically that we started to appreciate what might have been regarded as irrelevancies in earlier times. In the golden era of Hollywood (1930-1960s), fans were interested in stars *qua* stars – in their capacity as performers, not humans with predilections, fallibilities and foibles like everyone else. Madonna, with her invitations to inspect her body or discuss her sexual preferences, played no small part in changing that. She was vigorously abetted by a media – a *global* media – switching focus away from hard news to entertainment in the way instigated by *USA Today*.

As the media changed focus, so did we. This sounds like I am arguing that the chicken preceded the egg, whereas, in actuality, I am just groping for a new way of asking “which came first?” The media certainly changed focus, examining the hitherto private lives of the rich and famous, presenting consumers with what, in previous years, might have been dismissed as insignificant tittle-tattle or, at best, tangential to other, more interesting topics. If consumers hadn't been interested, the media would have found little traction. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as we saw in chapter 3, was a conduit of the irresistible new voyeurism.

A global television audience of over one billion watched the memorial service for Michael Jackson in July 2009. It was smaller than the 2.5 billion television witnesses to the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, but a gargantuan gathering nevertheless. It offered an index of Jackson's near-mesmeric power to fascinate, even in his death. When Jackson died in June 2009, at the age of 50, it seemed as if people momentarily lost the ability to differentiate the flesh-and-blood mortal from his icon – the public representation that had been part of the popular imagination for the nearly four decades.

Everyone in the world was familiar with Jackson. Even those who had never heard a note of his music (and that probably means no one) would know of his extraordinary reputation – as the self-styled King of Pop, whose idiosyncratic habits accreted as he matured; the religion-hopping son of Jehovah's Witnesses, who embraced Islam but spoke for all religions; the artless lover of children who might also have been a cunning seducer of innocents.

Those who loved him, loved him in the kind of way fans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were wont: with a mixture of affection, attachment and idolization not for a person, but for an image of a person. Few people knew Jackson, the man; the world knew Jackson the icon. Few performers and certainly no African American performer had ever commanded a following like Jackson's: in one remarkable decade, Jackson sold 110 million

records (over 75 million as a solo artist); and sales surged again in the aftermath of his death.

Jackson's response to this adulation was to become a virtual recluse, giving interviews sparingly and making infrequent public appearances. During the 1990s, Jackson made three albums; though interest in him centered less on his music, more on his weird, self-indulgent lifestyle and unusual choice of companions. As his enigma deepened, questions multiplied. Did he sleep in an oxygen tent? Why did he want the bones of the Elephant Man? Was he so obsessed by Diana Ross that he actually wanted to look like her? Did he seriously believe he was an emissary for God? "He's just using me as the messenger," he told *Ebony* in May 1992. And, how come he always seemed to be in the company of young children? This last question was asked too many times to remain unanswered.

In 1994, Jackson agreed to pay Jordy Chandler, then 14, an undisclosed sum, thought to be more than \$25 million, to stop a sex abuse lawsuit ever reaching court. Jackson was never put under oath for a civil deposition, which could be used in a criminal trial. The deal was negotiated on Jackson's behalf by his lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, Jr., later to represent O. J. Simpson. Part of the agreement reached was that the payment did not constitute an admission of guilt by Jackson. After the charges, Jackson was forced out into the open and made to defend himself, whether he liked it or not. In the process, the qualities that were once integral to his appeal became implements of immolation. Was he weird-unusual, or weird-sicko?

The more rumors circulated, the more Jackson seemed to insulate himself from the world outside his 3,000-acre California residence, Neverland, which he appeared to have turned into his own gigantic playground where children could visit and stay and share the same bedroom as Jackson. He confirmed as much in a startling tv interview in 2003. Jackson's astonishing naïveté in talking about his love of children was, at once, touching and disarming. For some, it was a genuine expression of deep affection for children from someone so unworldly that he had no conception of the furor he was initiating. For others, it was the admission of a predatory pedophile, slyly attracting children for his own depraved ends. Charged in California for child molestation, he was obliged to defend himself in court. Joan Smith, of the *New Statesmen*, argued: "The Michael Jackson trial has been a paradigmatic moment in American cultural history" (June 13, 2005).

Smith argued of Jackson, "for all his weirdness, his fantasies and his perpetual quest for transformation have deep roots in the American psyche." She means that Jackson's rise from-rags-to-riches, his attempts to remake and reinvent himself and his "monarchical fantasies" are constituent parts of American ideology. His plastic surgery was no more than an extreme version of what more and more Americans engage in every year.

Jackson was acquitted. He never made another studio album. Jackson's *Invincible* was released in 2001. His appearances on stage also became fewer: in 2006, he disappointed fans by singing just a few lines of "We are the world" at the World Music Awards in London. It was his first performance since being cleared of the child molestation charges. There were suspicions that Jackson had acquired a dependency on prescription drugs.

In 2008, Jackson attempted to reprise his career as the King of Pop: it was announced that he would play at London's O2 Arena, the concert intended to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the release of *Thriller*. It did not materialize, though in March, 2009, more definite plans surfaced when promoters confidently publicized a ten-concert residency at the same 20,000-seat arena, scheduled to start in July. Jackson's motivation for undertaking such a punishing schedule was unclear, though the running costs of Neverland, which amounted to \$3 m (£2.1 m) per year, were possibly a factor. It was reported by the BBC that Jackson would earn \$400 m (£283 m) for the concerts, which sold out in minutes.

Jackson died before they began. Investigators concluded that a powerful concoction of prescription drugs ingested by Jackson at his Los Angeles home was the cause and Dr Conrad Murray, Jackson's personal physical was charged and later found guilty of involuntary manslaughter. La Toya Jackson, Michael's sister, maintained that her brother told her shortly before his death: "I'm going to be murdered."

"White Americans prefer being lied to – a kind of fact-free zone they choose to live in – about any topics they disagree with." Quincy Troupe was furious about the media's coverage of Jackson's death. Writing for *Black Renaissance* in 2009, Troupe noticed how Jackson's idiosyncrasies overshadowed his musical achievements in most of media (actually, Troupe would probably object to my use of "idiosyncrasies," though I mean the mode of behavior peculiar to Jackson).

Troupe tries to make sense of this in group-psychological terms. "Many white people in this country," he argues, "are projecting their own feelings of inadequacy, their inferiority complexes and insecurities onto African-Americans through the manipulation of the mass communication media apparatus, which they own and control" (p. 5).

"*It works!*" declares Troupe, not just for whites, but for African Americans "who believe themselves inferior to whites, especially when it comes to standards of beauty, intelligence, achievement or other important areas" (p. 5). It's a pungent argument, lessened in its power by lack of evidence, but worthy of attention.

Susan Fast advances a different understanding of why Jackson excited ambivalence on a grand scale: "It was really his more substantive, underlying

differences that were most troubling,” she writes, listing Jackson’s apparent refusal to stick to “normative social codes.” Fast means Jackson didn’t fit easily into racial or ethnic categories (we could add that he appeared to transfer across them), or into a recognizable gender role: he favored the companionship of children and young men. “Please be black, Michael, or white, or gay or straight,” Fast imagines people pleading (p. 261).

Interesting propositions. But did people really want Jackson to conform to a recognizable status? It’s at least possible that Jackson’s ambiguities, far from being troubling, were the very source of his humongous global popularity. And did whites really project their own inadequacies onto him, as Troupe contends? From a different perspective, he validated whiteness by trying to erase his own blackness. I’ll explain.

Taraborrelli relates an incident when the Jackson 5 was caught between conflicting demands. Berry Gordy taught them to assimilate in such a way that they’d be appreciated by the lucrative white market. This meant that they couldn’t be seen to endorse the black power ethic that pervaded not only America, but vast portions of the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet for African Americans to be devoid of any kind of political awareness would have looked phony. The very fact that they all wore Afro hairdos hinted at an identification with what was going on about them. When a journalist asked a Motown publicist if the brothers’ hairstyles “had something to do with Black Power,” there was a sharp riposte. “These are children, not adults,” snapped the publicist. “Let’s not get into that.” There were no more words, but the subject wasn’t closed. “Michael – a media master at the age of thirteen – understood that his lack of social consciousness would not look good when the writer’s story appeared. Before he left, he gave the writer a soul handshake and a big wink” (p. 79). After that, Motown’s press department insisted that anyone who wanted to interview the band had to agree not to ask any questions about politics or drugs.

In spite of the Afro, the winks and the brothers’ handshakes, Jackson was in no way reflective of the mood of the 1960s and 1970s. Quite the contrary: he came to represent a detachment from the mood, a young black man who looked like he was into black power and soul but was, in reality, a complete innocent. Even in his teens, it was easy to imagine he was a child, a gifted child; confirmation perhaps that blacks were naturally compensated for their lack of achievements in education, commerce and politics. In manhood, Jackson was even more comforting: an African American who had risen to the top on merit. Not all blacks, he seemed to be saying, were preoccupied with racism and the obstacles it strewed in their paths. Some were interested only in progress as individual people, not as members of a group that claimed a special status.

Off the Wall, the album that announced the arrival of Jackson as a mature 21-year-old artist, was released in 1979. Oprah was hosting a local talk show in Baltimore, Bill Cosby was fronting a Saturday morning cartoon show, Barack

Obama was graduating from high school, and Stevie Wonder was reaching the end of a creative period that had established him as arguably the world's pre-eminent popular musician. Jackson conformed to none of the existing stereotypes. Yet he was black. The importance of this was clear: he was silently making a statement about America's ability to accommodate black progress; about the possibilities awaiting black people with talent and determination enough to make it to the top; about the disappearance of the age-old American Dilemma. As a child, Jackson may have affected an Afro hairstyle, but, in the 1980s, he was a black man who could almost make you forget he was black. You could almost forget he was a man.

Celebrity can be a dangerous thing: it can flatter its incumbent with delusions of infallibility. Had Jackson heeded Don King's warning, he would have realized that his status was granted by a culture dominated by white people and by white values. As such, his acceptance was destined to be conditional. Here was a boy, a cornucopia of natural talent, who developed and expanded that talent in manhood. His dancing could mesmerize people, his singing could enchant them. He didn't talk politics and his comments about the condition of black people were so fluffy as to be meaningless. Christopher Andersen believes his fans – and, by implication, all of us – played their parts in “infantilizing” Jackson: “We were happy as long as he played Peter Pan and never grew up” (p. 356).

At a time when America was almost embarrassed by its seemingly never-ending racial problems, it was comforting to know that blacks, however humble their origins, could soar to the top. Even more comforting to know that, however high they soared, they still wanted to be white.

Sexually, Jackson was puzzling but not threatening: in his adolescence, he fraternized with older women, such as Elizabeth Taylor, or sought the companionship of escorts like Brooke Shields for celebrity functions. In 1994, a year after the first glimpse of his doubtful interest in young boys, he married Lisa Marie Presley. Jackson reportedly proposed over the phone four months after they had met. Their relationship was short-lived and Presley filed for divorce in January 1996, leaving many to ponder whether the marriage was a subterfuge. Jackson then married Debbie Rowe, a nurse who had been treating his skin condition. They had two children, rumored to have been conceived *in vitro*.

As an asexual figure, Jackson remained innocuous – to use Helán E. Page's phrase again, containable. The dread that might have been engendered by a virile young man who commands the fantasies of countless young women of every ethnic background didn't apply to Jackson. He was, to use Jan Nederveen Pieterse's evocative term, a symbolic eunuch. Actually, Ellen T. Harris compares Jackson to an actual eunuch – Carol Broschi, aka Farinelli (1705–1782), the eighteenth-century castrato singer, who was also “idolized” (p. 183).

When, in 1993, Jackson's sweetness-and-light conception suddenly went darker, his public humiliation may well have functioned as a lynching – a

symbolic lynching. As JoAnn Wypijewski, of *The Nation* wrote: “The definition of sexual danger has become endlessly elastic.” She concludes: “It cannot matter that Michael Jackson was acquitted of child molestation, since he was frequently remembered in death as a pedophile” (p. 7).

However people remember Jackson – a wondrous talent, a scheming deviant, a manchild lost in Neverland – no one can deny that, in cultural terms, he will remain a compelling subject: an icon of the late twentieth century, he reflects not only the changes in the circumstances of the African American population, but changes in white America. Jackson was idolized, perhaps even reified and, for many, objectified into an extraordinary being, an Other, for whom there were no established reference points in whites’ conceptions. Looked at one way, Jackson is a bizarre but freakishly gifted misfit. Looked at another, he is one of the most illuminating figures to stand on America’s postwar landscape.