

Introduction

The Epigrammatic Layout of the Argument

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

How the black body is habituated by race as an identity category is clearly depicted in Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1981 painting, *Irony of Negro Policeman*, in which the artist draws our attention to blackness social determinism.¹ In other words, *Irony* points to the fact that a black person is viewed as an animal and a fungible commodity. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, the [black] body is thus fixed “in terror and dominance.”² This indicates how blackness presence is “held within a general absence.”³ That

is to say, a black identity is always “overdetermined from the outside” and is singularly performed through the body. Being black outside positions blackness as the unassimilable otherness of whiteness and makes it impossible for the black person to transcend their racial identity. As Toni Morrison aptly puts it: “once blackness is accepted as socially, politically, and [physically] defined,”⁴ it has a tremendous impact on both blacks and whites, which neither of them can rid themselves of or undo. Unlike the Hobbesian project of “the war of all against all,” it is understandable that it is whites against blacks. In this sense, whites position themselves as different from blacks and seek to maintain their white-skin privileges at all costs; blacks, in turn, make do with whiteness preeminence by fashioning another way of being (a being + something else) in a world where whiteness is the norm. For blacks, then, how to live this relationship to whiteness is hard work. The French postcolonial scholar Frantz Fanon writes: “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of ‘being-for-other’ of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in an [oppressive] and civilized society.”⁵ So, for Fanon, a black cannot indeed be an “other” for another black; a black can only be an “other” for a white. As such, they represent a threat to the white social body.

Accordingly, it is difficult for a black person to develop a solid sense of self. The self, which eventually *becomes*, in the Beauvoirian sense, finds in whiteness their model of personhood and transforms the consciousness of blacks such as to conform to whiteness as the norm. What can be said is that the “self,” which *becomes*, is an inauthentic self in the Sartrean sense. What this means is that it remains untrue to itself. In other words, it is a false self, alienating blacks from a self of their own constitution and propelling them, as Fanon observes, “to run away from [their] own individuality”;⁶ that is, to be self-conscious of their own presence. This self-consciousness then manifests itself in the form of psychic instability. And while a black identity is marked on the body, racial identification is a deeply ambivalent and fragmented process and confines blacks to a “third space,”⁷ a liminal space of ambivalence. It is in this undefined space that I envision Michael Jackson as a racialized subject being discursively confined.

Michel Foucault comments on identification in *The Archeology of Knowledge*: “Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same,”⁸ exemplifies Michael Jackson’s racial stance. The singer resists facile

racial identification and refuses to identify himself to any preestablished racial identities, whether black or white, but gravitates toward a form of racial ambiguity that would precisely prevent him to “remain the same.”⁹ To put it differently, Michael Jackson’s racial identity, *not black* (other) and *not white* (the self’s other), a way of being “out from,” what can be described as the either/or racial binary, to which I will return, is not locked in the symbiotic relationship of subordination (blackness) and domination (whiteness), but positions him as an “other ‘other.’” The King of Pop continues thus to be seen through what Fanon calls the “corporeal malediction” of his blackness.¹⁰ To say it differently, even though race is culturally constituted, it does not, or cannot, disavow the materiality of the racialized body—a body that is read and interpreted in racial terms as a *lack*, null, and void of racial transcendence; a body that is constituted, re-constituted, and de-constituted through the fear of the “other”; and a body that seemingly appears to be outside of the either/or racial category, drawing attention to the limits of the power of blacks for self-making. Michael Jackson confirms Fanon’s assessment of the black person’s situation in the white world: wherever he goes, he remains a black person¹¹ whose identity is marked on the body, or, as Fanon puts it, is “overdetermined from the outside,” which is in fact always under some form of surveillance and repudiation. And this applies whether one is a nameless black person or the King of Pop.

In *Michael Jackson and the Quandary of a Black Identity*, I focus on the queerness of the pop singer’s racial identification by drawing from W. E. B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness” and Frantz Fanon’s concept of the doubling of identity, both functioning as an otherness of the “other,” *not black* (other) and *not white* (the self’s “other”) and representing a form of racial liminality. This alignment of a constructed and constructing self, or the “twoness” as Du Bois calls it,¹² leads to the question: What does it mean to be black in America? In this book, this question is reinterpreted and reformulated through the theoretical lens of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* so as to acknowledge the fact that like all blacks in America, Michael Jackson had difficulties in developing his sense of “self” within a culture that upholds whiteness as the norm and blackness as the “other.” The facticity of blackness as null and void of racial transcendence has created an identity “crisis” for Michael Jackson, which is visible in his attempts to resist classical racial models of identification and free himself from the either/or racial category. Michael Jackson, as Michael Awkward puts it, became “whiter”—“less ebony, more ivory”;¹³ that is, Michael

Jackson's skin/surface seemingly appears to be "white," "but that don't help" Michael Jackson's case, "cause, [Michael Jackson] can't hide what is in his face," in the words of blues singer Louis Armstrong from his song "Black is Blue." And even though Michael Jackson, in his song "Black or White," can say: "See it is not about races/Just Places/Faces/Where your blood comes from," in the Lavinasian sense, "the face speaks"¹⁴ and gives meaning to the appearance of race.¹⁵

Michael Jackson's resistance to racial identification provides a negative reading of the King of Pop and, in a less charitable vein, fuels epithets such as "weird" or "freak," each fastened into a relationship with each other notwithstanding the multifaceted psychological, epistemological, and ideological layers that Michael Jackson's self-construction of another possible "self" materialize. Such name-calling (weird/freak) points to the way in which this form of naming (of talk), which, as a form of "nan-oracism," to borrow from Achille Mbembe,¹⁶ acts on a person and dissolves him into "abnormality." Furthermore, one does not have to be a psychoanalyst to recognize that Michael Jackson's exposure to this kind of name-calling (weird/freak), makes him indeed susceptible to such name-calling. That is to say, once one is named, the naming is used to denigrate one and is reimposed on one because one takes on the name. In other words, naming Michael Jackson as weird/freak, as a form of "citational practice," produces the effect that it names¹⁷ and Michael Jackson becomes that name. In fact, there is a performative effect of having been called a name such as weird/freak—a name you yourself did not know and have never chosen. Michael Jackson inhabits a weirdness to which all blacks are subjected because a black identity destabilizes the epistemic, political, and social regimes of "the normal" that is defined by whiteness. *Am I that name*,¹⁸ interestingly, continues to be the existential question to which all blacks are confronted.

I am, here, interested in the disciplinary power that whiteness exercises on Michael Jackson as a black subject, and the ways in which such a subject is produced, reproduced, and counterproduced as fixed in his racialized essence and often attacked in his identification. And even though in its protean state, "*Black Is . . . Black Ain't*,"¹⁹ which communicates a sense of richness and abundance among blacks, race as marked on the body is produced through racial discipline and determines a black person's identity. In the end, Michael Jackson's attempt at self-fashioning "a *not black, not white* identity" trumps the either/or race category and positions him outside of the distinguishing norms of race assignment.

This is the very reason why Michael Jackson provokes a threat to the social body and must be disciplined.

The Extent and Organization of the Book

Chapter 1, the conceptual framework, provides a counterhegemonic basis for thinking of blacks' identity formation and its racial implications. It provides the theoretical basis for an in-depth study of the King of Pop Michael Jackson and the quandary of a black identity. It draws on the works of political scientists, social historians, feminist theorists, sociologists, philosophers, and critical race theorists that have informed the discursive and nondiscursive ontological, epistemological, and positioning of blacks in the United States. This chapter conceptualizes what constitutes a black identity and how it is inscribed on the body. I point out that the identity of blacks is "overdetermined from the outside" because the maleficence attached to their race is marked on the body in a way that essentializes blacks.²⁰ In other words, a black person is, to use Fanon's language, the "slave not of the 'idea' that other have of [them] but of [their] own appearance,"²¹ acting prophylactically contra racial transcendence.

The construction of a black identity in the United States leads to the idea that blacks are all alike. That is to say, in Claudia Rankine's words, "all black people look the same."²² This sameness elides racial difference and other differences that stem, for example, from class, gender, transgender, disability, sexuality, age, and speech and language impairment. In other words, race as a social phenomenon is a signifier that is fastened to the signified of the "other." Furthermore, in American society, race has become the supreme signifier of otherness in the face of whiteness. This chapter considers W. E. B. Du Bois's conceptualization of "double consciousness"²³ as an inevitable condition of blacks looking at themselves through the white gaze; it also draws on Fanon's articulation of the "implicit knowledge"²⁴ that blacks acquire after being thrown into a racist society. It further analyzes the complex ways in which blacks' identification processes depend on how race is fixed on the body or, as Fanon aptly sums it up, is "epidermalized," on the skin/surface. In line with this, I want to show how the reconfiguration of race goes beyond the somatic racialized body and provide a framework to conceptualize race performativity. What is in fact at stake in the United States is not what race is but what race does. Judith Butler reminds us that "performativity

is the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”²⁵ To this should be added that race, in its basic multitudinous act, assumes different meanings in diverse investigations. However, what race is made to be in praxis does not overrule how race is positioned within whiteness and its implications for the lived experience of blacks in America.

What gets highlighted, then, is how this knowledge about blackness is discursively constructed within a racist society out of “thousands of anecdotes and stories”²⁶ about blacks and who they are. In fact, there is a focus on blackness as fixed, a simple antithetical usefulness, which, within a social, ontological, and epistemological imperative, structures and upholds the presumptive hegemony of white-skin privilege. For blacks, then, one of the most painful repercussions “to be” a being-in-the-world—a world dedicated to white-skin privilege—is an ambivalent self-identification, a denial of the “self.” With remarkable insistence, Fanon describes this as a negating experience. Because “the body is surrounded by uncertainty,”²⁷ it reacts to, and mimics, the pejorative white gaze through which blacks encounter the “other” and can only experience being black in relation to whiteness.²⁸ The image of the “other” is never concealed and hidden from sight and invites an essential reading, which we can affiliate to the Sartrean *look*; that is, a *look* that reduces blacks to the object of the *look*. To put it differently, when the *look* is directed from whites to blacks, it creates an ontological condition for blacks that frames their way of being in society, a discussion to which I will return. For now, I just want to say that blacks have no ontological resistance in the face of whiteness because blacks, in the Fanonian language, are “overdetermined from the outside.” I will call this the fixing of race on the body, the outsideness of blackness, which is a site for savage exteriority recognizable in whites’ gaze, gestures, and attitudes toward the “other.” Blackness when juxtapositioned with whiteness empties blacks of all values that are continuously devalued.

“Blackness and black identity” is the focus of chapter 2. In this chapter, I will show that the attempt to construct the category “black,” which imposes itself upon blacks and continues to position them within the distinguishing norms of recognition that is marked on the body, has fundamental implications for racial identification. And if we take seriously Fanon’s definition of identification as a pathological condition since one experiences one’s “being through others,”²⁹ in this relational mode, when blackness is measured against whiteness, it is automatically reduced to otherness. Fanon, as a psychiatrist, diagnoses this inescapable condition

as a form of neurosis, which for him, even though the lived experience of blacks and whites greatly contrasts, is attributed to both blacks and whites. In his diagnosis, Fanon became increasingly convinced that “the black man enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.”³⁰ And since blacks’ neuroticism is the ultimate product of whiteness’s ignition of power and privilege so painstakingly normalized, blacks cannot experience their own experiences outside of whiteness.³¹

Sartre’s contention is that “it is the anti-Semite who made the Jew.”³² In the face of whiteness, Sartre’s approach is useful when conceptualizing blackness as always constructed as “other.” And, it is therefore very difficult for a black person to develop a solid sense of self. This constructed and constructing black “self” is constantly interrogated, policed, and subverted by the white gaze. Let us consider for a moment Fanon’s crucial question: Is it so abhorrent to be black?³³ Posed differently by Du Bois the question becomes: “How does it feel to be a problem?”³⁴ In fact, as a racialized subject, a black person is confined to a liminal and ambivalent space. It is from this ambivalence that self-identification can sometimes develop into pathological conditions in which the subjectivity of a black person becomes subjugated by a gaze that is directed through the episteme of whiteness. This experience of subjugation leads to an identity “crisis” and a misidentification where the otherness of the “other,” which is also othered, is implicated. The subject becomes an unsettled agent. This othering of the “other” is first experienced as corporeal since the body constitutes the material foundation of one’s social and subjective formation. The lived experience of Michael Jackson is the perfect illustration of this condition where his identity starts and ends disjointed. What we are dealing with in this disjointedness is that one is forever in conflict with one’s own identification in the face of whiteness. And this becomes in itself a source of the disciplinary device that puts pressure on Michael Jackson to engage in a profound struggle as a liberatory action and interaction to imagine and uncover another possible “self” that must not be intimately connected and impacted by race.

Race is a phantasmagoric creation, a social concept, that organizes a black person’s identification process, subjecting them to an identification that is marked on the body, which indeed has racial implications. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* by Barbara Fields and Karen Fields helps elucidate the distinctive point that in the United States, race cannot be disavowed notwithstanding the triumphalist approbation that

there is “the declining significance of race”³⁵ and an “end to racism.”³⁶ We do not need to look very far to know that race matters are, for example, manifested in the bodiliness of racism; that is, a body positioned within racism, which lends itself to an embodied understanding of race and racism. But behold, the point here is that, in the United States, the phantasm of race, which itself engenders racist attitudes, behavior, and thinking and postulates natural differences “based on real or imagined physical or other differences,”³⁷ continues to position blackness as a lack, a liability. It is no wonder that blacks, as a way to counteract the devaluation of “blackness,”³⁸ developed and continue to develop their own form of empowerment in their music, dance, and an ensemble of performances, which are bound up with what Fred Moten would call “a different modality of sociality,”³⁹ that is, another form of “being otherwise,” which socially engages the practice of blacks and enhances a sort of freedom (with a small f) away from the normative gaze of whiteness. It is nice when blacks do not always have to be concerned with, and looked at themselves through, the white gaze.

Michael Jackson wanted to break away from the wretched construction of blackness’s designation as a bodily mark, the distinguishing feature of a black person’s identity. So, he forged an identity that tried to escape (in fact, an inescapable escape) blackness constructivism, the fixity of racial ontology that structures and upholds white supremacy. Indeed, how race is fixed on the body is important for corroborating the ontology of race and the bodiliness of racism that ascertains the “other” as essentially different. This difference is the mark of a black authenticity reduced to anatomy. Unlike sex reassignment involving operations and hormone treatments, race cannot be reassigned or removed.⁴⁰ Of course, a black person may pass for white and can, at a social level, successfully assimilate whiteness as an identity. Nonetheless, assimilating whiteness comes at a psychic cost. Not only the “passer” may have to forgo meaningful relationships with other blacks, but they would have to schematically deal with the ontological specificity of whiteness as terrifying for the “other.” In a word, blacks cannot live their own relationship to their body except through the intermediation of an interpretive schema that is not of their own choosing.

At the most elementary level, Michael Jackson’s attempt to transcend the black/white binary by fashioning a sort of “racial in-betweenness” displays a kind of double self-othering—an othering of oneself that others his always already other self, and leads to a form of racial ambiguity. This could be read as a kind of postmodern racial subjectivity, which is

foundational for Michael Jackson's constructed and constructing "possible self" revealed on his body—*not black, not white*—a body that still signals blackness, conceivably a certain flair of blackness, which whites might identify with the pop artist Michael Jackson, but to which whites possibly also find themselves reacting in a way that scripts the very susceptibility of whites' gaze as ideologically and historically intertwined⁴¹ with the "racial epidermal schema," which has replaced the "historico-racial schema" positioned below the "corporeal schema." The latter is the way in which the body's agency is revealed in the historical world as a universal given of human perception, which is, at a foundational level, important for human presence and being-in-the-world with others.⁴²

In chapter 3, I will examine how Michael Jackson is positioned on the borderline of race, *not black* (other), *not white* (the self's "other"), which, in effect, transforms him into an "other 'other.'" An "other 'other'" is one who does not quite fit into the rigid boundary definitions of sameness, or, to be more precise, who may be left out of or who skirt the opposite identities: unnatural/natural, black/white, woman/man, mother/father, or gay/straight matrix and the remaking of identities along new lines. In fact, an "other 'other,'" an ambivalent self-identification or, in this case, disidentification of the subject from himself, is the consequence of a conflict between *not black* ("other"), *not white* (the self's "other"), and the "other" binary or opposite identities, creating a "third body," which unsettles the social body. Here, I will draw from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity to show the materiality of the body and how it is tied to the performativity of gender as "queer performativity" and illustrate in this chapter that the nonnormative construction of Michael Jackson's raced identity can be seen as race performativity—an identity that can be reified and realized through repetitive performance and re-articulations of daily acts.

Furthermore, can we interpret Michael Jackson's racial ambiguity as postmodern in the ways it resists assumptions about racial identity and, as some critics define it, as a Deleuzian "body without organs";⁴³ that is, a posthuman body that is contra to what is supposed to be the traditional conceptualization of the human that excluded blacks in the United States from indentured servitude to the Jim Crow south from being fully human? Or to forgo how blacks are positioned in society in such a way that constantly dehumanizes them? Let us consider for example the pernicious use of certain body parts in the constitution of the charges of alleged child molestation against the King of Pop and how

the police brazenly photographed and displayed Michael Jackson's penis as a part of the evidence. As John Nguyet Erni explains, Michael Jackson's genitals "[stand] for the 'alleged crime' scene unlike hair samples, figure prints or human tissues that can serve to a crime and the crime."⁴⁴ And while morality and ethic are transformed into a provocative forum of a familiar black racial aesthetic, this mockery of justice shows that if blacks were actually considered fully human, they would also be able to go beyond the boundary of race, and like whites they would be viewed as raceless. In this chapter, I will show that specific epistemology, ideologies, and practices are in place to systematically sanction and protect the presumptive hegemony of whiteness.

Indeed, whiteness, from the inception of the United States, determined and continues to determine who should be rights-bearing subjects capable of reason; that is, the power of the soul to have acceptable thoughts. When blackness enters the picture, as Achille Mbembe puts it, "reason finds itself ruined and emptied, turning constantly in on itself."⁴⁵ As a result, blackness has no ground to stand on and expresses itself as a psychic derangement endemic to the bodiliness of racism, that is: "a site of reality and truth—the truth of appearance."⁴⁶ The bodiliness of racism, which is supported by cultural practice, racist ideologies, institutionalized violence, and "the polymorphous techniques of power,"⁴⁷ indeed forms the black subject already under negation and provides the actual condition to de-elevate blacks. By writing that race "is that which marks the body prior to its mark,"⁴⁸ Judith Butler shows how some modes of appearance for category such as race stand out as visible social signs, "whereas whiteness, which is no less social is nevertheless part of the taken-for-granted visual field, a sign of its presumptive hegemony."⁴⁹ And because, in the final analysis, blackness is reduced to an antagonistic otherness, the problem that presents itself in its unbroken continuity is for blackness to be always seen as a threat to the social body. In other words, being black is, without a doubt, inseparable from being different—that is, to be black is to be different from being white, and thus, blacks, as racialized bodies, are "overdetermined from the outside" as a fundamental signal, notwithstanding the multiple ways blacks' lives are lived.⁵⁰

Chapter 4 examines the problematics that self-identification poses for Michael Jackson and how it provides a foil for the negative form of identity that the misrecognition and objectification of the artist takes on. Judging from Michael Jackson's lived experience, he seems unwilling to accept the harsh consequences of being black in a society that nor-

malizes whiteness. The thing that interests me, here, is his attempt to move between racial spaces. And in light of this, in this chapter, I look at the polymorphous uncertainties of Michael Jackson's self-identification process, all operating in complex and different directions, which often explained Michael Jackson away as a "freak" or as a "weirdo." In the context of a highly regulated sphere of visibility, some appearances are considered normative and self-liberating whereas Michael Jackson's "freakiness" or "weirdness"—a euphemism for his ambiguous racial appearance—is subjected to the most excessive forms of derision. Because blackness constructs a body that is already defiant of the social body and the taxonomic "order of things," Michael Jackson's racial defiance is reduced to an otherness that fixes him in the "zone of nonbeing"⁵¹ as not quite human. I will later draw on several paradigmatic examples to illustrate this point.

How, then, does Michael Jackson's "weirdness" or "freakiness" challenge identification as well as misidentification—that is, the doubling of "otherness" that informs his racial and gender self-alienation? Does his "weirdness" or "freakiness," anchored in an identity performance that blurs the boundaries between white and black, male and female, create anxiety because of its subverting potential? Furthermore, is it because Michael Jackson's "weirdness" or "freakiness" challenges identification as well as misidentification that Michael Jackson must be resisted, restricted, or worse, punished, terrorized, humiliated, and disciplined in order for society to safeguard the realm of the rigid either/or race category? To ask these questions is to approach the question I am asking: What does it mean to be black in the United States? And while this and other unmasked questions will shape the discussion in chapter 4, I also locate Michael Jackson's "weirdness" or "freakiness" within a larger framework of self-identification and demonstrate that his appearance deconstructs and challenges the corporeal notions of "natural bodies" and fixed identities. Indeed, Michael Jackson must be disciplined and "normalized." In a white world, blackness coupled with "weirdness" or "freakiness" is forever perceived, to take from Michael Jackson's album titles, as "*bad* and *dangerous*."⁵² This can be affiliated to what Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes as a wound to the black psychic, a wound to the head; a condition that is only curable when whiteness is denormalized, rehabilitated, and split open, and a new white subject can be constituted. It is only then that blackness can be reimagined in a positive light in the United States. In my concluding remarks, I try to imagine what blackness will be when whiteness is denormalized.

The aim of this book is thus to offer a different reading of Michael Jackson's lived experience and elicit a new sensibility for us to think in new ways about the analytics of a black identity and its complex histories. When all is said, one has to simply reckon that race is epidermalized⁵³ and represents a grid for understanding blackness as an identification that is marked on the body. The harrowing inscription of race on the body makes it hard for blacks to develop a solid and secure sense of "self." Consequently, the black body is in inordinate physical and psychological pain; and in order "to be" in this world, it is "put together by another self,"⁵⁴ a "possible self" through "a complex labyrinth of discursive strategies, desires and hopes, [and] fears and fortitude."⁵⁵ No doubt, the lived experience of Michael Jackson as a case-study-led theoretical methodology is illustrative of this condition.