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[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

[Home](#)

Cover Story
The Queerness of Michael Jackson
A Function of Society's Homophobia?
Inclusion
By the Rev. Irene Monroe
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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At Michael Jackson's memorial service the Rev. Al Sharpton gave a rousing speech that had the congregation at the Staple Center rise to their feet at times with shouts of Amen.

Sharpton made one particular statement in his speech to MJ's three children, addressing the reasons for Jackson's eccentricities when he said, "I want his children to know there was nothing strange about your daddy, it was strange what your daddy had to deal with, but he dealt with it anyway."

While clearly Sharpton's statement hinted to the racism Michael Jackson ensued in the music industry as an African American entertainer trying to be a crossover success, Sharpton's statement totally ignored, as much as the black community has, in their tribute to Jackson, the homophobia too, from us and the music industry.

Diagnosed with vitiligo, a skin disorder that causes de-pigmentation in patches of his skin, Jackson bleached his skin, not as a denunciation of his blackness, but rather, as he said, as a way to cosmetically have a more even skin tone.

Just as Michael was black he was also queer because he did not conform to our society's heterosexist norms. And as the man in the mirror faded from black to white so too did his staged gender performance from cute straight boy lead singer of the Jackson 5 to an effeminate male solo artist donning outfits in sequins.

And as the consummate drag performer he was not only a singer and dancer, Jackson was also a shape-shifter.

Jackson's transitioned himself first into looking like Diana Ross and then later into

looking like his baby sister Janet and then later he transitioned himself into something, well, as inhumanly ghastly as he became more ghostly looking.

Jackson's gender blending was as transgressive, tabooed, and subversive as his skin bleaching.

He wore many masks until the masks became him.

Jackson's costumes and accessories range from various signature wigs to his hyper-masculine look with his military/marching band outfits or his classic red (faux) leather look from the "Beat It" to his more softer look with his white nylon socks that were always prominently displayed beneath his black dress pants when he's doing his famous moonwalk.

Whereas Jackson couldn't be on the down low about his skin bleaching he could be and had to be on the down low about his sexuality.

With an entertainment industry that forced Rock Hudson, a movie idol, in the closet until his death, and with a black community that still has light years to go in accepting its own lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer population, Jackson concealed his desire to grow up by donning an asexual Peter Pan image.

But when rumors abound, nonetheless, that Jackson was gay so too did rumors that Jackson was a serial pedophile who beguiled young impressionable boys into his bed using the Neverland Ranch as a lure.

Although Jackson was acquitted of all charges, the strangeness Jackson had to deal with that Sharpton did not speak about at Jackson's memorial was homophobic bigotry, a bigotry that's predicated on the stereotype that one's gayness or perceived gayness is not only deviant but it is also innately criminal.

"Every time they knocked Michael down he got back up. Every time they counted him out he got back in", Sharpton said at the tribute.

The child sexual abuse charges not only knocked Jackson down but it shocked his fan base. And with the potential of his multimillion recording industry collapsing under false allegations Jackson had to go into action.

When Jackson tied the knot, first with Lisa Marie Presley, Elvis's daughter, in 1994 following the first child molestation charges in 1993, everyone knew that Jackson was in damage control mode. And his second marriage, in 1997, to Debbie Rowe, who is the mother of two of Jackson's three children, was rumored to be not consummated. You get to see how compulsory heterosexuality exacted a toll on his life.

"We will never understand what he endured ... being judged, ridiculed. How much pain cans one take? Maybe, now, Michael, they will leave you alone." Marlon Jackson stated at his brother's tribute.

And maybe Marlon is right.

Jackson was unquestionably eccentric, and his masks did not always protect him or liberated him because he always had to don them within the restricted boundaries of both race and sexual discrimination.

Perhaps Jackson's queerness was more a function of society's homophobia than it was his own?


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[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

[Home](#)

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