

The Roots and Routes of Michael Jackson's Global Identity

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Published online: 29 March 2012
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In 2011, the realm of American popular culture experienced a jolt when an American icon decided to go global. In DC Comics issue #900, Superman renounced his US citizenship. A stalwart of “the American way,” Superman decided that his mission for justice should encompass people and phenomena beyond the territorial boundaries of the U.S. after feeling morally compelled to support non-violent protesters in Iran. The repercussions of Superman's actions created complications for US foreign policy, and forced the aegis of American heroism to officially differentiate his stance from that of the US government. Yet while Superman continues to see the world as increasingly interconnected and strives to become a global citizen, DC Comics publishers Jim Lee and Dan Didio insist that Superman remains committed to his American base. After all, Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, grew up in the heart of Americana.

It is not only fictional icons who represent some facet of “all-American” identity who have become cosmopolitan subjects in our ever more connected world, but real ones as well. While few have taken the drastic step of renouncing their US citizenship, American icons such as Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey have been influenced by the global circulation of their products as well as their persons.¹ Yet, although the frequency with which people and media increasingly cross borders reveals that transnationalism constitutes a deep-rooted and striking feature of American identity (Appadurai 1996; Grewal 2005), national identity remains

a prevalent frame as a social reality and an object of analysis for its specific formations and expressions (Bernal 2004), complicated as it is by race, class, and gender.

Like Superman, Michael Jackson is an American icon who went global. His ability to fuse together West African, African American, and Anglo–European musical influences as well as choreography styles from the American inner city, Fred Astaire, and French mime Marcel Marceau lent Jackson's craft a broadly inclusive appeal. From Sweden to South Korea, footage from Jackson's world tours shows fans cheering, chanting, weeping, and fainting as he performed, despite controversies surrounding him. His geographic mobility developed his transnational perspective; at many stops on his world tours he would also visit hospitals and orphanages to which he donated money, gifts, and resources. In 1992 he established the Heal the World foundation which airlifted 46 tons of supplies to war-torn Sarajevo. According to the Guinness Book of Records, Jackson donated an estimated \$300 million to charity in his lifetime. Of his philanthropy Jackson commented, “I just couldn't see myself not being touched by the things I have seen, like that village in China, and the things I have seen in Africa and Russia and Germany and Israel” (Shmuley 2009, 138). These experiences shaped his messages in songs such as “Heal the World,” “They Don't Care About Us,” and “Earth Song” (see also Vogel 2011). Since his 2009 death, fans have commemorated Jackson by erecting statues of him in England, China, Russia and India.

However, Jackson was an American icon and it was his status in the U.S. that launched his global iconicity. Indeed, the day after Jackson died, the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington D.C. called for a moment of silence for the American pop star. Yet what are the precise contours and components of Jackson's American iconicity? And how do we understand the nuances of his racial identity

¹ The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiated a Global Development Program and Oprah Winfrey opened an academy for girls in South Africa.

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as an *African* American in relation to his iconicity (cf. Hollander 2010)? His African American identity was undoubtedly shaped by the history of slavery which he referred to in his autobiography (*Moonwalk*), and referenced in his lyrics and visual imagery.

Yet while Jackson acknowledged his ancestors' experiences of slavery in the U.S., he also emerged from the African Diaspora's forced migration, and thus was always already transnational. The transatlantic African slave trade entailed an estimated 12 to 20 million West Africans forced into slavery and shipped to South, Central, and North America (Horne 2007, 2). In *Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy argues that identity should be understood from a transnational and intercultural perspective, beyond the stricture of the nation-state (Gilroy 1993, 19). He therefore claims that it is not sufficient to analyze the geographical "roots" of black identity; scholars must also attend to identity's "routes," and the "interplay" that exists between the two (Gilroy 1993, 19). Routes, as much if not more than roots, allow us to see identity as "a process of movement and mediation" (Gilroy 1993, 19). The workings of social categories such as gender and class also shift through routes. Grasping the "politics of identity" (Appadurai 1996, 44) yields a broader anthropological understanding of the transnational flows of ideas, objects, and practices, and the fluidity of society.

I take up Gilroy's call to examine the interplay of Jackson's roots/routes and in doing so, show the ways in which his American iconicity was founded upon his multi-dimensional American identity, and fueled his global iconicity. I contend that untangling Jackson's American iconicity—specifically, what he reflected and represented of American identity—helps us understand the roots and resilience of his global iconicity. To do so, I first examine how his charismatic presence is invoked in central arenas of contemporary American life such as Presidential ceremonies, sports, and the military. These arenas are also highly masculinized spaces, and Jackson's diverse gender performances and multi-faceted persona help de-essentialize the heteronormative masculinities reinforced in such institutions. I then discuss how Jackson both critiqued and celebrated the US's complex racial histories in his work, particularly his lyrics. I conclude by tracing a trajectory of his transnational appeal—leading up to his iconicity in China—and how that was reinforced by his American identity.

Identity and Iconicity in American Life

Michael Jackson reflects and represents currents of diversity of American identity. Seen in the 1970s as emblematic of post-Civil Rights equality (Dyson 1993), he catapulted from the status of working-class child performer to multi-

millionaire music publisher. Jackson, who broke records in the American music industry with his Grammy award-winning 1982 album "Thriller," achieved unprecedented "crossover" success in American and global popular culture. The weighty notion of "crossover"—in this case the complicated movement from securing black audiences to white ones—had been a musical and business tactic of Motown. Motown was the Detroit-based record label which launched a 10 year-old Michael Jackson and his brothers to a series of number one hits as the Jackson Five. The Jackson Five's success, helmed by young Michael, was seen as helping the Jackson family achieve the "American Dream" of upward mobility based on industriousness.

Yet the lived reality of the "American Dream" bred some disquieting dynamics, particularly for Michael Jackson. After all, "the American dream was a discourse of both whiteness and racism" (Grewal 2005, 7), a discourse made apparent at various junctures, such as in 1980 when the leading music publication, *Rolling Stone*, refused to put Jackson on its cover for his album "Off the Wall". This refusal prompted Jackson to accuse the publication of racism. As bell hooks notes, white-owned media outlets "have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination" (hooks 1992, 2). The legacy of this discourse of racism also resonates in considering what Michael Eric Dyson refers to as the "seeming de-Africanization" of Jackson's cosmetic surgeries amid the oppressive Eurocentric ideals and standards of a mostly white entertainment industry (Dyson 1993, 48). Given the larger structural issues of racial discrimination that permeate all sectors of American entertainment and help drive actors and singers of Asian, Jewish, Latino, African, and other ethnic backgrounds to surgically alter their eyelids, noses, cheekbones, and various body parts (see Martin 2012), Jackson cannot be entirely faulted for following the industry logic (which rests upon a broader cultural logic) of conforming to a Eurocentric norm in order to attain commercial success in a predominantly white industry. As for the lightening of Jackson's skin that Dyson also refers to, the Los Angeles County Coroner has since confirmed in his autopsy report that Jackson suffered from vitiligo, a disorder which causes uneven losses of pigmentation. Jackson is believed to have undergone a complete depigmentation treatment which lightened his skin in a uniform manner. Members of his family and entourage have spoken publicly since his death that Jackson chose this treatment—a not uncommon one for people who suffer from vitiligo—for the aesthetic purposes of evening out "blotches," as he himself described the effects of the disorder to Oprah Winfrey in a 1993 televised interview. Importantly, while Jackson's skin treatment engendered suspicion and sensationalism from the media, he also challenged received notions about commensurability between skin color and

racial identity, using his body as a way to de-stabilize perceptions about essentialism.

The ‘King’ and the State

While Jackson’s celebrity is easy to dismiss for those “not enamored of popular culture” (Hollander 2010, 147), for decades Jackson has been a charismatic force, able to “engage passions and dominate minds” (Geertz 1983, 121) and as such, merits closer attention. As I argue, Jackson has punctuated numerous seminal events in American life, particularly as the US rode the crest of its hegemonic, “superpower” status at the end of the Cold War. In his exposition on the Weberian notion of charisma, Clifford Geertz explores the “symbolics of power” by examining how charismatic individuals situate themselves at “the animating centers of society”—dominant societal institutions and hubs of innovation—through spectacular forms that consecrate their power (Geertz 1983, 122–124). Through their involvement with politics, the arts, religion (and, I would add, media and technology), charismatic figures confirm their personal stakes in the prevailing cultural narratives by championing or challenging them (Geertz 1983, 146). Jackson did both through his music and in other public arenas throughout his life, as discussed below.

Jackson’s pivotal presence and invocation in central domains of American life—the arts, politics, sports, and the military—attest to his charismatic persona. After the phenomenal success of the albums “Thriller” and “Bad,” Jackson virtually became a cultural ambassador for the U.S. According to Gerald L. Campbell, the former Senior Advisor to the United States Information Agency for the promotion of public diplomacy, surveys taken by the Voice of America during the 1980s placed Michael Jackson as the highest ranking pop artist for listeners in the former Soviet bloc, with more than 50% approval ratings (Campbell 2009). While Jackson’s world tours were sponsored by Pepsi-Cola and not the U.S. government (as the “jazz diplomacy” tours had been during the Cold War),² Jackson’s music and life narrative were upheld at home and abroad as compelling evidence of the ascendancy of American individualism, entrepreneurialism, multiculturalism, and consumer capitalism.

One of the most visible institutions of American society at which Jackson was invoked and instantiated was the seat of American political power: the U.S. Presidency. Jackson was

² Jazz diplomacy was the term for U.S. President Eisenhower’s cultural exchange policy of sending American jazz musicians to perform for Communist and neutral audiences around the world during the Cold War from 1954 to 1968 (Davenport 2009). Facilitated by the U.S. Information Service, the purpose of jazz diplomacy was to promote U.S. democracy overseas and counter Soviet claims of America as racist and segregationist (since most of the jazz diplomats were African American or racially integrated bands).

invited to the White House multiple times to receive awards from various U.S. presidents and promote administrative causes and celebrations. The most notable accolade Jackson received was the Presidential Humanitarian Award in 1984 from President Reagan. At the White House ceremony to receive the award from President and Nancy Reagan, Jackson outshone the First Lady by appearing in a military uniform adorned with a selection of sequins and sparkle more commonly seen on women’s ball gowns at White House galas. His glitzy choice of attire that nevertheless hinted at militancy (a subtly ironic gesture towards “Black Power”?) contrasted with Reagan’s traditional, dark business suit. Jackson posed a sartorial challenge that reveals “the existence of black men whose creative agency has enabled them to subvert norms and develop ways of thinking about masculinity that challenge patriarchy” (hooks 1992, 89)—particularly white patriarchy at its geopolitical center.

Jackson was awarded by Reagan for his anti-drug and anti-drinking stance by the Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving, an initiative that, incidentally, stemmed from Reagan’s broader “War on Drugs”. Notably, the “War on Drugs” has been criticized for its racial profiling of drug offenders and is thus known by many as the “War on Blacks” (Nunn 2002), showing how Jackson, a black male, was strategically deployed by the Reagan administration as the “exception” who conformed to the socially conservative values of the administration. Thus, this event illustrates how Jackson spectacularly contested and conformed to cultural narratives about (black) masculinity at the “animating center of society”.

Under the next Republican administration of President George Bush, Sr., Jackson was awarded two more accolades. Yet in 1992, Jackson was invited to perform at Democratic President Clinton’s televised inauguration ceremony, reflecting how, despite the shift in administration from conservative Republican to populist Democrat, Jackson’s iconicity remained a spectacular component of American Presidential power. At this ceremony, Jackson delivered a heartfelt plea for the incoming Clinton administration to devote more attention and resources to finding a cure to the AIDS epidemic (which the previous socially conservative Republican administrations had not adequately funded or promoted).³ That Jackson was forced to proclaim his heterosexuality in media interviews at that time yet opted

³ Interestingly, Jackson’s national popularity peaked at a time when neoliberalism became a trenchant feature of the U.S. With its emphasis on free markets, neoliberalism entailed the de-regulation and privatization of much of the economy (Harvey 2005, 65). “Cutbacks in state welfare and infrastructural expenditures diminished the quality of life for many” (Harvey 2005, 88). Thus some gestures of social support were left to the whims and partialities of wealthy individuals. Jackson was one of the celebrities who felt compelled to offer medical-related donations for those who lacked access to the resources needed to “help themselves”.

to publicly plead with the incoming U.S. President to allocate resources to a disease that was heavily associated with homosexuality illustrates the diversity of his subject position within America, and his commitment to social issues. Jackson's affiliations with multiple U.S. Presidential administrations also make manifest the gravitas of his accomplishments for the U.S., and the ways in which the popular and the political instrumentalize the other.

Professional sports are another popular and highly profit-driven masculinized domain in American society, and Jackson played an unprecedented role in that arena as well. The National Football League championship, (or Superbowl, as it is called) is arguably the single most important sporting event in America and watched by millions, with advertisers competing for commercial spots (as of February 4, 2011, Forbes noted on its website that for the 2011 Superbowl, advertisers paid \$3 million for a 30 second spot). In 1993, for the XXVII Superbowl, Jackson performed for the entire half-time show. In another precedent, due to Jackson's iconic status, the Nielson ratings for his show were higher than those for the game itself, and his performance become the highest rated halftime show ever. The content of his performance is also noteworthy: at a sports event which celebrates displays of athleticized aggression and hyper-masculinity, Jackson staged an elaborate performance of his humanitarian anthem, "Heal the World". Singing about love and healing amid a sea of youngsters and striking poses in an all-embracing manner was a stark contrast to the sight of muscular men in protective gear tackling one another. Jackson offers an alternative masculinity in this bastion of heteromascularity with his long, flowing hair and lithe dancer's body.

The American military is also an arena in which Jackson has been invoked and instrumentalized, albeit posthumously. As reported in UPI.com on May 6, 2011, Jackson's hit "Thriller" was performed by a U.S. military band when President Obama met with the U.S. Navy SEALs to congratulate them on their raid that killed the leader of Al Qaida, Osama Bin Laden. While Jackson's song played in the background, the SEALs were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation by President Obama. News reports do not offer an explanation as to why Jackson's song was used to narrate this moment in America's "War on Terror," although "Thriller"'s lyrics do refer to furtive activity in the night amid the specter of death, a scenario eerily similar to the nighttime raid and disposal of Bin Laden. Perhaps the military band or White House officials who selected the song felt that President Obama and Jackson are two black men who have played differing yet prominent roles in maintaining American's image on the international stage. As with the hyper-masculinity of the Superbowl, Jackson's alterity is intriguing to consider here. Known for his penchant for glittery military attire which he would sometimes combine with long hair, Jackson's invocation here hints at the diverse representations of masculinity

possibly lurking within the enforced uniformity of the military.

American Roots in Jackson's Music

I turn now to an example of how Jackson's music reflected and represented American identity, and how his African American identity found expression in his music. Before Jackson's song and music video "Black or White" for the 1991 *Dangerous* album challenged the notion of bounded racial categories (see Chin 2011; Martin 2010), Jackson had already broached the topic of racial exclusions in 1982's "Thriller" album. In "The Girl is Mine," which I consider to be among his most under-appreciated and critically unexamined songs he penned, Jackson advanced a powerful racial and sexual claim softened by sugary lyrics and arrangements. "The Girl is Mine"—a duet he performed with Paul McCartney—is a subtle yet salient challenge to any lingering legacy of anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S., which were only fully ruled unconstitutional as late as 1967, a mere 15 years earlier. In the duet, Jackson and McCartney vie over a woman, both claiming ownership over her. Although Jackson's lyrics never make explicit the woman's ethnicity, what was interpreted by many listeners (especially by numerous radio stations in the U.S. which refused to play the song) is that a black man and a white man are fighting over a white woman.

In taking up that assumption, we can see how deceptively radical this song was; Jackson was sending a firm message about transcending racial limits. The chorus revolves around these two lines: "The Girl Is Mine/The Doggone Girl Is Mine". Although the song was panned by many critics as being trivial and by some fans as a token appeal to white pop audiences, Jackson is challenging received notions about racial categories and constraints, and doing so with no less an illustrious white musician than a former Beatle. The language of patriarchal ownership in the song—"The Girl is *Mine*"—is problematic, and the voiceless "girl" is a common figure upon which white men and men of color have historically staged their unequal encounters. Yet Jackson's joyous tone deflects any substantive message of sexism or misogyny as is commonly heard in other genres such as rock, punk, or hip hop.

Jackson squarely diffuses racial tensions in the song through his choice of lyrics. What brought the song ridicule yet rescued its radical message from mainstream condemnation was Jackson's cunning use of the sappy vernacular "doggone" in the lyric "The Doggone Girl Is Mine". "Doggone" is actually a euphemism for "God damn". By summoning up a curse yet easing its impact, Jackson adroitly gestures at the stakes of inter-racial dating, and how they differ between him and a white man, foregrounded as they are

against a history of anxieties and violence over inter-racial dating and miscegenation. Jackson's first lyric, in fact, carefully suggests that the girl exists solely in his dreamland: "Every night she walks right in my dreams...". By staging the (presumed) bi-racial encounter as a possible fantasy, he gently lures the listener in. In the "rap" at the end of the song, Jackson further downplays any threat of racial tensions. After McCartney declares, "Michael, we're not going to fight about this, okay?" Jackson responds, "Paul, I think I told you, I'm a lover not a fighter," positioning himself as a harmless romantic—a pacifist as opposed to a militant (black) male. Jackson's delivery in the song also tempers anxiety: his vocals are breathy and playful as he coos about "his" girl. Yet Jackson manages to convey an earnest devotion to his girl whereas McCartney's delivery comes off as relatively unconcerned, signaling his unquestioned white male privilege.

Jackson and McCartney's competition over the eponymous girl would also serve as a precursor to a financial and artistic battle not divorced from racial undercurrents or Jackson's roots. In the early 1980s, McCartney had mentioned to Jackson the wisdom of owning music copyrights and licensing songs as a profitable source of income, an avenue for an artist to seize control in a corporate media environment. A few years later, many of McCartney's hits that he wrote with fellow Beatle John Lennon would become available for ownership in what was known as the ATV catalog. In 1984 Jackson began to negotiate to buy the ATV music publishing catalog against McCartney, who was not pleased about his friend's bidding. In 1985 Jackson's bid of \$47.5 million for the ATV catalog was accepted, and he then owned the publisher's rights to McCartney's and Lennon's songs (in 1995 Jackson would merge with Sony Corp to become Sony/ATV). Since music publishers collect royalties every time songs are licensed and used, a few years later Jackson licensed several Beatles songs for advertisements. This move further alienated McCartney who felt that his music should not be used to sell commercial items such as Nike products. Yet for all the unpaid and unacknowledged black labor that went into the success of the plantation economy of the American south, and for the nearly century-long appropriation of black music by white artists (see George 1989, 8; Neal 1998, 7), Jackson—whose family roots in the U.S. were enmeshed in slavery, and who had studied black artists exploited by the white music establishment—dealt a challenge to white male privilege and ownership by owning the rights to the catalog which would grow to include Elvis' hits as well. Jackson's purchase of the catalog and subsequent commercialization of some of the Beatles songs was also the kind of aggressive business move that would be lauded by the likes of Donald Trump (a friend of Jackson's, incidentally) and other white, cutthroat American tycoons in the aggressive business world of the 1980s, as dramatized in the 1987 film "Wall Street". In fact, Jackson embodied the kind of entrepreneur that

American society continues to valorize, as evident in reality television shows such as "The Apprentice". At the same time, Jackson would increasingly become involved in humanitarian issues around the world in the 1990s, and this was reflected in the lyrics and imagery of his songs and music videos.

The Roots and Routes of a Global Icon

At the height of his popularity in the U.S., Jackson became involved in what would be the start of a commitment to philanthropy around the world. In 1985 he co-wrote "We Are the World" for United Support of Artists for Africa which sold 30 million singles with the proceeds designated for famine relief in Africa, the continent from which Jackson's ancestors originated. While dedicated to his "roots," Jackson was about to embark on his transformative "routes" via his world tours. Jackson, in fact, was mentored by another African American whose views Gilroy claims were shaped by *his* travels overseas: Quincy Jones. Gilroy notes the artistic and personal growth of the jazz performer and composer through his tours of Europe and the Middle East for America's jazz diplomacy mission during the Cold War (Gilroy 1993, 18). Incidentally, it was Jones who would eventually produce Jackson's arguably most iconic solo albums: "Off the Wall," "Thriller," and "Bad". Through visiting hospitals and orphanages in locations as diverse as Romania and the Philippines, Jackson learned firsthand of the effects of poverty and social inequality outside of the U.S. and donated money, resources, and gifts. In 1993, he performed two concerts in Sao Paulo, Brazil, to 100,000 people each. The concert promoter remembers that Jackson invited people from the poorest areas to spend a day at a local amusement park with him and told Billboard magazine on July 11, 2009, "He displayed great concern for everything in the country, with poverty" (Cobo 2009).

As Gilroy claims, black artists have been impacted by their routes—temporary or permanent relocation or exile—with the result that "these figures who begin as African-Americans...are then *changed into something else* which evades those specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity" (Gilroy 1993, 19, italics added). Transformation, therefore, is a striking element of the transnational experience—on the scale of both the personal and the collective. As a result of the accumulation of these world tours (for instance, his 1987 Bad World Tour lasted 16 months and covered 15 countries, playing to over 4 million people), Jackson addressed issues of poverty, racism, social justice, and environmental degradation on a global scale in the music and imagery of songs such as "They Don't Care About Us" and "Earth Song" in his 1995 HIStory album. In doing so, Jackson followed in the spirit of the internationalist Paul Robeson. Robeson was a

black American singer who was also an actor, intellectual, and activist, and who came to be defined by his “routes” in his travels through the Soviet Union and Wales as well as his “roots”.

The following is a striking example of how Jackson’s “roots” and “routes” intersected and how his American identity informed his global iconicity. For his 1995 song “They Don’t Care About Us,” a song about marginalized people the world over, Jackson filmed two music videos, one of them in Brazil. Brazil, according to historian Gerald Horne, was one of “the two great slave empires of the 19th century” alongside the U.S. (Horne 2007, 1); by 1850, an estimated 4.5 million enslaved Africans were shipped to Brazil (Horne 2007, 2.) A poignant reflection of Jackson’s commitment to his American and African roots via his routes, one of the locations chosen for the Brazilian music video was Pelourinho, in the city of Salvador. From the 1600s to the 1800s, Salvador was a destination for the sale of slaves from Africa, and Pelourinho (which means “pillory”) is the site where African slaves were whipped, tortured, sold, and even died (Ramos 2010, 69). Pelourinho is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Jackson also used Brazil’s famous black drumming group Olodum in his video, and their red, yellow, green and black clothing reflect their African heritage to which they pay tribute in their drumming (Ramos 2010, 69). In the video, Jackson dances in the place where African slaves were once denied their freedom, their lives; his is an artistic act of reverence and reclamation. His performance is accompanied by the members of Olodum, whose colors Jackson also wears to signify his advocacy for their stance. Jackson grew up a member of a community legally, politically, and socio-economically marginalized in the U.S. for several centuries *and* who were in exile, and the imprint of that layered history never left his artistic expression even as he undertook his individual journeys. This is apparent from the lyrics of “The Girl is Mine” to his filming at the site of one of the destination points for the African slave trade in Brazil. Thus Jackson’s complex identity bolstered not only his American iconicity but his global one as well.

Made in China

In conclusion, I want to mention my observations from when I attended the unveiling of Michael Jackson’s statue at the Sculpture Park of Guangzhou, in Guangdong province of China during a research trip. On January 1, 2011, in the capital city of the Guangdong province of China, the Guangzhou-based Michael Jackson fan club unveiled a bronze sculpture of Jackson for which they had raised 158,000 yuan (US\$23,000.). His arms outstretched, Jackson stands in an inclusive pose from his Superbowl

performance, connecting his place in American sports history to China. When I spoke with the fans, some of them told me that they did not see Jackson as purely American; rather, they saw him as a global symbol. Nevertheless, Jackson was the first American pop star whose music and dancing were allowed to be shown on TV in China in the 1980s when China was opening up, and he sold America—and continues to—in much the same way that MacDonaldis and Coca Cola have. For fans I interviewed who remember the 1980s–90s, he is synonymous with American pop culture and consumer capitalism. For the younger fans, Jackson represents the epitome of American entrepreneurship and humanitarianism; this comes at a time when China, in the process of privatizing, has heard Bill Gates and Warren Buffett speak about the need for philanthropy. These fans commented that they enjoyed watching footage of Jackson visit hospitals and orphanages on Youku (China’s version of YouTube) because they appreciated his sincerity.

Michael Jackson remains a global icon, yet his place in seminal events and institutions in American life mean that he will always be inextricably linked with America. Undeniably, his experiences there helped shape him, much as Kansas left its imprimatur on Superman, another American icon whose vision transcended the nation. In the meantime, pleased with the sculpture’s popularity, a contingent of Chinese government officials, artists, and businesspeople have sent a replica of Jackson’s sculpture to the U.S.—to Kansas, in fact—as part of a China-U.S. cultural exchange program. Thus, the U.S. will receive its first sculpture of its icon from China, an example of how iconicity—and identity—is as much about movement as it is about moorings.

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