The Cultural Lives of Things
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The Way You Make Me Feel: Understanding Our Associations to Celebrity Objects Through Michael Jackson’s Sequined Glove

Introduction:

On June 25th, 2009, Michael Joseph Jackson overdosed from Propofol (a hospital grade anesthesia) under the supervision of his doctor while in the midst of preparing for his first concert tour since 1997. While his life ended, the material life of his possessions, for our purposes his sequined glove, were reborn. However, this wasn’t the first time that the sequined glove has undergone a transformation.

Material culture studies scholars have illustrated that objects have lives beyond their owners, but there are various types of object lives. Some, as scholars like Belk have written extensively on, are rooted in the relationship between the owner and their projection of the self onto an object1. Similarly, much of material culture looks at how things were made, why they were made, and how our relationship with that type of consumption is significant. While these are important relationships, it’s not the type of life of the sequined glove we are interested here. Instead, the glove must be viewed as a numinous object. As Maines and Glynn write:

“numinous objects are examples of material culture that have acquired sufficient perceived significance by association or merit preservation in the public trust. They are the objects we collect and preserve not for what they may reveal to us as material documents or for any visible

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1 Belk, "Possessions and the Extended," 15, no. 2:139-140.
aesthetic quality, but for their association real or imagined with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic.” (Maines and Glynn, 1993)².

Numinous objects carry with them an essence or quality that enables them to conjure up feelings of significance due to their association with something perceived or actual (Maines and Glynn, 1993)³. In this case the association with the glove is clearly Michael Jackson. If Jackson were perhaps more traditional in his fame and the analysis would be more straightforward. Tony Bennett, for example, is another very famous vocal talent, but it is difficult to find a numinous object for Bennett with the range of associations Jackson has. This is due in part to the bizarre nature and path of Jackson’s career.

The glove debuted at the celebration for Motown’s 25th anniversary (the record label where Jackson and his brothers got their start). Jackson was there to celebrate his accomplishments as a member of the Jackson 5, but refused to perform unless also able to debut his new single “Billie Jean.” It was during that performance that Jackson debuted three of his most iconic performance motifs: his fedora, his moonwalk, and his sequined glove.

![Figure 1: Sequence Glove Debuts at Motown 25](image)

² Maines and Glynn, "Numinous Objects," 15, No. 1:8-10.
³ Ibid.
This is what I’ll call the first of the gloves associations. Jackson rode a peak of fame from that 1983 performance for 10 years until his first molestation accusation, when the association began to transform from one grounded in awe and adoration to one linked to bizarre behavior. This transformation nicely coincides with Jackson’s extreme appearance changes. The 2004 criminal trial into Jackson’s behavior effectively stripped the glove of whatever glory remained. Jackson retreated from fame, leaving the glove to be associated with a fall from grace as more people experienced the glove as an impersonator’s shtick rather than an extension of the King of Pop. It wasn’t until his announced comeback, tragic death, and posthumous canonization in music history that reincarnated the glove in its current associations.

Numinous objects are intriguing precisely because of their somewhat ambiguous definition as being significant due their associations and collective importance to the public trust. This can lead to an analysis of why an object may be culturally significant. The aim for the rest of this paper is not to evaluate why Michael Jackson’s sequined glove should be considered significant, but instead to try to better understand how associations can change and transform through time. The glove is a tool to help break down the complex relationships society has with objects, specifically numinous celebrity objects.

**Wanna’ Be Starting Something: The Glove of a King, 1983-1993:**

It’s extremely difficult to understand the magnitude of Michael Jackson’s fame during its peak. The combination of childhood stardom, electric dance moves, and unmatched vocal talent propelled him to one of the most famous people on the planet. Prior to the debut of the sequined glove in 1983, Jackson had released *Thriller*, which at its peak was selling one million units per week, and is to this day the best-selling record of all time. This is all to put into perspective why society would’ve been paying attention to what Jackson would be wearing. While the peak of his musical fame didn’t necessarily coincide with the peak of his fame for bizarre behavior, at this point in time he was already known for being eccentric and different, so there was always a spotlight on what he was doing.
Part of the difficulty in studying Jackson’s belongings and associations is that so much of his life is a mystery. Jackson was an intensely private and shy person, so most of what is known about him stems from secondhand sources that can at times contradict each other. For this reason, it’s important to consider various viewpoints regarding certain aspects of his life. Unfortunately, that leaves us with a somewhat incomplete history of the sequined glove.

There are two predominant stories relating to the creation of the sequined glove. After his death, a close friend of Jackson’s in the 80’s stated that the glove’s creation was practical: Jackson suffered from vitiligo (the lessening of pigment in the skin) that left him with patchy skin. It is common for this condition to start on the hands, which Jackson used the glove to cover. Jackson’s vitiligo was confirmed by his longtime dermatologist, as well as in his autopsy report. Another account from John Kehe, a music executive that worked with Jackson and his brothers in 1980, stated that he was giving Jackson a tour of a production facility when Jackson saw an editor wearing white cotton gloves to handle the film. Jackson saw something in the glove, was taken by it, and asked if the producer could spare one, and shortly after it made its television debut (Kehe, John).

It’s possible that the glove came out of a combination of the above stories. The fascinating aspect to a material culture studies scholar lies more in what came of the glove than how it came to be. The main thing to take away is that Jackson, rather due to utility or chance, took a single white glove and morphed it into something iconic—he gave it its life.

This is the only association that ventures into fashion, and specifically celebrity fashion culture. As Pamela Church Gibson notes in *Fashion and Celebrity Culture* while considering Lady Gaga and Madonna’s association with expressive clothing, earlier in popular music history there were far less

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4 Gross, "Actress: Michael," CNN.
6 Ibid.
subgenres and fan bases, enabling the entire country to be familiar with leaders of the industry. As music has diversified, it’s become more difficult to become an ubiquitous household name, but there are few who are able to do so, including Gaga, Madonna, and Jackson. Similarly to Gaga today, it would’ve been virtually impossible for someone in the 1980s who watched T.V. or read the news to not be aware of the appearance and prominence of Jackson.

Like Gaga and Madonna, Jackson was straddled between two worlds: being atop the world of mainstream popular music and trying to remain authentic to their expressive, often less mainstream personas. As icons, they need to be authentically different, but to remain icons they needed to be supported by mainstream audiences. The solution was to leverage their celebrity to create a new mainstream, whether consciously or not. It was certainly atypical for Jackson to decide to wear a single, white sequined glove on his hand while performing, but through the power of his cultural relevance it became normal within his own system of objects. In other words, the association society had with Jackson’s glove wasn’t that it was weird or out of place, but that it was exactly what Jackson should wear. In the same vein, instead of wondering why Lady Gaga would wear a meat dress to an awards ceremony, society collectively and unconsciously accepted that is the only type of dress Lady Gaga should wear on a red carpet. Essentially, at that level of fame, your decisions become you.

Michael Jackson’s glove wasn’t Michael Jackson’s glove until people saw him wearing it, and from that moment on it took on its role as an extension of him not for himself, but for the rest of the world.

Patricia Church Gibson focuses much of her sections on music and fashion to the relationship between music icon and brands. She discusses the symbiotic relationship between the two, noting the Beatles haircut from German designer Astrid Kirchner in the 1960s, but she doesn’t devote as much

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8 Ibid.
time to those who influenced designers, like Jackson did\(^9\). The nuanced difference to me between most of what Gibson analyzes compared with Jackson is that she focuses on how designers used to artists to change fashion tastes in their followers.

I am not sure that, beyond the Thriller jacket, the average person wanted to dress as Jackson, instead it was an appreciation and understanding of what only Jackson could dress like. It was cool and hip in part because only Jackson could actually pull it off. In a review in the *New York Times* for Motown 25, John O’Connor wrote that “He is clearly the heir apparent to the dazzling androgyny mantle once monopolized by Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones,”\(^10\). It is in his choice of the words “heir apparent, “dazzling,” and “monopolized,” that it becomes obvious Jackson wasn’t meant to be modeling for the average person, but instead his choices reinforced that it was his specialness that is what made what he chose to wear special, not the other way around. When looking back at Jackson’s influence on fashion, Booth Moore of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that “Wearing one glove, Michael Jackson reached into the pop culture zeitgeist and influenced an entire generation…That rhinestone-studded glove became his signature statement,”\(^11\).

Jackson’s relationship with designers was not like many of the celebrities Gibson writes on. Instead of using big name designers, most of Jackson’s clothing was designed by Michael Bush and Dennis Tompkins, a smaller LA-based duo consistently given the same direction from Jackson: “This is what the world's wearing -- top it,”\(^12\) (Moore). Jackson wasn’t dressing for the average person, the association with his glove at the height of his fame and influence wasn’t rooted in being like Jackson, but instead was grounded in the sheer power of his fame. People were interested in the glove because it

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\(^9\) ibid.  
\(^12\) Ibid.
represented his talent, his persona, and the music that was currently breaking records no one thought could be broken.

One of the most famous instances of Jackson wearing his glove occurred while visiting President Reagan at the White House to accept an award.

![Figure 2: Jackson and President Reagan and the First Lady, 1984](image)

Only Michael Jackson could wear an outfit like that to meet with a president. He was a fashion icon, but to himself. Jackson’s fashion influence was more like that of a regal king than a musical one, the glove could be thought of not unlike a crown, you have to have the right to wear it. While it’s purely speculation, it seems more likely that those at the time would be more inclined to mimic the President’s attire than Jackson’s, despite Jackson being the one who they’ve influenced.

Maines and Glynn’s paper on numinous objects states that they “tell stories; the stories they tell are the stuff of social and intellectual history—the interaction of emotions, ideas, and beliefs,”\(^\text{13}\). Jackson’s fame and success during the 1980s tells only the beginning of the sequined glove’s story. There was little association with anything other than incredible talent and entertainment. It performed

\(^{13}\) Maines and Glynn, "Numinous Objects," 15, No. 1:10.
the role of crown or scepter, allowing for society to make the connection between sequined glove and the King of Pop.

**Man in The Mirror: Dealing with Change In Perception, 1993-2009:**

If a numinous object is culturally significant and historically important due to its association, how does that object’s meaning change when that association dissolves and is replaced by a different one? This idea of shifting associations is intriguing because the object itself is finite. Jackson isn’t changing the glove, the perception of Jackson is being altered, and as a result the glove takes on a new meaning.

Jackson had always been the eccentric, which in a way is part of what the one glove represented. Gloves are typically worn in pairs, but the singularity is what adds to the spectacle. In the 1990s, however, Jackson’s behavior began to take center stage over his music and performance.

Whether it was his changing appearance, childlike demeanor, or simply outlandish rumors, the King of Pop was no longer being treated like royalty, instead being mocked as “Wacko Jacko.” As the media and greater society began to view Jackson as odd, out of place, and different, the glove lost its previous meaning. It became emblematic of his strange behavior: “why would someone wear only one glove? That’s not normal.”

*Figures 3 and 4 are 1990s tabloid covers depicting Jackson*
It’s difficult to consider a reality where negative tabloid coverage alone transformed the glove’s association from one of such awe and respect to one of mockery. That is because in 1993 Jackson would be publicly accused of child molestation. It is not the aim of this essay to lay out the case against or for Jackson because his guilt plays little role in the story of the sequined glove’s life. The moment those allegations were announced they slid right into the melting pot of Jackson’s bizarre behavior, which is where the glove now found itself as well.

Susan Pearce discusses the social lives of objects, which she describes as “intentional inscriptions on the physical world which embody social meaning.”\textsuperscript{14} In other words, there is something that stems from the physical world that we attach and associate ideas/perceptions onto. While she considers the life of a highlander sword, our physical object is Jackson’s glove and the social meaning is what we’ve attached to it through history. In her case study, she begins with what the sword was actually used for and the facts associated with it, and she notes that society chooses from a range of possibilities to place the sword into a social system of objects, but this choice is not finite and can be altered with time\textsuperscript{15}. The swords associations shift as it society shapes it from its original life as an

\textsuperscript{14} Pearce, \textit{Museums, Objects}, 21.
\textsuperscript{15} Pearce, \textit{Museums, Objects}, 26.
instrument of battle to a sign and symbol of the highlanders, Scottish culture, and world history due to the new system of objects it is placed in.

This is not unlike the glove, which while attached to Jackson on stage in the 1980s was a part of the admiration, but separated from the stage in the 1990s it is a part of the abnormal. It is becoming less and less a possession of Jackson’s and more a representation of him. The glove isn’t a direct part of the rumors, but somehow gets wrapped up in them because if it’s happening to Jackson, it happens to the glove that signifies him.

Jackson ultimately reached an out of court settlement with his accuser in 1994, but the damage had been done to both his career and reputation. A 1995 NY Post cover featured above illustrates just how closely Jackson’s behavior was connected to his glove, as the subtitle reads “Gloved One makes big comeback tonight.” A new numen had been founded, and despite being found not guilty, his second accusation of impropriety in 2003 cemented it. The hand once adorned with the glittering glove representing talent now was perceived as enshrouding the evil instrument of a pedophile.
Remember the Time: The Glove as Grief and Glory, 2009-present:

Jackson’s death breathed new life into the sequined glove. As it had lied dormant for nearly a decade, the glove’s associations had seemingly stopped transforming. It became a Halloween costume, a late night joke, and in a way a reminder of Jackson’s fall from grace. After his death however, the glove found new meaning as a grief object; a beacon of Jackson’s fans love and hope.

Brooks Barnes wrote in The New York Times obituary: “Mr. Jackson ushered in the age of pop as a global product — not to mention an age of spectacle and pop culture celebrity. He became more character than singer: his sequined glove, his whitened face, his moonwalk dance move became embedded in the cultural firmament.”

“Embedded in the cultural firmament” is no small statement. However, that is exactly where the glove lives. It embodied everything he represented, but unlike the artist himself, is able to experience the changing societal tides through time. The glove had completely transformed from a relic of a fallen idol to a communal mourning object.

Erika Doss notes that temporary memorials begin loosely defined and without significance, but as they are documented, visited, and brought to light they enter into a new system of objects. As one of the most televised days of mourning in recent history, Jackson’s fans, many clad in gloves, created one of its new association. Barnes continued in the obituary, “Impromptu vigils broke out around the world, from Portland, Ore., where fans organized a one-gloved bike ride (“glittery costumes strongly encouraged”) to Hong Kong, where fans gathered with candles and sang his songs.”

Doss writes that some believe public displays of death and memorial are actively outside of the mainstream, and that they can serve as a form of social agency and challenge allowing people to create

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17 Ibid.
their own history\textsuperscript{18}. It’s interesting to consider how this may factor into Jackson’s glove and reputation. While purely speculative, it seems possible that part of the response to Jackson’s death was also a response to his previous alienation in the press. Fans used symbols like his glove to honor him, mourn him, and remind society of the respect they believed he had robbed from him in life.

Doss also argues that grief objects, as the glove has now become, evoke memories and act as tools to remember the deceased, which she believes suggests a “duty of memory to acknowledge loss.”\textsuperscript{19} For Jackson fans, the previous decade was not something to remember, but the glory of the 1980s certainly was. This type of association is far more psychological, compared to the more historical and cultural associations previously addressed in this essay. His own family used the glove to remember their brother, as all pallbearers at his funeral wore one sequined glove (pictured below):

As I’ve highlighted throughout, the associations with Michael Jackson are not only influenced by his own actions or those of his fans, but media coverage. Unsurprisingly, the media also elevated Jackson (and his glove) as something to be honored. Whether it was simply due to his death or attributed to its criminal circumstances, Jackson was given back the kingdom of pop.

\textsuperscript{18} Doss, \textit{Memorial Mania}, 68.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Media coverage helped to turn his death into a tragedy, not unlike John Lennon and Elvis Presley before him. It is not accidental that the *Daily News* and *Ok!* chose photos of him wearing his glove, and it speaks volumes to its visual representation of Jackson’s glory. The glove’s final association is one with grief, redemption, and due to this redemption, it also is brought back full circle to fashion symbol.

**Conclusion:**

Michael Jackson’s sequined glove, as a numinous object, has gone through many different associations related to its cultural significance. Numinous objects as a whole are a fascinating topic due to the various ways this significance can be transferred from the collective consciousness onto them. In the case of the sequined glove, this intrigue is multiplied due to the sheer magnitude of its source material: Jackson’s reputation. It is crucial to material culture studies to try and identify these case studies that allow us to better understand how society and material objects are interwoven. It’s my intention that through understanding how the perceptions of Jackson throughout time affect the glove’s own significance will allow for greater analysis of how we relate to and consider celebrity related numinous objects.
Bibliography


