

FPO



BY
VANESSA
WILLOUGHBY

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
KGABO
'SAINT ROSE'
MAMETJA

ST R POINT P P I N G

NIPPLEGATE
EXPOSED OUR
DEEP FEAR
OF BLACK
WOMEN'S
SEXUALITY

IN 2004, Janet Jackson was experiencing a career zenith: *All for You* (2001), her seventh studio album, peaked at no. 1 on *Billboard*'s Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart and was certified double platinum. The title track spent seven weeks at the top of the *Billboard* Hot 100, marking her second-longest reign on the chart. The album won a Grammy in 2001, and in 2004, Jackson was invited to perform at the Super Bowl halftime show alongside Justin Timberlake, P. Diddy, Nelly, Kid Rock, and Jessica Simpson. Timberlake had released his first solo album, *Justified*, in 2002, but he was still attempting to retool his image as a crossover pop star with R&B appeal. Jackson and Timberlake planned to end the halftime show with a duet of his song "Rock Your Body." The final line, "Bet I'll have you naked by the end of this song," was Timberlake's cue to tear off a part of Jackson's costume, revealing her red bra underneath. But when Timberlake exposed Jackson's nipple, which was partially concealed by a star-shaped cover, to more than 100 million viewers, they both appeared shocked; Jackson's breast was hardly onscreen before CBS broadcasters cut away. However, she was punished for 9/16 of one second of nudity, while Timberlake rose from her post-Super Bowl ashes.

"Nipplegate," as it was promptly dubbed by the media, not only impacted live broadcasting but also exemplified how Black women are often punished for other people's mistakes. A 2014 article in *Rolling Stone* noted that more than 200,000 viewers contacted the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the days after the performance to complain about Jackson's exposed breast. MTV, which produced the event, was banned from working on future halftime shows. Broadcast networks implemented lengthier tape delays for live events. In 2006, Congress passed legislation increasing the highest indecency fine the FCC can impose on broadcasters from \$32,500 to \$325,000 per incident. The FCC fined Viacom a total of \$550,000, a penalty that was dismissed in 2011 after five years of back-and-forth court battles. Jackson's wardrobe malfunction, which "offended" about one-third of Americans, according to a 2005 *Time* poll, became a metaphor for the country's moral decline.

In his 2006 book, *The Decency Wars: The Campaign to Cleanse American Culture*, Frederick S. Lane wrote that religious conservatives cited the show as evidence America was "spiraling out of control." The performance, which took place during an election year, was used by George W. Bush and the

GOP as ammo in a "culture war" that included attacks on same-sex marriage, comprehensive sex education, and abortion access. Racism and puritanical rules about female nudity magnified Jackson's scarlet letter. "For Jackson, [Nipplegate] was looked at as the capital offense that her career could never be able to come back from," Shayla Lawson, author of the 2020 book *This Is Major: Notes on Diana Ross, Dark Girls, and Being Dope*, tells *Bitch*. For Timberlake, the controversy was key to shedding his boy-band identity for good. He reportedly laughed off the incident, telling *Access Hollywood*, "Hey man, we love giving you all something to talk about." A few days later, he appeared to have adopted a different tone: "I don't feel like I need publicity like this. And I wouldn't want to be involved with a stunt, especially of this magnitude," he said during an interview with Los Angeles radio station KCBS.

Ultimately, Timberlake's reputation escaped any debilitating damage: *Justified* won two Grammys in 2004, including one for Best Pop Vocal Album. He was "infantilized," Treva Lindsey, PhD, author and associate professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the Ohio State University, says. "Timberlake was clearly an adult at the time, and yet it's like a 'boys will be boys' kind of figuration or response to him." The mistreatment of Jackson, Lindsey added, reflects how "white men have the access to...touch Black women's bodies, expose Black women's bodies, but the fault lies with the Black woman's body for being exposed."

America's Legacy of Sexual Panic

Nipplegate was a mass-mediated confirmation of America's contentious relationship with Black women's sexuality. Tamara Winfrey-Harris, author of the 2015 book, *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America*, described the response to Jackson's exposed nipple as "our typical American sort of sexual panic." "What Janet Jackson said was a mistake became, in society's mind, this moral failure, that a Black woman was blamed for and that a white man got to skate by on," Winfrey-Harris, who has contributed to *Bitch*, says. "There was no room for anyone to believe that a Black woman may have been a victim



in this because, again, of our legacy of not believing and not trusting Black women and their sexuality." The history of the objectification of Black women is rooted in the physical and sexual exploitation of Sarah Baartman, whose body was displayed in 19th-century European "freak shows." Even after her death, Baartman was unable to escape the white gaze: Her brain, genitals, and skeleton were featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Man in Paris until 1974. This dehumanizing history repeats itself throughout pop culture, holding Black pop stars to racist expectations. White pop stars, on the other hand, garner critical acclaim and cultural clout for expressing their sexuality. Sex-positive "trailblazer" Madonna made a lucrative career out of pushing boundaries: She released racy music videos, such as "Erotica" and "Human Nature," that evoked kink and fetish culture and wrote the 1992 book *Sex*, complete with provocative Steven Meisel photographs. In 2008, Madonna was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Timberlake, who appeared on Madonna's 2008 album, *Hard Candy*, introduced her at the ceremony. In contrast, Jackson, though eligible for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, wasn't nominated until 2016. After receiving three nominations, she was finally inducted in 2019.

Jackson's artistic approach to sexuality is judged harshly because of the United States's foundation on white patriarchal values that dictate how nudity is categorized. A 2004 CBS News article published the day after the Super Bowl wondered whether the incident had been a poorly planned "publicity stunt" and cast Jackson in the role of an exhibitionist who "used her sexuality to grab an audience." Jackson had previously dismantled her "good girl" image with 1993's *janet.*, an album Jackson and critics alike saw as an ode to the power of female sexuality and pleasure. She posed topless on the September 1993 cover of *Rolling Stone*, her jeans unbuttoned, her breasts covered by the hands of then-husband René Elizondo. For Jackson, the album wasn't about sex as hedonism but sex as liberation, an integral part of the creative process. Yet Black women who refuse to hide their sexuality aren't afforded the freedom to rewrite the narrative. More recently, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's 2020 song "WAP" caused a meltdown among conservatives, including pundit Ben Shapiro. On the flip side, white pop stars such as Miley Cyrus publicly commodify Black women's sexuality for their own purposes, only to weaponize it when it

no longer benefits them. Cyrus collaborated with hip hop artists and producers for her 2013 album, *Bangerz*—even twerking during that year's MTV Video Music Awards—and then disparaged the hip hop "scene" in a 2017 interview with *Billboard*. Cyrus later apologized for her comments, but she's not the first white pop star to associate Blackness with immorality.

From Anita Hill to R. Kelly's underage victims, a society that subscribes to white supremacy does not see or believe in the vulnerability of Black girls and women. Jackson was forced to make a public apology even even though Timberlake was responsible for the faux-pas. The public's eagerness to assign Jackson the role of a hypersexual manipulator echoes the racist stereotype of the Jezebel. In "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," a chapter from her 1990 book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, author Patricia Hill Collins wrote, "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression." The Jezebel's overt, unapologetic display of sexuality and lack of shame is her sin. The institution of slavery propelled the myth of Black women as sexual deviants in order to justify the system's atrocities. In her 2011 book, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry, PhD, wrote, "The idea that Black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men." This stance of

moral superiority practiced by the white establishment thrives on the punishment of Black women. A 2017 study from Georgetown Law’s Center on Poverty and Inequality found that “adults believe Black girls ages 5–19 need less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than white girls of the same age.” The authors, who surveyed 325 adults across the United States, also found that respondents believed Black girls “know more about sex than white girls.” This unconscious bias follows Black girls well into their adulthood; it assumes not only that Black women are the perpetrators but also that they deserve to be physically, mentally, and emotionally abused.

That might explain why CBS and MTV required Jackson to issue a video apology in addition to her written statement. But her apologies were deemed an insufficient form of penance. In 2018, *HuffPost* reported that Les Moonves, the former chairman and CEO of CBS, harbored a personal vendetta against Jackson because he thought her apologies weren’t sincere enough. (Moonves was forced to step down as chief executive of the CBS Corporation in 2018 after multiple sexual harassment allegations against him were made public.) Jackson was allegedly “blacklisted” by CBS and Viacom, her music blocked from MTV, VH1, and the conglomerate’s radio properties. According to *People*, CBS rescinded its offer to have the singer present at the 2004 Grammy Awards. Sales for her eighth studio album, *Damita Jo*, released a month after the Super Bowl, suffered. “There was something deeply anti-Black and deeply misogynistic about the response to what occurred,” the Ohio State professor Lindsey says. “When we look back at the moment, considering how much more explicit television is in 2020 than it was then, it was a very knee-jerk reaction to the problem of Black women’s bodies that the nation has always had.”

Winfrey-Harris said the moment showed that “historically, the room for Black people, and Black women specifically, to make missteps is very narrow.” When you’re a Black woman in the public eye, chances for a redemption arc are rare. R&B singer and songwriter Chrisette Michele chose to sing at one of Donald Trump’s inaugural balls in 2017 because she wanted to “be a bridge” in a time of political divide. The decision ruined her career. Some members of her extended family stopped speaking to her, and industry peers, including one-time collaborator Questlove, offered to pay her not to perform. Spike Lee tweeted that he wouldn’t use her music for his Netflix show

She’s Gotta Have It. Michele lost an album-distribution deal, and the *Washington Post* reported that she was “diagnosed with bipolar disorder and endured a miscarriage that she publicly attributed to stress from death threats and a hydrant of criticism.” Michele apologized to “the people she hurt” on *The Breakfast Club*, but her career has never fully rebounded.

The Cost of Patriarchal Hysteria

Timberlake wasn’t the only person to capitalize on Jackson’s humiliation: Jawed Karim, for instance, searched the internet for clips of the performance because he hadn’t watched the live broadcast. Frustrated that his efforts didn’t uncover any footage, Karim, along with friends Steve Chen and Chad Hurley, started working on the coding for a platform to which users could upload their own content. Their idea was a near-instant success: In 2006, Google purchased that platform, YouTube, for more than \$1.5 billion. Much like Facebook, YouTube’s origin story is about male entitlement to women’s bodies and the belief that cultural visibility like Jackson’s is a license to objectify her.

It would be inaccurate to say the Super Bowl tanked Jackson’s career. May 2019 marked the beginning of Jackson’s “Metamorphosis” residency at Las Vegas’s Park MGM hotel, which grossed \$13 million. However, Timberlake never experienced the same level of backlash. His apology came, conveniently, after he’d racked up millions of album sales, headlined tours, and won multiple Grammys. “If you consider [the incident] 50–50, then I probably got 10 percent of the blame,” he admitted to MTV’s John Norris in 2006. He added, “I think America is harsher on women. I think America is unfairly harsh on ethnic people.... If there was something that I could have done in her defense...I would have.” This apology still depicted Timberlake as an incidental onlooker, further underscoring how anti-Blackness and misogyny factored into Jackson’s disproportionate penalties. In 2014, former FCC Chairman Michael Powell revised history, telling *ESPN* magazine, “I personally thought that was really unfair. It all turned into being about her.” He added, “In reality, if you slow the thing down, it’s Justin [Timberlake] ripping off her breastplate.”

“Nipplegate,”
as it was
promptly
dubbed by
the media,
not only
impacted live
broadcasting
but also
exemplified
how Black
women
are often
punished
for other
people’s
mistakes.



Like Timberlake’s delayed remorse, Powell’s recantation is selective amnesia at best and an act of denial at worst. And while both men have publicly voiced their thoughts on Jackson’s treatment, Super Bowl fans have shown they still care about protecting “family values” from women of color.

When Jennifer Lopez and Shakira headlined 2020’s halftime show, the FCC received more than 1,300 complaints from viewers who deemed the performance offensive and inappropriate. Some parents complained that their children had watched a “porno show,” referencing the costumes, the dancing, and the pole Lopez slid down at the beginning of her set. Yet despite the handful of loud voices, the halftime show was generally well received: It even won an Emmy. On the flip side, Jackson’s few seconds of barely there nudity was irredeemable. “I’m disappointed that that moment will forever be tied to her in such a negative way and has [had] these long-reaching effects that it simply did not have for all of the other players in it,” Lindsey says. “The only one truly scathed in that moment was Jackson.” When I ask Lawson if she thinks the fallout permanently changed Jackson’s career, she said “I don’t think that Jackson actually ever psychologically came back from that.... It was almost like proving that the people that had told her very early in her life that she couldn’t be out here in public and living a normal womanhood...were right.” The response to the singer’s performance, 17 years later, is still relevant because it confirms our culture’s deeply rooted fear about Black women’s sexuality being on display.

Vanessa Willoughby is a writer and editor whose bylines include but are not limited to Allure, BookPage, the Toast, and Bitch. Willoughby first appeared in our Spring 2015 Law & Order issue.