

Miley and MLK

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We live small lives.

Perhaps this is one explanation for both the sad spectacle offered by Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke at Sunday night's Video Music Awards and our culture's round-the-clock obsession with it since.

Americans are famously preoccupied with sex and with the sexual antics of the famous. This might seem like another reason for our fascination on Sunday night, but it is simply a corollary of the proposition: We live small lives.

Fifty years ago yesterday the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his now famous ["I Have a Dream" speech](#). In many ways, our collective (and selective) memory has softened the sharp edge of [King's radical vision](#) of a just America.

Four days ago a 20-year-old pop star—starved for attention? desperate to shed an image? (mis)managed by corrupt media moguls?—gave a painful-to-watch lesson in how white, privileged female celebrities, ignorant of history and easily exploited by "the industry," appropriate minority cultures with disastrous consequences.

Cyrus may have intended homage (she solicited material for the performance—apparently without irony or a twinge of guilt—by requesting "something that feels black"). What she offered instead was an example of ["the privileged having unchecked access to the cultural trinkets of marginalized people."](#)

And while she probably thought she was giving artistic expression to female empowerment, she was, in fact, working the tired tropes that objectify and make available for public consumption women's bodies. (Or, rather, a highly stylized, commodified version of the female form.) And the sexism here: for all the moral outrage directed at Cyrus, there's been little said about Robin Thicke's role (and his abominable hit song) in both the minstrel show and the misogyny.

And while the issues raised by this whole sad story are not unimportant, it's been interesting to ponder this week why it is that all my students knew about the VMA performance on Sunday but none of them knew that the Supreme Court nullified a key provision in the [Voting Rights Act](#) this summer.

Dr. King dreamed big. But we live small lives.

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