

**I Know I Am Someone:
Michael Jackson, *Thriller*, and American Identity**

by Sara Tenenbaum

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James A. Miller
Professor of English and American Studies

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Abstract of Thesis

"I Know I Am Someone: Michael Jackson, *Thriller*, and American Identity"

This thesis addresses the cultural phenomenon surrounding Michael Jackson's 1982 album *Thriller* and uses it as a lens through which to view and analyze the development of a distinct American, primarily youth, identity in 1983 and 1984. It is structured using a three-prong approach that first analyzes the sonic work of the music of *Thriller*, second explores the characteristics of Michaelmania and the youth identity being constructed within the Michael Jackson pop explosion, and third analyzes the backlash from both the white and African American communities against Jackson in that time to illuminate his subversion and danger to the status quo. I argue that Jackson's act of profound crossover during the *Thriller* era triggered within the American youth an equally profound act of identity formation that transcended racial stratification in America's past and created a foundational part of our contemporary identity that moves slightly beyond America's troubled racial history. Using both the voices of his fans and his critics to tease out the work his person and his music did in the early 1980's, I advocate we keep Jackson and his work foregrounded in our study of popular culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as his pop explosion fundamentally and permanently effected how Americans understand ourselves and our relations with each other.

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You Got To Be Startin' Something

On February 27, 1980, Michael Jackson sat at home watching the Grammy Awards on television. He watched the flickering screen as a parade of white artists and white presenters gave awards and praise to each other, only registering mild pleasure when "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" won for Best R&B Vocal Performance – Male. He recalled in his 1987 autobiography, "Although *Off The Wall* had been one of the most popular records of the year, it received only one nomination... I remember where I was when I got the news. I felt ignored by my peers and it hurt. People told me later that it surprised the industry too."¹ As he watched himself win that night, anger and hurt coalesced into determination. "I said to myself, 'Wait until next time' – they won't be able to ignore the next album," he recalled. There's no doubt the perceived brush-off by his industry peers lit a fire under him, but we can also only imagine the frustration he felt after his most ambitious and exciting work to date was once again shoved into the stifling box of "black music" and left there to gather cobwebs. For, even with the spectacular string of number one hits that had introduced Michael Jackson to the American public as a child musical prodigy, and the decade of success and artistic growth that followed, he was still powerless to stop himself from being dismissed and relegated to the subgenre of "black music," cast out of the mainstream and back to the margins because of the color of his skin. Sitting in his house that night, Jackson decided once and for all that it was time to break through to the American mainstream in a way that could never be denied him. He would do it for himself, and for the other artists he admired and watched run into the insurmountable wall of race over and over again. It was time for the walls to crumble; he would be the one to break them down.

He did with *Thriller*. That it should be the breakthrough at all is astonishing. It's as lean and lithe an album as the young man who made it. *Thriller* is nine songs long and clocks in at just over 42 minutes. Of those nine songs, seven were released as singles. Of those seven singles, three were given videos. All seven singles reached the top ten. Two of them – "Billie Jean" and "Beat It" – reached number one and made themselves comfortable there. All three of the music videos are considered to be pioneering examples of the genre. By the summer of 1984, the album had sold over 30 million copies worldwide.

As scholars we try to resist grand, sweeping narratives because they elide the nuances of the complicated processes through which culture changes. That's often to our advantage, but

¹ Jackson, Michael. *Moonwalk*. New York (Doubleday, 1988): 175-176.

sometimes we're so focused on making sure we're paying attention to the details that we are blind to the bigger picture. The record-breaking numbers associated with *Thriller* are sometimes dismissed as quantifying influence; assuming that just because a lot of people bought it or listened to it, its cultural impact is being magnified disproportionately. In this thesis I argue the opposite, almost to the extreme: that *Thriller* and Michael Jackson in 1983 mark the third and most recent pop explosion experienced in America and, as such, a singular and rare moment of identity creation and reformation. The pop explosion, as coined and defined by Greil Marcus talking about the Beatles, is

"...an irresistible cultural upheaval that cuts across lines of class and race (in terms of sources if not allegiance), and, most crucially, divides society itself by age. The surface of daily life (walk, talk, dress, symbolism, heroes, family affairs) is affected by such force that deep and substantive changes in the way large numbers of people think and act take place. Pop explosions must link up with, and accelerate, broad shifts in sexual behavior, economic aspirations, and political beliefs... Enormous energy – the energy of frustration, desire, repression, adolescence, sex, ambition – finds an object in a pop explosion, and that energy is focused on, organized by, and released by a single, holistic cultural entity. This entity must itself be capable of easy, instantaneous and varied imitation and extension, in a thousand ways at once; it must embody, suggest, affirm and legitimize new possibilities on all fronts even as it outstrips them. This is a fancy way of saying that the capacity for fad must be profound."²

My intention is to use Marcus' framework of the pop explosion to explore the effects of Michael and *Thriller* in 1983, configuring it not as a total break with the past but as a powerful eruption of African American culture into the American mainstream. Though he does not utilize the tropes of Black Nationalism or civil rights explicitly in his lyrics, Jackson in both sound and image conjures black history and culture while simultaneously transforming them into a product so compelling that the white mainstream was helpless to resist it.

At the time of *Thriller's* release the popular media was engaged in a debate about the future of the music industry. Sales declined steadily after the disco explosion in the late 1970's, radio had become noticeably more segregated than twenty years before, and in all the chaos MTV was ascending to cultural importance. Jackson and *Thriller* had an immediate impact on both. The sales of *Thriller* have been credited with reviving record sales industry-wide; the singles released crossed the color line onto Album-Oriented Radio (AOR) and obliterated the line between black and white music on charts, radio, and MTV. The television station, which had been steadily rising in popularity since its debut in 1981, had previously refused to air videos by black artists by saying they were the wrong musical format, R&B and not rock. Bob Pittman, the channel's

² Marcus, Greil, "The Beatles" in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* ed. Jim Miller et. al., New York (Random House, 1976): 214.

founder and head, had relied on extensive market research of widespread, largely white consumer markets and determined that white suburbanites between the ages of 14 and 34 (MTV's target demographic) were not interested in black music, and would be more likely to stop watching if they saw a black face on their TV. There were very few exceptions, mostly for established acts like Tina Turner, and also for one Prince song that was deemed to have enough guitars to make it rock 'n' roll. "Billie Jean" became the first black video made for a black song put into heavy rotation by MTV despite the fact that it didn't fit the channel's supposed format. These boundary-busting moments were not unnoticed by the American people, who had been engaged in the debate about racism in the music industry along with the industry itself. The overwhelming popularity of *Thriller* made it an irresistible force, to borrow from Marcus; an undeniable cultural product that made arcane discussions of musical format and radio tradition seem hopelessly outmoded. The power of Jackson's performance, on television for the *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* special, in music videos, and on stage, made him an object of desire and worship. Though by modern standards *Thriller* exploded almost without promotion – seven singles, sure, but only three videos and a meager handful of public appearances by Jackson – it and the artist behind it saturated every aspect of American life without dampening or compromising his racial expression.

This should not imply that Jackson was somehow the first African-American artist to bring an aggressive blackness and consciousness of black history and traditions to their music and presentation. In fact, Jackson was helped along in his development as an artist and a black man by a great number of musicians and performers with evident black pride and the ability to elegantly vocalize that pride, including idols Jackie Wilson and James Brown and early Motown label-mates Marvin Gaye, Richard Pryor and Stevie Wonder. Jackson was extremely perceptive from early childhood, and he studied the physicality and expressive talents of these performers, synthesizing them and using them to form his own unique style. But Jackson is by far the most popular and successful artist to engage in this conjuring, and does so in an especially subtle way. His music, sonically and lyrically, does not overtly recall the civil rights struggle or the Black Nationalism movement, but their presence is there in less intuitive ways. Lyrics refer obliquely to black word games like the dozens, dancing becomes a reflection of class and race struggle (sometimes more explicitly, as in "Beat It"), his voice and music channel emotions personal and communal, and employ techniques from all over the long history of black music. To better understand Jackson as a performer, and to better understand why the overwhelming assault by *Thriller* on American culture is more important than just being a massively popular record, it is

important to contextualize him as a young black man, a product of American history and culture and black history and culture. Viewing him on this continuum and in its intersection with race will help expose the work his popularity, presence and performance is doing to young Americans' self-construction and identity. Through sound, style and performance, Jackson bestows upon his fans a subversive message that breaks down the remaining walls between black and white cultures irreversibly.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to take a close look at what comprised the public conversation about Michael Jackson in the moment of his greatest popularity and importance, and glean from that conversation the ways in which Americans, especially American youth, reconfigured their identities to place Jackson, black superstar, at the center of a natural American identity. As a pop explosion his influence on the youth is profound. His mere existence challenges deeply ingrained notions of race and gender and changes them in irreversible ways. As a black man who did not conform to the neat stereotypes of black masculinity, Michael was able to broaden notions of race, gender and acceptability in ways previously futile. Rock critic Dave Marsh wrote in 1985, "...the idea of a black man performing such a massively successful and enticing act of unification has to be nipped in the bud. Somebody must have feared that otherwise people might get the idea that the things that hold them separate but equal are either bullshit or... visited upon them for reasons other than the obvious. There are a lot of suburban kids out there who are going to have a hard time believing that their white skin is an automatic sign of superiority after spending the happiest years of their childhood trying to be just like you."³ It is this profound crossover that is the site for the work Jackson's music, dance, and image are doing to our consciousness, the site of the pop explosion, the site the explosion of the color line in pop music once and for all.

To identify every way in which this album and this man reconfigured American identity would be a near-impossible task. In order to get at the most visible and important of these, I will take a multi-pronged approach, giving the three most important sites of change close attention. First I will examine the music that started it all. Giving *Thriller* a close reading in lyrics and most crucially in sound, I will be able to identify the ways the album is both a product of the long history black music in America, as well as a new interpretation of the pop form that is able to shatter walls segregating the music industry once and for all. It is important to note now that Jackson did not write all the songs on *Thriller*, though he did write the most consequential:

³ Marsh, Dave. *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*. New York (Bantam, 1985): 9.

"Wanna Be Starting Something," "Billie Jean" and "Beat It." He also had direct input into the lyrics and music for every song he did not write, changing tempos, beats and harmonies to his liking, as well as changing lyrics when he thought it necessary.⁴ Because Jackson did not write the entire album himself, direct lyrical analysis is ruled out; we cannot assume the words he is singing reflect deep personal narratives and beliefs. As such, musical and sonic analysis becomes more important than usual. Jackson's intent is more easily gleaned from the structure of his sound than from the message of his lyrics because the sound is where he was able to exert influence over songs he did not write. The way he manipulates his voice in melodies and harmonies, where he and producer Quincy Jones placed the beat and bass, and the way they sequenced the album will be able to tell us more about *Thriller's* musical impact than just a close reading of the lyrics.

Second, transitioning from a focus on Jackson personally to a focus on American culture and youth culture at large, I will examine the cadence and content of Michaelmania as it was represented in the press and on television as *Thriller* took over. The hysteria, widespread imitation, and near-instant devotion Jackson and *Thriller* inspired in American youth both black and white is the core of the pop explosion, and easily the most important work Jackson does in this moment. The transgression of boundaries in archaic industries like the music industry, which is controlled by a handful of mostly-white elites known for eliding blacks and women since the beginning of recorded music, is important, but not as important as the breaking of boundaries between black youth culture and white youth culture in such ways that subsequent generations no longer think to separate their culture into black and white categories. Jackson makes black music and presents it with black style, all things that typically excluded full participation and admiration by white Americans in line with the segregated culture and values of the past. Instead, white youth lay claim to Jackson with the same ease that Americans laid claim to the British-born-and-bread Beatles, as if he is naturally one of us. Imitation is widespread and colorblind, and extends from the cooption of Jackson's personal style to the way it sparks wider interest by white youth in black culture. It is not a mistake that artists like Prince, who have had their own measurable success but are still relegated to the margins of popular music, are suddenly catapulted to national popularity after Jackson releases *Thriller*. It is true that Prince makes some of his best albums after 1983, but it is equally as true that the way in which Jackson's popularity sanctions a deep personal love of his black music also sanctions his legions of fans to explore and love all black

⁴ "Thriller," for instance, was originally called "Starlight Sun" and was a straightforward and predictable love song. It was Michael's idea to change the topic to horror movies, though original composer Rod Temperton rewrote the lyrics. It was also Michael's idea to write a rap for Vincent Price to perform.

music and black culture. By looking at the people most affected by Jackson and *Thriller*, the American youth, I can get at the ways in which Jackson's unprecedented popularity and success work to break down the barriers between black and white youth culture and produce a new American identity that underlies the way Americans have thought about themselves ever since.

Finally, I will take a close look at the backlash against Jackson that begins to build in late 1983 and comes to a head in the summer and fall of 1984. It is not surprising that Jackson inspired critique from the older generations, both in the public and in the industries that he revolutionized. Anyone who is challenging and successfully overturning the prejudices and barriers built into the infrastructure of our culture and our identity will be seen as a threat by those wishing to uphold the status quo. A figure in such a marginal space as Jackson occupied – young, urban black man – is especially threatening because this transgressions are on long-standing taboos and systemic practices meant to keep entire groups of Americans from claiming full cultural citizenship. But the ways in which Jackson upset the stereotypes of the young, urban black man make the tenor of the inevitable backlash unique. The stereotypes of black men as sexually aggressive, violent, disrespectful and dangerous are negated by Jackson's personality; he is shy, religious, seemingly chaste, sexy but safe (as *Time Magazine* calls it, "eroticism at arm's length"⁵), polite, and androgynous. The typical critiques about the dangers of blackness cannot be deployed against Jackson because he defies them. As such, in order to at least try to combat his influence new tropes about the dangers of this *other* kind of blackness must be created and deployed. Curiously enough, they come from both white and black critics, as Jackson's new model of blackness and black masculinity in particular present challenges to the paradigms forwarded by those seeking to further the political project of African American equality and uplift through the model of Black Nationalism that has persisted since the late 1960's. Analyzing these critiques, I can illuminate the American identity being constructed *against* Jackson. It will also allow me to highlight the most subversive aspects of Jackson's takeover, as it is these characteristics that spur on the backlash as it reaches its highest pitch.

The elements of Marcus's pop explosion are scattered throughout these three sections. By the end of this paper I hope to have proven Jackson's inexorable influence in the development of our modern American identity, an identity that has allowed for cultural integration which has continued in his wake to challenge reified notions of race, gender, sexuality and citizenship even after Jackson lost his place in the national spotlight. The work he did at this time, and continued

⁵ Jay Cocks, "Why He's a Thriller." *Time Magazine*, March 19, 1984: 59.

to do as he dominated pop culture and music in the 1980's, has forever changed the way American youth view each other and themselves, and the ideals they wish to impart to each subsequent generation.

At the end of "Wanna Be Startin' Something," the first track on *Thriller*, after the song breaks from its tight, tense structure and just before it opens up into the ecstatic African chant that brings it to its close, Jackson lets his soulful tenor loose and sings: "So hold your head up high / and scream out to the world / I know I am someone." He sings with abandon and elation, his voice whooping and soaring with pride and confidence and the promise of something new, something better. It's the sound of a young black man taking the world and all it has to offer for himself without reservation, and it is the sound that millions of American youths took seamlessly into their hearts and sang and screamed right back at him. It is not the someone we were, but the someone he turned us into that I have come to discover.

Chapter One

Help Me Sing It: The Music of *Thriller*

There are essentially two ways to approach *Thriller* as a musical album. The first is to discuss it purely in terms of sound, composition and performance. The second, and far more common approach is to discuss it in terms of the seemingly endless number of records it shattered. *Thriller* remains, to this day, the biggest-selling album of all time. The Recording Industry Association of America estimates that it has sold, to date, roughly 30 million copies in the United States and about 110 million copies worldwide.⁶ It became the biggest-selling record ever, surpassing the soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever*, in March of 1984, when CBS Records reported it had sold 30.9 million copies internationally and 19.4 million in the United States.⁷ In October of 1983 it became CBS Records' biggest-selling record, and that December magazines like *Billboard* breathlessly reported that over a year after its release it had "topped the 12 million mark in the U.S., and is selling at a clip of more than 600,000 a week. It reportedly sold 225,000 copies last Monday alone."⁸ It didn't just break sales records; all seven singles released off the album reached the top ten in the Hot 100, the most top ten singles ever gleaned off one record. The gap between the end of "Billie Jean's" run at number one and the beginning of "Beat It's" run at the top, just one week, was the shortest gap between number one singles since the Beatles replaced themselves at number one in 1964.⁹ And the album enabled Jackson to become the first artist in *Billboard* history first to simultaneously occupy the number one spot on the pop albums and singles charts and the black albums and singles charts¹⁰ (with "Billie Jean") and then to simultaneously have the number one album in both the United States and Great Britain, while maintaining his dominance of the US pop, black and dance/disco charts¹¹. And all of that just barely scratches the surface; I haven't even mentioned the record-breaking number of awards he received, places claimed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the history-making music videos, and the fact that "Beat It" broke the color barrier on Album Oriented Radio (AOR) before it or "Billie Jean" was ever released as a single.

⁶ "Michael Jackson's *Thriller* Set to Become Top Selling Album of All Time," MTV.com, accessed on January 12, 2011. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1616537/20090720/jackson_michael.jhtml

⁷ "All-Time Best Seller: 'Thriller' Album Breaks 'Fever'," *Billboard Magazine*, March 19, 1984.

⁸ "'Thriller' Album Returns to the Top," *Billboard Magazine*, December 24, 1983.

⁹ "Chartbeat: Jackson, Prince: Royalty," *Billboard Magazine*, April 30, 1983.

¹⁰ "Chartbeat: Jackson and Q in View," *Billboard Magazine*, March 5, 1983.

¹¹ "Chartbeat: Michael Jackson Tops All Charts," *Billboard Magazine*, March 12, 1983.

It's not hard to see why *Thriller* is so often only discussed in the context of its mind-blowing achievements. And it is not surprising that once the ball got rolling, the press in 1983 and 1984 often had a hard time talking about anything besides the mountains of awards, records and distinctions piling up at Jackson's feet. But to see *Thriller* as only the sum of its industry accomplishments fatally misses the most compelling thing about this album: that all of this hubbub, this breathless admiration and frenzy, was inspired by nine songs that run for just over 42 minutes. One *must* assume that these songs carry immense power within their tight frames, for how else could such a small amount of music create such big waves?

In this chapter I want to give *Thriller* its due in its own context as an album, a collection of songs, and look at how those songs trigger its immense impact on our culture. We shouldn't seek to alienate these two perspectives from each other, because they exist in a causal relationship: Jackson records *Thriller*, releases it, and it changes the world. Clearly the first part must be related to the second. But too often our elision of *Thriller* as a potent album of songs – choosing, instead, to boggle at its efficacy in garnering accolades – results in an inability to understand why this mania was sparked in the first place. Without the music of *Thriller*, Jackson would have never ascended from his already-high perch of fame to the untouchable realm of the iconic superstar, and he achieved that ascension because he wrote and recorded the album with the intent of making a record so undeniable that no achievement would ever be out of reach again. Frankly, the only surprising thing about the story is just how right he was. My intention in providing a close reading of *Thriller* as an album is to illuminate how it acts as a tool for Jackson to communicate with his audience, old and new, and establish the bonds of admiration and identification which will create and solidify his superstar status.

Thriller is also a more complex album to listen to and understand than it initially seems. Pop music as a genre has a complicated relationship with songwriting. Since The Beatles exploded in 1964, it had become a standard marker of authenticity that rock artists and bands write their own music; to do otherwise was suspect and called one's rock 'n' roll credibility into question. Where rockers in the 1950's like Elvis Presley were comfortable recording songs written by others or covering Brill Building standards with a rock 'n' roll edge, rockers post-Beatles rejected wholesale the notion that anyone else should write songs for their albums (with the exception of the occasional loving cover). Collaboration with outside musicians or other bands was perfectly fine, but your name had to be on the writing credits. Pop, R&B and soul all have a less-straightforward relationship to outside songwriters. R&B and soul both encourage

musicians to write their own music, and the genres have turned out some of the most talented songwriters in music history, but artists in these genres also openly record songs written by professional songwriters, or have their most accomplished singer/songwriters write for other performers and groups (Stevie Wonder is an excellent example of this). Pop is even more open to using the wares of professional songwriters, and to great effect. The model set up by the Beatles, in which authorship determines authenticity, has permanently complicated our reading of albums as texts. Artists like Michael Jackson who were trained in the genres of pop, R&B and soul, do write their own music, but also include tracks written by professional songwriters or musician friends without hesitation. As such, one cannot engage in the simple correlative relationship between the songs on the albums and insight into the artist's frame of mind and intended message, because the words they are singing are not words they penned. We can, of course, engage in that relationship on tracks they *did* write if we wish to, and we can also gain information about intent and message through an examination of what songs were chosen to be included, their relationship with the tracks on the album the artist did write, and about the choices made in how the song is sung, orchestrated and recorded. An outside force may have determined the skeleton of the song but the artist and their producer are ultimately in charge of how it sounds when it reaches the public's ears. With an artist like Jackson, who composed music more easily than lyrics, the control they exerted over the sound of each song can be very telling indeed.

It is important here to take a moment to discuss Jackson's method of songwriting. There are two basic ways to approach writing a song: You can start with the lyrics, or you can start with the music. Many musicians and songwriters will switch back and forth between the two approaches, depending on how inspiration hits. Michael Jackson worked almost exclusively by composing music first. A song or part of a song would pop into his head – a rhythm, a bass lick, a melody, a harmony – and he would build on it until he had a finished track. The pieces of the song were recorded into hand-held tape recorders or Dictaphones as he heard them in his head. Then he would record his first demo (usually with the help of his siblings Randy and Janet while they still lived in their family home), and then bring that rough cut to his producer. They would record a series of demos with fleshed out music and eventually fleshed out lyrics, and then go to work on the final production to be considered for the album. We can use the home demo of "Billie Jean" that has been available for some years now on the Internet¹² to demonstrate.

¹² The source I accessed for this analysis is available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0p530q9-4Y&feature=fvst>

According to Jackson¹³ in outtakes from his 2007 interview with *Ebony*, he enlisted Janet and Randy's help to lay the song he composed in his car one afternoon onto tape. Already present is the iconic beat and bass lick (sounding like it's being played on a live bass guitar, probably by Randy) and the haunting synthesizer punctuation. In fact, the musical track is very similar to how it will appear on the album, albeit simpler – the addition of brass, strings and the subtle flourishes added by Quincy Jones are not there yet, and there are also instruments that get dropped or moved around by the final cut. The lyric, however, is what one would kindly call incomplete. Jackson mumbles through the first verse, mostly nonsense words to hold the melody: "She told me I was a lonely man / and I felt sad / [unintelligible nonsense] / all those who died / all right you see all right," sung in the rhythm of the verse. The pre-chorus, perhaps the most affecting part of the finished song, is actually quite funny in this fetal state: "It seems that you dun-dun-ber-ber-ber-lee / Har-har-thin walla-man." It means nothing, and it's not meant to; the lyrics aren't the point now, though they become more central later. The chorus contains the only lyrics that will make it into the final version of the song. This should help us understand how crucial music, melody, harmony, beat, bass, and *sound* are to Jackson's creative process. He composed sonically and musically almost exclusively, and the strength of that music is what eventually moved him to complete any composition. "What I do when I work," he told *Ebony* in 2007, "is to do a raggedy, rough version just to hear the chorus and see how much I like the music. If it works for me in that way when it's raggedy than we can really go forward with it."¹⁴ As an artist grounded in sound and not in words, we can really look to the sound of the album as a whole to give us insight into Jackson's intentions and message, even when talking about songs he did not write. Because lyrics are not the pathway to insight it doesn't fully matter if the words he's singing are his (obviously, the words he wrote for himself to sing are important and will be considered seriously, however the fact that the majority of songs are *not* written by Jackson does not mean we cannot learn from them); as the album's title artist, his hand is in every note and beat whether they came from his brain or not, and as such the music offers us a way to read him and the parts of him he is committing to vinyl.

Jackson wrote four tracks on *Thriller*: "Wanna Be Startin' Something," "Billie Jean," "Beat It," and "The Girl is Mine" (with Paul McCartney). Rod Temperton, a professional songwriter most famously a member of funk/disco group Heatwave, wrote three: "Baby Be

¹³ "Michael Jackson Talks to Ebony" (audio interview outtakes, 2007), accessed February 3, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvK4RkvqFhI> at 1:16-1:20

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 1:05-1:15.

Mine," "Thriller" and "Lady in My Life." Steve Porcaro, a member of the band Toto, and lyricist John Bettis wrote "Human Nature," and Quincy Jones and soul singer James Ingram wrote "P.Y.T (Pretty Young Thing)," rounding out *Thriller's* nine tracks¹⁵. "Human Nature," an unfinished snippet originally composed for Toto, was finished in the studio for Jackson under his watchful eye; "P.Y.T." was similarly composed while the album was being recorded. Jackson entered Westlake Studio in Los Angeles, California, in April of 1982 with Quincy Jones, who had also helmed *Off The Wall* (1979) under a tight recording schedule. They spent the next five months writing, recording and mixing dozens of songs for the album. Recording time was even more stressed because Jones and Jackson were simultaneously recording *Thriller* and the *E.T. Storybook* album in conjunction with the blockbuster film. In the fall, the record company drastically increased the pressure finish the album, setting a hard release date and demanding finished music. "Eventually we came under tremendous pressure...to finish *Thriller*," Jackson recalled in his 1988 autobiography, *Moonwalk*, "When a record company rushes you they really rush you, and they were rushing us hard on *Thriller*. They said it had to be ready on a certain date, do or die."¹⁶ But when they completed the first mix, it sounded terrible. Bruce Swedien, the lead sound engineer on the album (as well as for *Off The Wall* and the six subsequent solo albums Michael would release for Epic and Sony), recalled:

"When we first thought we had finished mixing *Thriller*, the album, we had much too much playing time on the sides of the LP...I knew it was over 25 minutes per side. Of course on LPs, if you have too much time on a side, it minimizes the volume level, and low frequency response, that you can put on the record during mastering. In those days, 18 minutes per side on an LP was just right for good sound. We were way over! ... I played the reference LPs in the control room. We listened, and the sound on the LP was dog doo. It was horrible...The Epic dudes were popping corks, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Michael sneak out of the control room, and go to the other studio, across the hall. Quincy saw him too and followed him. I was next. Then Rod and Freddy. I remember Michael was crying; he was heartbroken."¹⁷

Jackson recalled the same: "*Thriller* sounded so crappy to me that tears came to my eyes... We sat there in the studio, Westlake Studio in Hollywood, and listened to the whole album. I felt devastated...Finally I realized I had to do the whole thing—mix the entire album—all over again."¹⁸ So that's what they did. They took a couple days off, then returned to the studio and re-mixed the album, devoting one day to each track. At the end of those nine days they turned the album in to Epic. Less than a month later, it was released.

¹⁵ Songwriting credits from the *Thriller* liner notes.

¹⁶ Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 198.

¹⁷ Bruce Swedien, *In The Studio with Michael Jackson*. New York (Hal Leonard, 2009): 30.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 198-99.

Initial reviews of *Thriller* were good, very good. *Billboard* was impressed and speculated that "this album could repeat the four-single attack¹⁹ that led 'Off The Wall' to its multi-platinum heights,"²⁰ and *People* raved, "Willingness to experiment and a flawless sense of rhythm make this an album that lives up to its title."²¹ *Rolling Stone* puts the album in perhaps the best perspective in terms of its relationship with the music industry and pop music scene at the time. The magazine was known to be critical of simple pop and disco especially, as it was the child of the 1960's rock explosion and had long held rock 'n' roll as obviously superior to other genres of music. But their review of *Thriller* is excited and filled with praise for the album's depth ("uptempo workouts don't obscure its harrowing, dark messages"²²), the artist's new maturity ("[Jackson's] dropped the boyish falsetto...and chosen to address his tormentors in a full, adult voice with a feisty determination that is tinged by sadness"²³), and close their review by enthusing:

"His talents, not just singing but dancing and acting, could make him a perfect mainstream performer. Perish the thought. The fiery conviction of *Thriller* offers hope that Michael is still a long way from succumbing to the lures of Vegas. *Thriller* may not be Jackson's *1999*, but it's a gorgeous, snappy step in the right direction."²⁴

Rolling Stone's review offers us a glimpse of how the music world and public at large was set up to receive *Thriller* upon its release in 1982. There was still a strict segregation imposed upon black music; it was expected to conform to certain styles, primarily R&B and soul with occasional sanctioned forays into rock (as with Prince), and it was released and marketed through its own radio stations and record stores. Black artists and black music had found popularity with white audiences for decades but the two kinds of music, with white music represented primarily through rock and pop and black music through soul and R&B (and, soon, rap), were seen as a sort of oil and water. You could like both, but they would not mix. This is why *Rolling Stone*, a magazine that admired rock music to the point of fetishization, saw Prince's *1999* – a brilliant and ambitious album in its own right, and one that existed firmly in the accepted black rock mold – as a greater triumph than *Thriller*. *Thriller* gives the listener every facet of pop, from the maudlin "The Girl Is Mine," to the vicious dance tracks "Wanna Be Starting Something" and "Billie Jean," to its intersection with rock on "Beat It," to the bubblegum of "Baby Be Mine," to the very essence of crooning soul on "The Lady In My Life." It presents us with pop writ large, imagined and composed within its totality not its subgenres. Its unfamiliarity would have made it difficult

¹⁹ *Off The Wall* tied Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* album for most top-10 singles off one album (four) in 1980.

²⁰ "Spotlight: Michael Jackson—Thriller," *Billboard Magazine*, December 11, 1982.

²¹ "THRILLER: Michael Jackson," *People Magazine*, January 24, 1983.

²² Christopher Connelly, "Thriller: Michael Jackson," *Rolling Stone*, January 20, 1983: 46.

²³ Connelly, "Thriller," 46-47.

²⁴ Connelly, "Thriller," 47.

for reviewers at the time to know how to judge its trajectory; either it would stand as Jackson's second Epic solo album, an improvement from the first and a sign of greater things to come in the future, or it would be a groundbreaking record that would destroy the barriers of segregation between black and white music. They can hardly be faulted for not anticipating the latter, as such intense pop explosions happen so rarely. But by listening to and examining each track closely we can start to hear what drove a million American teenagers straight into Michaelmania.

"Wanna Be Startin' Something" opens *Thriller* with three pert raps on a synthetic-sounding snare drum and immediately launching into a driving and instantly catchy syncopated rhythm. The taps on the hi-hat and a persistent shaker add to the tension, as does the low, tight bass line. A few measures in, the bass plays a higher lick and Jackson's voice doubles the quick melody. A few measures more and the pre-chorus taunts are introduced, "So you wanna be startin' something / You gotta be startin' something / Said you wanna be startin' something? / You got to be startin' something!" Jackson's voice is multi-tracked on each "startin' something," and those vocal tracks become part of a call-and-response in the chorus: "Too high to get over (yeah yeah) / too low to get under (yeah yeah)..." When the first verse starts it blows open with a high tenor wail that carries within in the same tension permeating and propelling the rhythm track. Jackson's arrangement places the beat and the bass right up front for the listener, and the otherwise sparse instrumentation (horns and electric guitars are used for effect, not consistently through the entirety of the song) just refocuses the listener's attention on the grain of Jackson's voice. Known for his sweet ballads and smooth, sensual disco tracks, Jackson's voice on "Wanna Be Startin' Something" is a surprise; it is strained, rough, with hints of the hoarse growl that would become his signature style on later albums. He sounds like a man at the end of his rope, fed up with everything and everyone around him, and the sentiment is reflected in the lyrics, which seem to directly address the myriad aggravators in his life. "I took my baby to the doctor / with a fever but nothing he found," he complains in the first verse, "By the time it hit the streets / they said she had a breakdown! / Someone's always tryin' to start my baby cryin' / Talkin', squealin', lyin' / Sayin' you just want to be startin' something."

There is naked aggression in Jackson's voice and musical arrangement. The sound is unrelenting, refusing to stop pushing the listener forward even when Jackson isn't singing; angular guitar solos and occasional brass announcements jar us out of whatever trance the otherwise looping rhythm lulls us into, mimicking the rude and unexpected intrusions Jackson experiences in his life. The song's bridge is sung with spite and bile as he draws out his insults,

"You're a vegetable, you're a vegetable / Still they hate you, you're a vegetable / You're a buffet, you're a vegetable / They eat off of you, you're a vegetable." The verses get angrier and move from internal ("I took my baby to the doctor") to external critique ("You love to pretend that you're good / When you're always up to no good"), and from amorphous in subject to specific. "Wanna Be Startin' Something" is the only song on *Thriller* that is self-referential, as it introduces the listener to Billie Jean for the first time: "Billie Jean is always talkin' / When nobody else is talking / Tellin' lies and rubbin' shoulders / 'Til they call her mouth a motor!" The listener, having not yet heard the song named for her, can and probably should take Billie Jean, in this instance, as representative of a larger group of personal acquaintances or friends who Jackson feels have betrayed him in the interest of selling stories and garnering fame of their own. "Wanna Be Startin' Something," like Jackson's other compositions for the album, is rife with paranoia and anger towards vague and indefinable groups: the press, gossipmongers, dangerous women, two-faced friends. "Billie Jean," still five songs away, is as specific as he gets, but the rage and frustration simmer and explode all over the record. In the final, seemingly ad-libbed verse Jackson practically shouts, "If you can't feed your baby / Then don't have a baby! / And don't think maybe / If you can't feed your baby!" Frustration with tensions and pressures in his own life erupt into a critique of society at large, turning the anger outward to his audience and condemning them for their bad decisions. But then Jackson, releasing the last of his frustration in the final chorus, unexpectedly takes a turn towards the inspirational.

The final minute and a half of "Wanna Be Starting Something" is probably the best-known part of the song. Immediately on the heels of the final chorus the bass line adds a major key harmony, opening the song up from some of the minor tension it's been laboring under to this point, and Jackson's voice rings out in clear, true tenor as he sings "So keep your head up high / And sing out to the world / I know I am someone / And let the truth unfurl / Don't wanna hurt you now / Because you know what's true / Yes I believe in me / So you believe in you!" It's an exhilarating shift; the song suddenly feels more open, less claustrophobic, and the ease with which Jackson navigates the high tenor exhortation makes the listener's heart race. And then, with Jackson whooping and hollering with joy, the song explodes with a massive spectrum of vocals (Jackson stacking his own harmonies along with singers Julie Waters, Maxine Waters, Oren Waters, James Ingram, Bunny Hull and Becky Lopez²⁵) chanting "Mama-se / Mama-sa / Ma-ma-coo-sa" for over a minute until they fade out and the track ends. The chant releases "Wanna Be Startin' Something" from the weight of its anger and in turn it becomes positively buoyant and

²⁵ *Thriller* liner notes.

infectious. The chant is a phonetic bastardization of part of Camaroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango's unlikely 1973 crossover hit "Soul Masooka."²⁶ Originally recorded for a compilation called *Soul Power*, "Soul Masooka" became a popular dance hit in Africa and also in New York City, where DJs added into their party playlists and artists recorded cover versions. Music writer Nelson George speculates that Jackson was first exposed to "Soul Masooka" when the Jackson 5 took a trip to Africa in 1973, but no definitive tale of how Jackson decided to use that particular snippet of the song seems to exist in the public record. The effect this choice has on the final product, however, is absolutely crucial. "When you compare Dibango's superfunk original, 'Soul Masooka...and the final version of Michael's song, you get a deep insight into Michael's musicality," George observes.

"He arranges the words in a much higher key and at a faster rhythm, turning Dibango's monotone delivery into a high-spirited chant. Up until the last bridge, the song's lyrics present a paranoid vision of the world. Michael reshapes Dibango's old hook, turning the fear in the song's first two-thirds into an inspired celebration."²⁷

"Wanna Be Startin' Something" is a bold choice to open *Thriller* a number of reasons: its confrontational lyrics, its tense and dark sound, its palpable anger, its sparse arrangement, all things that go against Jackson's musical and personal presentation thus far in his life. He begins by defying all listeners' expectations of him. But "Wanna Be Startin' Something" does something else as well, something subversive and deeply transgressive: it marks Jackson, the song, and the entire album to follow as aggressively, confrontationally black music. Using "Mama-se / Mama-sa / Ma-ma-coo-sa" for the final minute and fifteen seconds of the track, Jackson is openly engaging in the music of the African diaspora, connecting directly the sound of a Camaroonian musician to the sound of an African-American musician, "signal[ing]," to his listeners as Paul Gilroy says, "through the transnational power of black musics [*sic*] which have reached out beyond the boundaries of the nation state."²⁸ If we understand music as Gilroy does – as a conduit through which the African diaspora and especially the part of the diaspora comprised by the Atlantic triangle of the United States, the Caribbean and the United Kingdom, is able to construct aspects of black identity that transcend the specificity of location and class – then what Jackson is doing by not just sampling but appropriating and rearranging the chant of "Soul Masooka" is defining himself, musically, as rooted in that diaspora. While his image is still theoretically up for grabs, his music defines itself as inescapably black and closed to overt

²⁶ Nelson George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, Cambridge (Da Capo Press, 2010): 89.

²⁷ George, *Thriller*: 92-93.

²⁸ Paul Gilroy, "Wearing Your Art on Your Sleeve: Notes Towards a Diaspora History of Black Ephemera," *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 501.

attempts at crossover. It is not "whitened" for radio; if there is crossover it will be on its own decidedly black terms.

Jackson's opening musical statement is bold and aggressive, but *Thriller* was not conceived of as an aggressive, confrontational album, and its second track affirms for the listener that an all-out pop assault is not being mounted. "Baby Be Mine" is a light, bopping post-disco pop tune that is melodically compelling while allowing us a few minutes to decompress from the intensity of "Wanna Be Startin' Something." Bouncing synth-bass propels the song at a medium pace, fast enough to be danceable without being overwhelming, and is complemented by synthesizer flutes and keyboards. The melody engages soulful rise and fall, each line ending with a higher note held long enough for the rougher grain of Michael's voice to come through fully. These longer phrases are additionally complemented by nimble backing vocals in three-part harmony flitting through the gaps between them ("There'll be no more reasons to change your mind / (I can't sit still you thrill me baby be mine)"). Temperton penned an uncomplicated love song – promises of eternal love and happiness that can only come from youth – paired with an uncomplicated composition that is both vastly enjoyable and quite forgettable. In the context of the album as a whole it seems a bit of a throwaway song, and since *Thriller* is only nine songs one filler piece (and it is not *Thriller's* only potentially unnecessary inclusion) can seem like a waste. But Jackson's voice shines with unexpectedly gritty soul through it, and it serves its function as follow-up to the explosive "Wanna Be Startin' Something" exceedingly well.

If there is a genuine oddity on *Thriller* it's the third song on the album and first single released, a duet with Paul McCartney titled "The Girl Is Mine." The problems with the song are not because the pairing of McCartney and Jackson's talents was somehow incompatible. They had first worked together when McCartney sent Quincy Jones a song called "Girlfriend" he'd written with Michael's voice in mind in 1978, and subsequently recorded with Wings for their album *London Town*, released the same year. Jones suggested Jackson record it as well for 1979's *Off The Wall*. It's a fantastic version, and charted well as a single; Jackson decided to write a duet for he and McCartney to sing on *Thriller* in thanks. That gesture grew into two more collaborative projects, the duets "Say Say Say"²⁹ and "The Man" for McCartney's 1983 album *Pipes of Peace*. Of those four songs, "The Girl Is Mine" stands out as the most staid, regressive adult contemporary pop song to come out of their friendship. In the context of the rest of *Thriller* it

²⁹ "Say Say Say" was released as *Pipes of Peace's* first single and went to number one. McCartney and Jackson filmed and released a successful music video for the song as well.

sticks out like a sore thumb, a song for parents amongst a taut, explosive expressions of youth and independence.

Set at an easy listening tempo with an airy electric piano- and bass-heavy sonic landscape, the lyric describes a simple and juvenile competition between two suitors for one woman's affections. Each tries to claim her through the insistence that they met her first and they love her more, adapting an almost musical theater-like structure as they address each other, the audience, and the girl all in the name of the rather facile story. It was a hit because it's Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney, not because of any particular musical merit. And perhaps in some ways it served to lull the public a bit before unleashing the two best and most potent songs on *Thriller*. But more than anything else it sounds like Jackson retreating one last time into the safety of his past as darling child of show business. Unlike the rest of the album, which boasts some of Quincy Jones' glossiest, most sophisticated pop production, "The Girl Is Mine" feels slick and superficial like the ballads Motown had used to initially feed the young Jackson to the public. There's no substance, no urgency to it; it's not exactly insincere but there's no genuine feeling behind it. It ends up as the song that needs to be justified and excused; as *Rolling Stone* puts bluntly, "[Jackson's] raw ability and conviction make material like 'Baby Be Mine' and 'Wanna Be Startin' Something' into first-class cuts and even salvage 'The Girl Is Mine.' Well, almost."³⁰

That "The Girl Is Mine" is a subpar pop effort on a stunningly brilliant pop album should not warrant its dismissal, especially since Jackson's creative process was extremely deliberate. He resented being rushed and viewed his albums through the dually ruthless eyes of an artist and a businessman. Jackson equated quality and quantity in his view of the world and his place in it. His goal in making *Thriller* was to make the best album in the history of pop music, and his way of measuring quality was by sheer volume of albums sold. Therefore, for *Thriller* to be judged as a success in his eyes it would have to sell more records than any album before it. This goal was openly stated during recording, and Quincy Jones has commented upon it many times since then in interviews. The 8 million copies *Off The Wall* sold was considered to be an extraordinary feat, especially for a young black solo artist, and Jones was among those who openly doubted Jackson's assertion that he would make an album that would easily outsell it. The amount of pressure Jackson put on himself has much to do with the tone of the album, the deep ribbons of tension that run through it as a whole and Jackson's original work especially. *Thriller*, for him, was about establishing independence – from his family, from his past, from his previous career. It

³⁰ Connelly, "Thriller," 47.

was about wanting freedom and being fettered at every turn by family, fans, girls, boys, hotel rooms, inhibition. The internal struggle comes through the sound if not always the words, and it's what drew teenagers from every racial and class background to the record. Liberation inspires excitement and longing, but it also inspires fear, and not every reaction to fear aids in liberation. Sometimes the most natural thing for anyone to do is to run back to the safety of the past, and that is what "The Girl Is Mine" sounds like. Jackson takes one last turn as the golden child with the golden voice, performing a song every mother could love with yet another industry veteran. And yet the act of releasing it first, though it seems like a bait-and-switch, is also a liberating act. Jackson shows the public the side of him that wants to hide from all this change, to cling to the past, and then simply lets it go.

A third of *Thriller* is over. The listener at this point, having fully come down from the attack of "Wanna Be Startin' Something," is ready for their heart to race again. The fourth track is the eponymous title track and the song perhaps most difficult to separate from its seminal music video. But the song reaches listeners' ears months before there is even talk of a short film, a year before a Michael Jackson video is even played on MTV for the first time. "Thriller" opens with a creaking door and spooky synthesizers, overlaid with a cartoonish howl from a wolf³¹. Though it is as different from "The Girl Is Mine" as it gets, they are connected by their theatricality. The sound effects build until "Thriller" cracks open with its iconic synthesizer salute. The groove drops instantly, a funky synth bass-driven gem by Rod Temperton punctuated by handclaps and generous high-hat work. Jackson's playful vocal slides into the first verse with a slick "Ooh." The lyric had originally been vaguely about love but after recording a demo version Jackson had a better idea. He and Temperton worked to change the lyrics to be about horror movies and scared dates. Jackson also came up with the admittedly brilliant idea to have Vincent Price, a personal friend, record a rap for the bridge. Jackson sings the verses like a boyfriend telling scary stories to his girl with a flashlight under his chin, sometimes narrating and sometimes taking on the persona of the characters. His voice is clear, without the rough grain present in "Wanna Be Startin' Something," and when he gets to the chorus his tenor soars to the top of his full-voice register. When he belts, "Cuz this is thriller!" he does it with excitement not intimidation, turning the listener into a fellow traveler. Jackson uses his innate and unique ability to flirt with his singing voice outside the context of a love song to achieve a level of intimacy with the listener that most songs about scary movies are not able to reach. The listener feels like he is singing to them, like if

³¹ According to Swedien, they tried to get his dog to record that howl and, when they failed, Michael himself recorded the effect. (*In the Studio with Michael Jackson*, 33)

they turned around he'd be right there on the couch pointing to the television screen. That is an ability that cannot be taught, a talent that you either have or you don't. The most talented singers all have this ability, and that's no surprise, but the easy, unstudied nature of Jackson's intimacy make it all the more compelling. As a Motown artist it would have been nurtured and groomed to maximum efficiency, but here he uses it without the artificial sheen of that training. It is especially helped along by the "oohs" before each verse.

The structure of "Thriller" on the album is different from the version used in the music video, which was lengthened and edited so that Price's rap takes the place of the original bridge. On the album the bridge is comprised of gleeful descriptions of the entrapment of a horror movie: "Night creatures crawl and the dead start to walk in their masquerade / There's no escaping the jaws of the alien this time / It's the end of the line! / Oooh!" If "Thriller" is the aural embodiment of a great Halloween haunted house, the bridge is the moment halfway through when you take your first full breath, sure you're almost out of harm's way. Jackson relishes that momentary false relief; swept further into the spirit of the song, he ends the next chorus by promising "Girl, I could thrill ya more than any ghoul could ever dare try." It's not a tease; the listener can hear the depth of his desire to be given that chance. The final chorus wraps up its repeated exhortation – "So let me hold you tight and share a killer thriller" – with a whooping "Ow!" and then dissolves into the synthesizer's staccato vamp. The eerie sounds return, layering slowly over the catchy pop like a thickening fog from which emerges a promise from Jackson, "I'm gonna thrill ya tonight," and then Vincent Price's instantly-recognizable ghoulish drawl. The rap that has been written for him is at once perfectly appropriate and hilarious. Jackson uses Price's gruesome intonation to its fullest effect, setting the scene with Shelley-esque panache ("Darkness falls across the land / the midnight hour is close at hand") that is then interrupted by the language of the streets ("Creatures crawl in search of blood / To terrorize y'all's neighborhood"). The victims of this potential horror show are uptight squares – "And whosoever has been found," Price threatens, "Without the soul for getting down / Will stand and face the hounds of hell / or rot inside a corpse's shell." The only way to survive this apocalypse is to get down, to get funky. It's fun and it's light, but it's also a real notification as Jackson once again promises, "I'm gonna thrill ya tonight": *Thriller* is here to take over the world, and no one stands a chance unless they join forces with it. Michael's wailing picks up in the background as Price enters the rap's second verse, crescendoing as Price closes with a menacing warning: "And though you fight to stay alive / your body starts to shiver / For no mere mortal can resist / the evils of the thriller!" With a final synth flourish the song is abruptly

silenced and Price's iconic laugh echoes out of the speakers. As it fades away, still ringing in the listener's ears, the creaky door that opened the song slams shut.

I am reluctant to read too deeply into "Thriller" because I think its primary appeal to Jackson as a track to be included on the album is how well composed, catchy and exuberant it is. It's a welcome change from the typical pop love song, and it's a welcome change stylistically from the adult contemporary of "The Girl Is Mine" and the more traditional black pop sounds of "Baby Be Mine" and others. It's immensely enjoyable without scratching its interpretive surface even the tiniest bit. But its use of the tropes of horror is suggestive. Conjuring thoughts of invasion, takeover and infestation puts "Thriller" into a different context after *Thriller* starts to sell. Jackson's easy adoption of the first person and his willingness to slip in and out of monstrous roles in the lyrics hint that it may not just be about taking a girl on a date where she's guaranteed to bury her face in your shoulder. Though the later video makes it sound more plausible, I want to stop short of contending that Jackson is adopting the position of the monstrous narrator as a way of presenting himself as an invasive force about to take over America because I think that there's no way to tell if that was truly his intent, and it's important not to put words in his mouth. But there can be no doubt that Jackson saw in *Thriller* the opportunity to stage an invasion of American popular culture unseen since the Beatles invaded 20 years before, and the record of that invasion with all its screaming and rioting can and often does look like a scene straight out of a horror movie.

"Thriller" starts off the album's middle third, a trio of songs that are without a doubt the most iconic and important songs on *Thriller*, the songs most directly responsible for the absolute pandemonium of Michaelmania that dominates the popular culture of 1983 and 1984. Ironically, "Thriller" is not released as a single until late January 1984, even though the video is given a theatrical debut in November of 1983, and the VHS *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller* is released just before Christmas and quickly becomes the highest selling home VHS release of all time. On *Thriller* the song starts the album's rise to its highest peak, while out in the culture it provided a neat cap to the most successful year that arguably any music act has ever had. In fact, the triad of pop perfection that is the center of *Thriller* is released to the public in exactly the opposite order that it is sequenced on the album. In both scenarios, though, it is the next song that is offered between the other two and that breaks both the album *Thriller* and American pop culture wide open.

"Beat It" opens with six gut-shaking blasts from a synthesizer gong, ringing out with perfect timing like the world's most ominous church bell. On the final chime, the lowest note, all other sounds drop out except the sparse, clipped drums which also sound like synthesizer drums until the kick of a real drum kit enters with the scorching signature guitar lick, performed by Eddie Van Halen. The first thing the listener notices is that it is *heavy*. This is not rock appropriated by pop as it has been done before and after *Thriller*, in which the motifs of rock music like the electric guitar and prominent bass are used to give an otherwise bland and safe artist a supposedly dangerous rock sheen. This is a rock and roll song from conception to performance. It is the work of Jackson solely, as writer and composer, and in its existence allows some of the loose ends of the African American legacy in pop music to be tied up once again. Black musicians created rock 'n' roll, even though since the 1950's it has been dominated almost exclusively by white artists. Jackson uses rock in "Beat It" not as an outsider appropriating a form he admires but as a part of that music's legacy and history, a natural heir to the sound who has as much right to it as any white musician does. Even though he has not even dabbled with rock music in the past, he reveals himself within the first 20 seconds of "Beat It" to be an avid listener and fan of the genre. The influence of his friendships with white icons like Freddie Mercury, Paul McCartney, and Mick Jagger, as well as black rock founders like Chuck Berry and Little Richard can be heard in how comfortable he is with the sound, and how naturally he composes in its idiom³². It's a bold and confident musical statement, executed perfectly, and goes a long way to explaining why "Beat It" instantly became such a massive hit in the United States. The song first got the music industry's attention in December of 1982, right after *Thriller* was released, when AOR stations started playing "Beat It" even though it hadn't been officially released as a single, and to huge positive response... as long as no one knew who it was by. "Some stations played the record without identifying the artist and got good phones all along," *Billboard* quoted Epic Senior Vice President Don Dempsey as saying, "And then after maybe a week of airplay they'd say, 'This is Michael Jackson we've been playing,' and some AOR listeners would have a problem with it."³³ Though a combination of rock 'n' roll snobbery and casual racism may have deterred AOR listeners from openly liking a Michael Jackson-penned rock song when *Thriller* was initially

³² It has been suggested that the real motivation behind Jackson's decision to purchase the ATV Music Publishing catalog in 1988 (which controversially gave him control of the Beatles' publishing rights, as their company Northern Songs had been partially bought by ATV in the 1970's, and which damaged his friendship with Paul McCartney) may have been to protect some of Berry's and Richard's music. The ATV catalog contained most of their original compositions, as well as a huge number of other black rock 'n' roll songs that had helped created the genre in the first place. Such suggestions were not widely reported until after Jackson died in 2009.

³³ "Michael Jackson Cut Breaks AOR Barrier," *Billboard Magazine*, December 18, 1982: 1.

released, by the time "Beat It" was officially released as a single, complete with a music video in heavy rotation on MTV, Michaelmania had already brought the nation to its knees. Jackson took to the rock form naturally; he was so good at it that he broke this genre and color barrier without even trying.

Eddie Van Halen's guitar work on "Beat It" is masterfully raw and just before the first verse begins he adds a neat little staccato guitar harmony on top of the killer main riff. Then Jackson bursts in, voice already at full force and a high tenor pitch as he bites out, "They told 'em 'Don't you ever come around here! / Don't wanna see your face you better disappear!'" The fury we first heard in his voice in "Wanna Be Startin' Something" is back and seems to have been ignited even further by the furious rock song behind him. What at first seems to be a narrative abhorring violence among the (implicitly black, urban) youth delivered in straightforward rock 'n' roll style is actually masking a subtle and subversive duality in message and meaning. Jackson's narrative is indisputably clear: he wants kids to stop trying to solve their problem with violence and instead to retreat from confrontation and seek out personal expression through creative means like music and dance. At the same time, he recognizes the inherent dilemma they face by backing down from a fight. The first two verses make this explicit:

*They told him don't you ever come around here
Don't want to see your face you better disappear
The fire's in their eyes and their words aren't very clear
So beat it, just beat it
You better run, you better do what you can
Don't wanna see no blood, don't be a macho man
You wanna be tough better do what you can
So beat it—but you wanna be bad!*

Jackson's engaging explicitly and almost exclusively with a dynamic unique to urban, and especially poor urban, life and one that is tied to black experiential identity. Ethnographers like Elijah Anderson have observed that, "In the street culture... respect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost—and so must constantly be guarded."³⁴ This view of acquiring and guarding respect as a precious commodity exacerbates the tensions produced by living a life that is stunted at each turn by institutional inequality and racism, producing an environment in which gestures and behaviors that would go otherwise unnoticed become the cause for small battles which can take any number of forms, from verbal insults to physical violence. Anderson's work has been rightly challenged as racially essentialist and

³⁴ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 199): 33.

ignorant of reality in its construction street culture (of his work on "the dozens," an African American word game, Robin D. G. Kelley eloquently skewers his entire argument by pointing out, "The goal of the dozens and related verbal games is deceptively simple: to get a laugh"³⁵), but his observations of the emotionally charged atmosphere of inner city life and the relief of that tension through interpersonal violence are not pulled from thin air. "Beat It" could not exist if violence amongst the youth – especially violence used as a way to gain or keep respect from one's peers – wasn't a prevalent enough problem in the black community for Jackson to feel comfortable singing about it³⁶. And while most white youth, urban and suburban, are not involved with these street politics, Jackson keeps his lyrics vague enough for them to be widely relatable if not actually relevant to all listeners.

It's a bold statement on the young artist's part, to engage so explicitly with this problem. Jackson had been held up for much of his life as part of a black family that, to state it uncouthly, was a "good example" to the community. The Jacksons were a cohesive family; the brothers were outwardly stable, polite and genial young men with pretty, charismatic sisters and two still-married parents. They were cheerfully hard working and extremely successful. Of course, part of the reason Joseph and Katherine Jackson chose to form their sons into a singing group was to keep them off the streets of Gary, Indiana, which was poor and rife with violent gangs. With their sons inside and rehearsing they could ensure they would not get themselves mixed up with drugs and violence. Therefore, Jackson became part of the model of how to lift oneself out of urban poverty and into the charmed life of fame and fortune. His exit from this downtrodden world early in life (he was 10 when the family was moved by Berry Gordy from Gary to Los Angeles to record for Motown) could have severed his ties to this part of his community, but with "Beat It" he displays a continuous and proud connection to the aspects of black life that many in and out of the community find troubling. Since *Thriller* is intended to break through racial and class barriers in order to achieve the kind of cultural domination Jackson desires, it is a risky move to include a song that many listeners – white, privileged, divorced from this kind of community tension – could find alienating. It's a testament to Jackson's nimbleness as narrator and overwhelming talent as a pop songwriter that it becomes one of *Thriller's* biggest breakthrough hits.

³⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's DisFUNKtional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston (Beacon Press, 1997): 34.

³⁶ This connection and intention is made even more explicit by the video, which uses as its narrative base Jackson's mission to stop a massive gang fight in a warehouse, and which features real Los Angeles gang members. It will be discussed later in much greater detail.

The chorus of "Beat It" always enters immediately after the end of each verse, an answer to the implied question of "Well, what do I do now?" posed each time Jackson exhorts the listener to retreat from violence. He begins in full-tenor wail ("So beat it! / Beat it!"), so high in his register that further climbing must be done in falsetto ("No one wants to be defeated!"). It is the intensity of his tenor throughout the song that sells it as really guttural rock 'n' roll, and which makes his use of the genre seem so effortless, but at the end of the first chorus he gives us a glimpse of his vocal range often unseen, though attested to by many. After the final call to "Just beat it" there is an intricate call-and-response between Jackson's multi-tracked voice in which the first invective is answered by another "beat it" echoed an octave lower and once more at the original pitch. This happens twice in this moment, and never again in this song. The flexibility and power of Jackson's high tenor and falsetto had been admired by fans and musicians alike since "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" (sung almost entirely at the top of his falsetto range) became a smash hit in 1978, but rarely were listeners given such a clear aural window into how low Jackson's range extended. "He started with a high voice and I've taken it even higher," Seth Riggs, Jackson's vocal coach told *Time Magazine* in 1984, and explained further, "He can sing low – down to a basso low C – but he prefers to sing as high as he does because pop tenors have more range to create style."³⁷ Riggs may be right about stylistic freedom, but Jackson's low-pitched vocal display in "Beat It" is not just important because it's a departure from his usual practice, but because in its inherent display of testosterone (which causes men's voices to be lower-pitched) it connects Jackson vocally to the trope of masculine virility embedded in rock 'n' roll tradition.

Rock credibility has been established by the end of the first chorus and is set in stone when, after the third verse and second chorus, the vocals drop away to allow Eddie Van Halen to perform an absolutely blistering guitar solo, raw and jagged and aggressive and sexual. Just as there is no attempt to "whiten" "Wanna Be Startin' Something" and other songs on *Thriller* for the white youth Jackson is courting, there is no attempt to "blacken" Van Halen's guitar-work, to turn it into something more recognizable to the community who'd been alienated from their own creation. Rock guitar solos had been indisputably influenced by pioneering black guitarists from Chuck Berry to Jimi Hendrix, but Van Halen's style is inextricably tied to hair metal, an aggressively white subgenre. Instead of pushing for a racially-defined "kind" of sound, Jackson pushes for the most rocking, aggressive, in-your-face guitar solo he can pull out of this virtuoso, understanding the needs of the music are far more important than any sort of racial allegiance,

³⁷ Cocks, "Why He's A Thriller," 59.

even as the song is working to address racialized social woes. Sound trumps lyric and creates a new meaning, allowing the aggression of Jackson's vocal performance and Van Halen's guitar work to foreground the bravery of standing up for and expressing yourself honestly, the noblest of goals embodied in the lyrics, over the specificity of the situation Jackson has woven his narrative around. And it works; so untouchable is the guitar solo that all Jackson can do for the rest of the song is wail the chorus over and over again until, exhausted, the sound fades out.

"Beat It" could have been the peak of the album, the apex of furious tension and catharsis, but it is not. It fades into a silence that is broken a moment later by one of the starkest and most recognizable beats in the history of pop music³⁸. Played on the snare drum and emphasizing the off-beat of each 4/4 measure, this consistent, up-tempo rhythm is the engine that powers "Billie Jean." For two measures it is heard alone. In the third measure, the iconic pile-driving bass line enters, a tense arpeggio rising and falling with edgy nervousness. For four measures it is just this, the backbone of rock and modern pop – bass and drums, the rhythm section – and then there is a sound panning from right to left, Jackson adding his own vocal percussion "Chh-chh-chh!" Four more measures of just bass and drums, and then the rest of the instruments come in: jittery synthesizers and strings, a heavier (multi-tracked) bass, more vocal percussive interjections from Jackson and then, finally, that unique little vocal hiccup just before he begins to sing.

"Billie Jean" is, without question, a work of sonic art. It is impossible to describe in words exactly how affecting the first 20 seconds of instrumental starkness are for the listener, how tightly it coils your stomach, how your muscles tense involuntarily in anticipation. The restraint of the introduction gives you no choice; it is nothing but a promise of something more, much more. When Jackson finally sings his voice is tight and almost a mumble. His words are unclear, the lyrics sometimes difficult to understand, and he sounds haunted. When he opens with the line "She was more like a beauty queen / from a movie scene" the listener gets the sense he has not stopped thinking about this girl in a long, long time, not because he wants to but because she won't give him a moment's rest. "Billie Jean" is Jackson's tightest and tensest composition to date, a perfect pop song about an imperfect and infrequently employed pop subject: the paranoia and misery caused by fame and adoration. It is ostensibly about a paternity suit, as the repeated

³⁸ "In my estimation," wrote Bruce Swedien, "'Billie Jean' is a perfect example of what I call 'sonic personality.' I don't think there are many recordings where all you need to hear is the first few drum beats, and you instantly know what song it is." (37)

chorus of "But the kid is not my son!" suggests, but that paternity suit is connected through the rest of the lyric (and through the invocation of the title subject's name in "Wanna Be Startin' Something") specifically with the pitfalls of celebrity. When he sings, "She told me her name was Billie Jean as she caused a scene / And every head turned with eyes that dreamed of being the one" he's not singing about being so cute and so popular with the ladies that he has to fend them off with a stick; he's singing about how fame makes you desirable for reasons indiscernible to the person being desired. It's a truth he's seemed to know for a long time but chose to ignore; the pre-chorus breaks free of the mumbling tension of the verses into full-voiced frustration as Michael wails "People always told me: be careful what you do! / Don't go around breaking young girls' hearts!" He doesn't just blame Billie Jean for the lie, but himself for not heeding the advice given to him by his friends, his managers, his mother: "And mother always told me: be careful who you love / Be careful what you do / Because the lie becomes the truth!" Here the public and the personal collapse into one existential crisis, as the press is now implicated alongside Billie Jean and Michael himself for the predicament he's found himself in. And with no other choice, he declares "the truth" to the listener: "Billie Jean is not my lover / She's just a girl who claims that I am the one / But the kid is not my son!"

The lyrics from this point out document a paternity fight, one that is infused with biblical language ("For forty days and for forty nights / the law was on her side") and with references to black community paternity politics ("And showed a photo of my baby crying his eyes were like mine"). Jackson imbricates his experiences as a young, secular black man immersed in the black community with his religiosity, and its reaction to his feelings of persecution at the hands of this wily woman. But the specifics of "Billie Jean" were pulled directly from Jackson's life, and the palpability of the fear, confusion and anguish in his vocal could be attributed to how fresh the inspiring incidents were in his mind. Jackson has never specified a single incident that inspired "Billie Jean" (he said in interviews throughout his life that the music was composed while he was driving, starting with the bass and then the synthesizers and finally the melody), but biographers have identified several. The Jackson family home in Encino, California, had been staked out by female fans since the 1970's, many of whom would try to hop the fence to meet the boys. The family sometimes came home to find those girls hiding in the house or sunbathing by the pool. They – and Michael in particular – also received a large amount of fan mail from fans, some normal and some obsessive. Close friends have recalled Michael getting a letter from a girl claiming he was the father of one of her twins (just one), and some, like former manager Frank DiLeo, have named this girl as the subject of "Billie Jean." J. Randy Taraborrelli, in his

biography *Michael Jackson: The Magic & The Madness* (which is the most definitive biography of Jackson at the moment), offers another scenario:

"In 1981 a female fan wrote Michael a letter to inform him that he was the father of her baby. She enclosed photographs of herself...and of the infant. Michael, who often received letters of this nature, ignored it as he does the others. This teenager, however, was more persistent than the rest. She loved Michael, she claimed, and longed to be with him. She wrote that she could not stop thinking about him and how happy they would be as they raised their child together. She was obviously disturbed.

In the months to come, Michael would receive dozens more letters from this woman. In one, she claimed that the baby and Michael had the same eyes and wondered how he could ignore his flesh and blood. It wasn't long before Michael began having nightmares about the situation.... One day, Michael received a package from her. When he opened it, he discovered another photograph: her high school graduation picture. In it, she smiled with girlish innocence. Also in the box was a gun. In a note, the fan asked Michael to kill himself on a certain day, at a certain time. She wrote that she would do the same – right after she killed the baby. ... Michael was horrified. He took the photograph, had it framed, and displayed it in the dining room on the coffee table."³⁹

Taraborrelli asserts that this is the definitive incident at the center of "Billie Jean," but Jackson never made a public statement one way or the other, choosing instead to skirt the question of the song's subject by saying it was based on an amalgamation of obsessive fans from over the years. I'm not out to dispute him, but I do want to draw attention to the depth of the emotional well he's drawing from here. The lyrics of "Billie Jean" enhance the song, but they are incidental without the virtuosity of his vocal performance.

Michael Jackson has an extraordinarily elastic voice. It was not just flexible with pitch, but with grain as well. The grain of the voice is a term, an idea, coined by Roland Barthes to describe an aspect of music vocally performed that had not yet been named. "The grain is the body in the voice as it sings," he wrote, "the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."⁴⁰ "[It] is not – or is not merely – its timbre," he explained, "the *significance* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message). The song must speak..."⁴¹ We can think of the grain as the emotive inflection on the part of the singer, the extra sonic layer that makes legible to the listener the soul of the music. Lyrics are just words set to music; the grain of the voice is what gives those words weight and meaning, and what compels us to listen. Jackson has the ability to sing in almost every mode, inflecting almost every meaning. Others composed pop dynamite for him, but when he wrote for himself the real power of that voice box

³⁹ J. Randy Taraborrelli. *Michael Jackson: The Magic & The Madness*. London (Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003): 223-224.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" in *Image Music Text*. London (Fontana, 1977): 188.

⁴¹ Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 185

was put on display. "Billie Jean" derives the majority of its weight, its paranoia, and its emotional grip on the listener from the incredible vocal performance Michael turns in. Bruce Swedien recalled that when they recorded the song it was recorded in full vocal takes with no drop-ins, meaning Jackson sang the song from beginning to end without flubbing a lyric, missing a note, or coming in late⁴². This is very unusual in pop music, especially with the increasing advances in recording technology. Recording this way allows Jackson to harness the power of the live performance on record; he can follow a natural emotional crescendo through the song, allowing himself to get lost in the sound and the lyrics in a way he wouldn't if he was stopping and starting from lyric to lyric, verse to verse. This technique gives *Thriller*, as a whole, a far more compelling sound than your average pop album, but it particularly benefits "Billie Jean." Jackson needs to build that paranoia and claustrophobia for the song, in all its eventual forms to work.

I don't think it's accidental that "Billie Jean" was *Thriller's* first huge radio smash, Jackson's first major video, the video that broke the color line on MTV, *and* Jackson's most iconic live performance, a dance routine so perfect that for the next 25 years he was essentially not allowed to perform it any other way. That video and that performance – the performance on the televised 25th anniversary Motown celebration, *Motown: Yesterday, Today, Forever* – will be discussed in further depth later. I bring them up now only to point out that as a song, "Billie Jean" was recorded with its iconic performance potential in mind. Jackson's voice builds and builds until we reach the bridge which, on record, can come off as surprisingly understated. Though punctuated by a few tortured yelps, it's mostly a tense, sparse electric guitar solo and then right back into the chorus, repeating his rebuke of the paternity charges until he finally withdraws into silence. It does nothing to interrupt flow or break mood, but the bridge also makes much more sense once you see Jackson fill it with a short dance break consisting of his tight spins, gravity-defying toe stand, and, most importantly, the moonwalk. Jackson was also known to dance while recording, and the marriage of body, voice and sound is readily apparent in the song's composition.

The sequencing of *Thriller* is a master-class in balancing emotion and intensity, and the track following the sonic assault of "Billie Jean," the dreamy, spacey "Human Nature," provides the listener with the same kind of space to relax as "Baby Be Mine" did following "Wanna Be Startin' Something." Composed by Steve Porcaro with lyrics by John Bettis it began as a small snippet at the end of a tape of songs submitted to Quincy Jones for *Thriller* and was then written

⁴² He also recalled that he created 91 mixes for "Billie Jean." The mix on the album is #2.

into a complete pop vehicle for Jackson⁴³. The snippet consisted of what would become the chorus, the airy "Why? Why" followed by Porcaro just humming the melody that would be set to the words "Tell 'em that it's human nature." Jones and Jackson were both taken with the melody and asked for it to be turned into a whole song. The result is a dreamy lament of freedom, Jackson yearning to run through the streets of New York City at night, to be young and free. Paired with the oppressive paranoia of "Billie Jean" it seems to embody a direct response to the former's content. "Looking out across the night time / the city winks a sleepless eye," he sings breathily, "Hear her voice shake my window / sweet seducing sighs." The listener can see him ensconced in a decadent penthouse suite in one of the city's high-rise hotels, staring out into the dark night and winking, blinking buildings, longing to be out there and not trapped inside, to be part of the world and not just observing it. "Let me out into the night time," he begs, "Four walls won't hold me tonight / If this town is just an apple / then let me take a bite!" Jackson keeps his voice wistful, and the shuffling easy beat and light synthesizer work keeps the song from feeling mired in sadness, but his longing is palpable. And with the chorus, Jackson brings his personal longing for escape round to something more universal: "When they say why? Why? / Tell them that it's human nature." Perhaps we don't all feel trapped like Jackson feels trapped in the gilded cage of fame, but he knows as well as we do that we all have our moments in which we just want to get out of wherever we are, escape whatever our small pressures are, and run uninhibited through our towns, cities, countryside, just feeling alive.

"Human Nature" returns Jackson to a more conventional R&B mode after the pop uniqueness displayed in "Thriller," "Beat It" and "Billie Jean." It's extraordinarily effective, both in the way it gives the listener space to decompress after the attack of those three songs and in grounding us once more in familiar pop and soul aesthetics, grounding Jackson there as well. Some songs on *Thriller*, like "Wanna Be Startin' Something," "Beat It" and "Billie Jean," are real breakthroughs in the pop musical form, new precedents for what can be done with that familiar set of rules, sounds and rhythms. "Human Nature" is not revolutionary in that way, but it is soothing and romantic, yearning and deep, a perfect vehicle for some of the softer tones Jackson's voice can achieve and some of the softer emotions he can evoke. It's also wonderfully age appropriate; Jackson was 24 when *Thriller* was released and the dreamy yearning on "Human Nature" reminds us that all young people have certain feelings and experiences in common, despite massive differences in background. The desire for independence, freedom, exploration, romance, and the allure of the city is something all of his young listeners were feeling in their

⁴³ George, *Thriller*, 131.

own particular way. The ability to convey that kind of universality, especially considering the unique circumstances of his own life, is just another reason why Jackson was able to enact such a stunning cultural transformation with this album.

Now in its final ten minutes, *Thriller* does not use the lull provided by "Human Nature" to sink further into musical inertia as happened in its first third. Instead, the ballad is followed by "P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)," a sassy, flirty dance pop composition by Quincy Jones and James Ingram that has Michael playing the role of the irrepressible flirt, virile young man out to catch the next pretty thing in a skirt that goes his way. Jones and Ingram use some highly improbably "slang" (I put it in quotes because I have never heard of "tenderoni" being used as slang for a girl one likes until after "P.Y.T." became a hit) to ground the lyric firmly in the frivolity of youth: "Where did you come from baby? / And ooh won't you take me there / Right away, won't you baby / Tenderoni you've got to be / Sparklin' nature, sugar fly with me." It's silly, nonsensical – young and dumb, if you will – and perfectly in tune with both Jackson's playfulness and his audience. Ingram, a deep-voiced soul singer, uses the slang of the lecherous old man in the song; one only calls a girl a "pretty young thing" if he knows he's too old to chase after her. As Nelson George points out, "An older guy leering at a young girl is a staple of American music, but even so 'PYT' would probably not have been a top-ten hit if Ingram had put it on one of his solo albums. Michael's man-child quality is what really sells the song."⁴⁴ Caught in the crosshairs of Michaelmania, many journalists in the year after *Thriller* is released will write time and again of Jackson's childishness: his fascination with Peter Pan and Disney, the many young friends he has and is seen publicly with, his outspokenness about the kinship he feels with children, his admiration of E.T., his infantilized nature and soft, boyish voice. They will make fun of him for it, question his sanity because of it, and some will even go so far as to insinuate that such personality traits make him an unfit superstar and icon. Most of them will express confusion at how such a childish man (or "man-child" as he is often referred to) can make such adult music. All who do so miss the youthful energy and fun in songs like "Baby Be Mine" and especially "P.Y.T." While "Billie Jean," "Wanna Be Startin' Something," and "Beat It" may all be heavier compositions, they are only one third of this album. Pleasure, playfulness and fun are all essential characteristics of dance music, pop music, and as Robin Kelley makes clear, black music: "Black music, creativity and experimentation in language must also be understood as sources of visceral and psychic pleasure."⁴⁵ Jackson's youthful performance on "P.Y.T." rescues it from a tired soul

⁴⁴ George, *Thriller*, 137.

⁴⁵ Kelley, *Yo' Mama's DisFUNKtional*, 41.

trope of lechery and re-infuses it with just that visceral pleasure. From the silly verses to the even sillier call-and-response bridge ("Pretty young things repeat after me / Sing: Na na na! / (Na Na Na!)") with the responses sung by Jackson's sisters Janet and La Toya) to the supremely wacky Alvin and the Chipmunks voice overlaid on the song's final moments, it is in some ways the least burdened and most conventional song on the album. Its conventionality doesn't sound staid though. It is fresh, it is bubbling, and it is perfect.

If "P.Y.T." is a sonic statement about Jackson's commitment to youthful frivolity, then "The Lady In My Life," *Thriller's* final track, is Michael all grown up. Nelson George states that the song was originally commissioned from Rod Temperton by Quincy Jones for Frank Sinatra; instead it was recorded by Michael. It's an extremely complicated composition, full of strange rhythms and unexpected chord and key changes, perhaps the most melodically complex composition Jackson sang outside of "I Can't Help It," from *Off The Wall*, which was written specifically for him by Stevie Wonder. It demands from Jackson a vocal performance strikingly different than the rest of *Thriller*, one that is more mature and complex than even the sweeping paranoia of "Billie Jean" or the anger of "Wanna Be Startin' Something." Jackson recalled in his 1988 autobiography that it "was one of the most difficult tracks to cut. We were used to doing a lot of takes to get a vocal as nearly perfect as possible, but Quincy wasn't satisfied with my work on that song, even after literally dozens of takes. Finally he took me aside late one session and told me he wanted me to beg. He wanted me to go back to the studio and literally *beg* for it."⁴⁶ The "it" in question here is sex, and it is the topic perhaps least covered on *Thriller*. "Billie Jean" represents its fallout – the paternity suit, the rumors, the self in crisis – but it barely figures into the romantic duel of "The Girl Is Mine," and though it is mentioned in the lyrics of "Baby Be Mine" ("Only you and I could make sweet love this way") it is far from the topic of the song. *Thriller's* approach to sex, much like Jackson's in real life, is to skirt it, to imply it, but never confront it, revealing that at its center the album and the man behind it are deeply ambivalent about it. This makes sense in the context of Jackson's upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness, a sect of Christianity with stricter-than-usual teachings about sex and its place only in a marriage. During the recording, release and explosion of *Thriller*, Jackson was open about his deep devotion to his religion, his implied virginity, and his complex views on women and relationships. He seems at this time to be inexperienced in adult relationships – he publically dates Tatum O'Neill and Brooke Shields, but the public and media are skeptical about whether either relationship would be seen as such when compared with a typical adult relationship – and rumors abound that he is gay

⁴⁶ Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 197-198.

(rumors that had been persistent since the 1970's), transsexual, and asexual, but his performances speak to an undercurrent of natural, raw masculinity and sexual virility. So as not to get distracted, think of it like this: At large, we assume a certain level of sexual authenticity in the performance of black soul and pop music, but that assumption was not automatically transferred onto Michael Jackson by dint of his race. His public innocence, his man-child persona, and a lack of an extensive public dating history make him an unlikely singer for a song like "The Lady In My Life," and explains why Jones had a hard time drawing the right emotional and sexual intensity out of his voice.

In the end, Jackson performs. The song's groove is irresistibly sexy, and Michael's voice settles deep into that pocket and just flows. He croons, he entices, and boy oh boy does he beg. He begins the first verse sweetly, but by the end of the song when he is ad-libbing his pleas for this woman to stay with him, next to him; his voice is raw and ragged. As Nelson George astutely points out, all he has to do is dip into a lifetime of watching some of the greatest soul men performing their own love songs to conjure the right emotions for this song, but he doesn't just pull from them, he joins their ranks with this performance. He oozes sex and heat, maturity and mastery. He is confident and strong, powerful. It is a statement more subtle but just as firm as the one issued by "Wanna Be Startin' Something" at the album's outset: Michael Jackson is not some boy who can be pushed around by the business and the culture anymore. Michael Jackson is a man, and he's coming for your women. Perhaps it looks a little silly written out like that, but it's right there in the sound. This is a new man, a new album, and the dawn of a new day.

Thriller lasts for under three quarters of an hour, but it takes the listener through an epic gamut of emotions, sounds and performances. Jones sequences it into a musical rollercoaster, with insanely high peaks and smooth drops. One can imagine Jackson laid out on the floor of the studio, sweating and panting at the end of the final take of "The Lady in My Life" because that is what the listener is reduced to by the end of the album as well (perhaps not sweating, though how one stays seated through some of those dance tracks is beyond me). It is an extremely powerful set of nine songs, and it is doing work as we listen to it. Jackson's extreme reluctance to give interviews to the press (especially the white press; he was a little bit more loose-lipped with *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, with whom he'd had a relationship since the Jackson 5) can, and I think should, be interpreted as a directive to his audience and the public at large to use his album, and eventually his music videos, as the primary text by which to understand him. Though he sometimes justified his unwillingness to talk about himself by complaining about the way the

press twisted his words and intentionally misquoted him (a complaint that became more frequent and louder after *Thriller* and his pop explosion), I think his primary motivation was the sense that he'd been perfectly clear about his state of mind, intentions, and insight on his records, in the sound and in the lyrics, and that the record should speak for itself. I think looking at the evolution of his albums, we can see a reflection of that – as Jackson became more political and philanthropically-minded more socially conscious songs, like "Man in the Mirror," "Heal the World" and "Earth Song," took up tracks on his albums that may have been previously devoted to a couple throwaway love ditties. In 1982, Jackson is not looking to talk about the world at large; *Thriller* is a deeply personal album, though it may not take the introspective, self-examining form that we have become used to after decades of folk- and rock-grounded singer-songwriters. He writes dance music, but the music and the lyrics are underwritten with intense emotions and feelings, clues to his inner life expressed as he feels most comfortable expressing himself: in sound (and eventually dance), not in words.

As I hope I made clear in my close reading, though *Thriller* does not contain conventional social message songs (with, perhaps, the exception of "Beat It"), it engages with a number of serious social issues in a far more subtle way. Jackson's assertion and interpretation of his own blackness encompasses a number of different issues about race relations both within the black community and between the black and white communities. Jackson chooses to take up the issue of his identity and his place in America without singing directly about it, parsing complex feelings through the sonic assault of "Wanna Be Startin' Something" and the frustration of "Beat It." He is clearly deeply connected to his black roots and his black identity, but does not feel that those things should alienate him from white listeners in any way. In fact, coming towards the end of the waves of militant Black Nationalism that had been sweeping through the black community since the late 1960's, Jackson's sonic vision is much closer to the integrationist approach of Dr. King than the separatist message extolled by Malcolm X. It's not that Jackson is looking for assimilation – again, he resists "whitening" his music at all turns – but that his music recognizes that black and white identities are all variations on the same American theme; that we have far more commonalities than differences. His music is not an olive branch so much as it is a window into the other side of the racial fence, and the compulsiveness of the dance rhythms are the indication that skin color as arbiter of taste is suddenly horrifically passé. This is not music for white people or black people, it's music for young people, for funky people, and because of that it is able to transgress all the boundaries set up to make sure that black culture and white culture do not further intermix.

Though the videos will help it along, it is the *sound* that sets in motion the crumbling of so many color lines. Earlier I related the story of "Beat It" transgressing the AOR color line without even intending to. Now, I want to quote *Rolling Stone's* assessment of *Thriller* in the 1983 yearbook issue, at the end of the first year of Michaelmania:

"[Michael Jackson's] scenario for *Thriller* looked something like this: satisfy the black/urban-contemporary audience at the year's outset with the dance-club-styled 'Billie Jean.' Then, as LP sales hit 2 million, launch a major assault on the whites-only land of MTV and album-oriented radio (AOR) with 'Beat It,' a rock and roll slammer that features a blazing Eddie Van Halen guitar solo and is accompanied by an invigorating video directed by Miller Lite lensman Bob Giraldi.

It was a smart plan, but it didn't work. It didn't have to. There was simply no resisting 'Billie Jean' – that pile-driving bass line, that soaring vocal and that magnificent Steve Barron video, each frame of which is a further testament to Jackson's amazing talent as a dancer ... [I]n a year full of successes and trends, from the Aussie Invasion to the Tide of Technopop, the crossover of Jackson's 'Billie Jean' was the most important. It exposed black music to a white audience for the first time in the post-disco era; it led to the collapse of AOR and its consultants; and it signified the primacy of MTV."⁴⁷

All of that from just one song. *Rolling Stone's* attention to the impact of the videos should not be ignored, nor do I wish to – perhaps the most astounding thing about *Thriller* and Jackson's success is that his videos served only to enhance already astounding pop songs, not detract in any way (a very difficult feat, as many subsequent years of MTV have shown). But MTV's agreeing to show the video for "Billie Jean" on MTV was largely influenced by its status as a smash radio hit, on black and white radio alike, and by the stunning sales of *Thriller* only four months after its release. The video may have broken MTV's color line, but the song is what broke everyone else's.

Each television performance, each music video, each new sales record, each tour date enhanced Jackson's cache and *Thriller's* allure, but none of them would have been possible if the album did not provide such a solid musical foundation. The power and potency of the music can be measured by the oh-so-famous sales numbers: 14 million worldwide by October 1983,⁴⁸ 8.5 million in the US; over 30 million records sold worldwide by March 1984 and over 19 million in the US,⁴⁹ to make it the biggest selling album of all time in less than a year and a half after its release. Numbers like that can only be achieved if more than one person per family is purchasing the album; to put it another way, *Thriller* was a record that siblings could not share. It is the power of the music that makes each listener's relationship to the record so intense that people had to have their own copy; it is the power of the music that allows the bass lick of "Billie Jean" or

⁴⁷ Jon Pareles, "The Year In Music." *Rolling Stone*, December 24, 1983: 19-20

⁴⁸ *Billboard Magazine*, "Thriller Tops 14 Million," October 8, 1983.

⁴⁹ *Billboard Magazine*, "All-Time Best-Seller: 'Thriller' Album Breaks 'Fever'," March 19, 1984.

guitar riff of "Beat It" to need only to be hummed in passing to be recognized. Today a limp record may be able to excel from one or two truly excellent music videos, but that was not the case when *Thriller* was released because *Thriller* and its videos for "Billie Jean," "Beat It" and "Thriller" is what made the music video into the cultural emblem and measure of worth that it became. MTV may have existed before Michael Jackson, but Michael Jackson *made* MTV and he would have never been able to get their attention had his music been anything other than simply undeniable.

Importance, achievement and impact can and have been measured by sales and sales records, and in that arena *Thriller* stands atop them all. Its success is unequivocal. But sales are not the beginning and end of *Thriller's* story, and are only the very tip of the iceberg when teasing out why Jackson is such a desperately important American icon. Sales can show us a fad, or a trend, but *Thriller* is neither: it's the impetus for a pop explosion, for a drastic cultural shift, and that can never be measured by charts or sales alone. The true measure of *Thriller's* impact can only be measured by the relentless and relentlessly public swells of adoration and obsession from his fans. *Thriller* inspired the kind of public chaos and emotion unseen in America since The Beatles landed in 1964, and Jackson earned himself the honor of having a mania named after him because of it: Michaelmania. It is in the pitch, volume and variations of Michaelmania that we can locate the truly subversive work that *Thriller* and Jackson are doing to American identity, and it is to Michaelmania that I turn my attention now.

Chapter Two

This One's for the Girls in the Back: Michaelmania

What is mania, and why is it important? Strictly speaking, a mania is what happens when a large swath of people (in our case, Americans) becomes obsessed with a particular cultural artifact and that artifact becomes the focus of media coverage and discussion amongst arbiters of taste and ordinary citizens alike. We can describe the uproar surrounding the multitude of passing fads that come through our popular culture, like slap bracelets and Beanie Babies, as manias if we wish, but we don't. The word is used more carefully, applied selectively to things that are beyond the scope of the ordinary fad, especially when that fad is a performer or type of music. Cultural historians, fans, and journalists tend to recognize only a few actual manias in the history of popular music. Popularity fads – moments when an act or artist becomes insanely popular on the radio or, later, MTV and temporarily dominates pop culture – are common and frequent. Popular music especially tends to celebrate newness above all, reveling in its short memory, insisting on innovation even where it's not present (as when Britney Spears and Lady Gaga blatantly recycle motifs, sounds and visual themes from Madonna and are still heralded as innovators in the industry) and latching onto any new iteration of a sound as a reason to cast off the supposedly tired and staid music of just the previous year in favor of a new set of albums and merchandise to buy. Without dipping too far into capitalistic cynicism, the cyclical nature of the music industry means record companies are heavily invested in finding an artist who can become very popular very quickly, exposing them to the widest audience as possible, and then casting them aside in favor of the next new thing.

There are many names for these bursts of popularity that erupt constantly in the music industry. They're "one hit wonders," "fevers," "crazes," and of course "fads." The descriptions offer both a sense of the pitch of the reaction and participation of fans, and a sense of their short duration; after all, fevers break, crazes calm, and "one hit wonders" never go on to have a second number one single. The term "mania" can only be applied to reactions that are transcendent and sustained, something nearly impossible to know beforehand, but also instinctively easy to recognize. Manias are hotter than fevers, louder than crazes, and last far longer than any fad or one hit wonder. Manias are sparked by something innate and special in an artist and their music, what Greil Marcus means when he says that within those around whom they revolve, "the

capacity for fad must be utterly profound."⁵⁰ What began as a term to dismiss, to describe devoted fans as maniacs, lunatics, people incapable of making rational decisions and therefore incapable of being taken seriously, was transformed through its attachments to profound music and profound connections between performers and their audiences into a term of reverence and special respectability. The reluctance to assign the term "mania" to the vast majority of popular pop music acts is not because of some arbitrary marker of record sales or radio play, but because it signifies a deep, profound, and tenacious connection between one musical act and our notions of American identity.

This may sound hyperbolic, but consider the only acts in popular music history to have manias unequivocally⁵¹ attached to them: Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and Michael Jackson. Even though there are far more musical icons – Stevie Wonder, Madonna, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, Barbara Streisand, Elton John, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, I could go on – and dozens of loud musical fads – teen idols and boybands have inspired plenty of shrieks through the 20th century – only three groups or performers are granted a spot on the very highest echelon of the pop music universe. Only three groups or performers have been able to reach deep into the American consciousness and fundamentally change who we are. The ways in which Elvis and the Beatles were able to enact permanent substantive changes on American identity – and *especially* American youth identity – have been well documented by others. In this chapter I will explore and analyze Michaelmania and its equally permanent and substantive changes on American (especially youth) identity. In doing so, I argue that Michaelmania, as manifested in 1983 and 1984, marks the third and heretofore last pop explosion experienced by the American people. As such, it marks a moment of subversion, transgression, and transformation, all of which are still central to the way that Americans and young Americans in particular conceive of themselves in our present moment.

The term "pop explosion" was coined by Marcus in his essay about The Beatles, written for the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll* in 1976, five years after the Jackson 5 had their historic run of four consecutive number one hits. He uses it to help the reader understand importance of the Beatles in the context of rock critic Lester Bangs' observation that

⁵⁰ Marcus, "The Beatles," 215.

⁵¹ Many argue that Frank Sinatra was the object of the "first" mania, but I think that manias are distinctly peri- and post-rock 'n' roll. Seeing manias through Marcus's lens of the pop explosion as transformative moments, the frenzy surrounding Sinatra certainly points to his enduring and unquestionable importance as a performer, singer, and lust object, but his musical offerings and presentation did nothing to challenge or change notions of American identity even during the peak of his popularity.

the British Invasion was "not simply a matter of music, but of event."⁵² Marcus asserts that only within the context of the Beatles event does the importance of the Beatles' music become legible, as it is then that it is exposed as a pop explosion. He goes on to define the pop explosion thusly:

"A pop explosion is an irresistible cultural upheaval that cuts across lines of class and race (in terms of sources, if not allegiance), and, most crucially, divides society itself by age. The surface of daily life (walk, talk, dress, symbolism, heroes, family affairs) is affected with such force that deep and substantive changes in the way large numbers of people think and act take place. Pop explosions must link up with, and accelerate, broad shifts in sexual behavior, economic aspirations and political beliefs; a pervasive sense of chaos...doesn't hurt. ... Enormous energy—the energy of frustration, desire, repression, adolescence, sex, ambition—finds an object in a pop explosion, and that energy is focused on, organized by and released by a single holistic cultural entity. This entity must itself be capable of easy, instantaneous and varied imitation and extension, in a thousand ways at once; it must embody, suggest, affirm and legitimize new possibilities on all fronts even as it outstrips them. This is a fancy way of saying that the capacity for fad must be profound.

And, at its heart, a pop explosion attaches the individual to a group—the fan to an audience, the solitary to a generation—in essence, *forms* a group and creates new loyalties—while at the same time it increases one's ability to respond to a particular pop artifact, or a thousand of them, with an intensity that verges on lunacy."⁵³

It would be foolish of us not to look at Michael Jackson's music through this same lens. As with the Beatles, the importance of *Thriller* becomes clear when we look at Jackson in the context of his own event. Jackson's event and the Beatles' event, however, are not the same. Beatlemania can be traced to an exact date – February 9, 1964, when they touched down in New York City for the first time – and was sparked when an extraordinary of teenagers reacted strongly first to their music, which suddenly saturated the airwaves as Capitol Records launched a promotional campaign leading up to their Ed Sullivan Show performances, and then to the images of them performing their songs on television and giving numerous TV and radio interviews. Michaelmania, on the other hand, emerges in a more curious and organic fashion. Unlike the Beatles, Jackson is an already-established American star and has been since childhood. Also unlike the Beatles, the release of *Thriller* is preceded only by the release of its first single to radio, a standard marketing practice and nothing like the blitz Capitol initiated in 1964.

Furthermore, as a black man and not a cute quartet of white Brits, Jackson's established star status is balanced by a racist and segregated cultural apparatus that is set up to hinder rather than facilitate his success. This is especially important when one considers that Michaelmania unfolds in two steps. The first is the initial six-month period after *Thriller* is released in December 1982. The album is immediately lauded for its musical achievement. Interest increases

⁵² Marcus, "The Beatles" p. 214.

⁵³ Marcus, "The Beatles" p. 214-215.

when album cuts are played on the radio before the next single is officially released, which is when "Beat It" inadvertently breaks the AOR color line and earns the very reluctant goodwill of rock fans. The second step hinges on specifically the demands by this public to *see* more of Michael Jackson. MTV, new vanguard of the music industry, has by 1983 become as important as radio to marketing musical acts and albums. MTV had also enacted a strict policy, based on problematic demographic research, of playing almost exclusively white artists in rock 'n roll videos. Following the release of "Billie Jean" as a radio single and its smashing success, amid mounting public and private pressure, MTV agrees to air the music video for the single. In early March of 1983 it is added to the playlist in heavy rotation. On March 31, 1983, the video for "Beat It" premieres during primetime and joins "Billie Jean" in heavy rotation. By April, Michaelmania has exploded in all its transformative glory.

The pitch and cadence of Michaelmania and its concurrent pop explosion are distinct from those that have come before it because of his race, because of this visual element, and because of his unique interaction with the public. Unlike Elvis or The Beatles, Michael Jackson was not interested in giving interviews. He was not interested in appearing on television talk shows, or calling into radio stations. He made very few public appearances, and when he did he spoke as little as possible. He was clearly charismatic and charming – that came through from his music videos, in which he invested much time, money, and creativity. But he was not goofy and funny like the Beatles or sultry and provocative like Elvis, though girls lusted after his own particular (and particularly powerful) sexiness. We are used to celebrities who are willing to be in the spotlight, and behavior otherwise is contradictory and contrarian to us; it annoys and frustrates, especially when that reluctance is met with even more popularity in seemingly-endless waves. But this is all still perfectly within the framework of Marcus' pop explosion, in which the cultural artifact at its center – Michael Jackson, in this case – does not need to be physically present or engaged to be important. He takes on symbolic significance for his fans and for the people around his fans (as non-participation in fandom does not spare you from the pop explosion). Jackson's ability to sustain the mania around him without having to directly engage with it is just another testament to his cultural power.

Michaelmania and Jackson's pop explosion are integral to my discussion of American identity because if we understand identity as an articulation of the self-in-process in relation to the world around it, as has been proposed by Stuart Hall among others, and music as a way of forming, articulating and experiencing identity as proposed by scholars like Simon Frith, then

mania becomes a way of witnessing and eventually documenting the formation of new identities in American youth. "[T]he experience of music for composer/performer and listener alike," Frith asserts, "gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it"⁵⁴ which in turns leads to the formation of an identity which is intimately connected not to the internal experience of an individual, but of the individual as part of a group and the group as comprised of many individuals. "Music constructs our sense of identity," Frith suggests, "through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imagined cultural narratives."⁵⁵ The content of mania – the words, actions and imitations emanating from the audience taking in the music and musician – is a way of reading and recognizing the cultural narratives being written and deployed by those for whom the music is enacting the process of identity creation. Since transcendence or rewriting of previous cultural narratives is a hallmark of mania – what Marcus is gesturing to with his comments on the role of the pop explosion connecting the performer to an audience and the individual to a group – we are given a particularly clear view into the process of making the self *and* the process of making a social group at the same time, because both of these things are enacted by the experience of music and interaction with a cultural icon.

Before I get into my lengthy discussion of the biography of Michaelmania, its participants, its characteristics, and its legacy, I want to note one more thing the reader should keep in mind, which is the artificial and constructed gulf between the subversive/transformational and the mainstream. We frame subversion as something that almost always comes from outside or beneath the dominant culture. Its interaction with the mainstream is problematic for us. Subversive cultural products that become popular and absorbed into the mainstream are framed as losing their power; subversive groups are either assimilated and their subversion rendered impotent, or they retreat back to the margins after their moment in the spotlight. These may be common circumstances, but they are not universal and the gap constructed between subversive culture and mainstream culture is false. Celebration and adoption of a subversive cultural product by the mainstream does not mean it automatically loses its transgressive properties, or that they have been somehow neutralized by the participation of the majority and not the minority. Instead, I think that when subversive cultural products achieve true mainstream popularity, the power of that subversion is amplified. Instead of a small slice of the public engaging willingly with

⁵⁴ Simon Frith, "Music and Identity" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, ed. London (Sage Press, 1996): 114.

⁵⁵ Frith, "Music and Identity," 124.

transgressive practices, representations, and messages, the culture at large engages and transforms. Frith notes that "[popular music's] most important social function is assumed to be commercial – the starting analytical assumption is that the music is made to sell; research focuses on who makes marketing decisions and why, on the construction of taste and 'taste publics.'"⁵⁶ As such, when music sells well (in this case, when an album becomes the biggest selling album of all time) scholars view its importance in terms of the triumphs of its marketing and engagement with capitalism; any rebellion or transgression in its message is lost to those who see the apparatus of capitalism (and successful use or manipulation of that apparatus) as the primary structuring force of American identity, a hegemonic force so powerful it cannot be overcome or subverted. It's a woefully short-sighted view; as Frith points out, "The appeal of the music itself, the reason why people like it, and what, more importantly, 'liking it' means, is buried under an analysis of sales strategies, demographics, the anthropology of consumption."⁵⁷ Especially when looking at music that becomes mega-popular, losing sight of the *why* of the music in favor of using it as an entrée into examining consumptive practices blinds us to the transformative value of popular music when it is taken up by an immense group of Americans.

Perhaps we can think of this using as our example rock music broadly conceived. When first created, rock was a deeply transgressive and subversive genre of music frowned upon by the public at large, and enjoyed by small groups of people – mostly young and mostly black – until Elvis and the Beatles popularized it amongst the white American majority. When The Beatles took rock mainstream they also created a powerful and potent pop explosion that, as I've argued in the past⁵⁸, was greatly responsible for the coalescing of youth identity that was then able to manifest in the counterculture, the anti-war movement, and bolstered second-wave feminism. In this case, as with others, acceptance by the mainstream enhanced the potency of rock's subversion. The argument that assimilation into mainstream culture eventually drains rock of its subversive potency shouldn't be automatically dismissed as history seems to have borne it out, but what is at issue here is the notion that interaction with the mainstream (especially positive interaction) always and automatically renders the previously subversive impotent. Recognizing this fallacy is vital to our exploration and understanding of Michael Jackson, Michaelmania, and its lasting effects as a pop explosion on American culture, for it is when he is taken up by the mainstream in proportions heretofore unseen in his life that Jackson's music, visual presentation,

⁵⁶ Frith, "Music and Identity," 120.

⁵⁷ Frith, "Music and Identity," 120.

⁵⁸ Sara Tenenbaum, *One Sweet Dream: The Beatles and America, 1964-1967*. Waltham (Brandeis University, 2006).

and mere existence become the site of subversive cultural transformation. As Dave Marsh noted in 1985, "Michael Jackson's music brought black sounds and black faces back to the center of all pop; he created, in fact, the first pervasively popular music, with appeal in almost every segment of the audience, since the demise of The Beatles."⁵⁹

American culture at the time of *Thriller's* release was an internally conflicted, confused, and curious thing. It was caught firmly between a burdensome past and an unknown future, flickering in an uncertain present. The staggering changes that started in the 1960's continued to reverberate through the country, and caused visible and particular ripples in each of our cultural corners. Popular culture and the entertainment industry, both catering to the youth demographic that first became socioeconomically essential during the rock explosion, was in a particularly precarious position. While American movies were coming out of a particularly creative and exciting period, American popular music was in a kind of free-fall. The rock 'n' roll and soul explosions of the 1960's had been interrupted by the disco in the mid-70's, which by 1980 triggered a massive backlash. The result was a swift and severe re-segregation of the music industry, a return to a form that hadn't been used since the era of "race" records. First Motown, then soul and funk had served the breaking down of segregation in American music. White rock bands talked openly of their love and respect for black musical forefathers and the stunning achievements of Motown in the 1960's, and then Sly Stone, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder in the 1970's had integrated Americans' record collections more than they had ever been before. Disco initially looked like it would continue that trend; it was a black-originating music, written and performed primarily by black musicians, and was popular across racial lines. But disco quickly became overwhelming. It was easily co-opted by mainstream record labels and white artists looking for a quick hit. Those opportunists did not care much about the funk roots of the genre, or about what would make a good song versus an easy hit. Disco oversaturated the market and the airwaves. Since the popular music world was still ruled by radio, DJs wielded great influence over their audiences and when they grew tired of disco, they drew the line.

Claiming that disco was being forced upon their listeners, who hated it, they established Album Oriented Radio (or AOR), a format designed specifically to allow DJs to play only rock records at the exclusion of a near totality of black music. With a handful of notable exceptions⁶⁰ soul, funk and R&B (collectively known as "black music") had not paid much attention to the

⁵⁹ Marsh, *Trapped*, 2.

⁶⁰ Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book* and *Innervisions*, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, etc.

long-playing album as a musical format the way rock had. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* transformed rock music forever by introducing the idea of the concept album and, through its genius, making the idea intensely appealing. Rock became art, and changed forever. "[B]lame it on 'Sgt. Pepper,'" Dave Marsh told the *Baltimore Sun* in 1983, "You see, I think the idea is that rock and roll has not just been mistakenly identified as white music, but that it has been identified as European art music – that European art music is the key to its tradition – which, of course, is all wrong, totally backwards. But how else do you explain the idea that groups like Pink Floyd, Yes, Genesis or King Crimson are rock bands? ... [R]ock had to be redefined, and the consequence of this highbrow redefinition was to play into the hands of lowbrow backlash."⁶¹ The lowbrow backlash meant separating rock from its origins in black music, in the blues, and alienating it from forefathers like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino. What Marsh pinpoints as a misidentification of rock tradition becomes the logic by which record companies, radio stations, and eventually MTV, could justify increasingly complete musical segregation. Instead of stating their decisions in the proper racial terms, they redefined rock to exclude all sounds that could be considered soulful or funky. Where the original crossover rock music by The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Who reveled in the heavy backbeat and crunching guitars of blues, and the pep and harmony of Motown, "rock" in 1982 was defined by the absence of all those. Of course, those now-rejected musical forms still successfully existed but they did so under the ever-present modifier of "black." Just as in the days of Jim Crow, music that was considered "black" was separated from the bunch and labeled accordingly. There were "black" sections in record stores, "black" radio stations, and "black" LP and singles charts in *Billboard*. It was the music industry's equivalent of "separate but equal," with all the dishonesty and maliciousness of its historical precedent.

It's redundant to assert that racism has always been present in the music industry, but by the 1980's that racism was occupying an increasingly uncomfortable public position. Marsh points out, "A generation of American kids had grown up listening to radio broadcasts that were almost as strictly segregated as they were before Elvis Presley, Alan Freed, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and other pioneers of rock n roll."⁶² Music was rightfully seen as one of the more progressive and integrative forces for social change during the cultural shifts of the 1960's, and the spirit of diversity, equality and universal love were a consistent topic of white and black

⁶¹ J.P. Considine, "Black music/white music: Is racism rocking rock?" *Baltimore Sun*, January 16, 1983: D15.

⁶² Marsh, *Trapped*, 2.

artists alike. To have acceptance and rejection once again couched in such overtly racial terms was problematic, and the DJs and executives enacted elaborate explanations to try to reconcile reality with image. They claimed that this really was all genre and sound, and not anything to do with race. Chuck DuCoty, a Baltimore AOR DJ interviewed for the same article as Marsh combated charges of racism by boasting, "There are a lot of white artists who play funk-type music, and we don't play them either."⁶³ And, even more importantly, they insisted their listeners could tell the difference and uniformly rejected the black sounds. "When Queen was experimenting with [funk-type music]," DuCoty explained, "we played 'Another One Bites the Dust' – which we don't play anymore"⁶⁴. And this last album, which was more funk-oriented, we played but it stiffed badly. That tells me it's not a black or white situation, but a style of music that does or does not work on an AOR radio station."⁶⁵ The result of all this elaborate justifying was that the music world seemed hopelessly flattened and monotonous, stifled by the very segregation DJs claimed would save rock 'n' roll. "People wonder why pop music lost its sense of possibility and enchantment in the Seventies," Marsh wrote in his 1985 book on Michael Jackson, "What other goddamn reason do they need? Segregation is precisely what choked off the spirit that lifted Sixties music. Once black performers had to beg, twist, and contort to get their fair share of attention, everything was distorted and corrupted – including the white rock world."⁶⁶ By the 1980's, the format and its racist undertones found itself under an even closer microscope because of the premiere of MTV (Music Television).

A 24-hour cable network that played almost exclusively music videos and was dedicated solely to rock, MTV became very popular and very important very fast. It debuted on August 1, 1981, with a base of 2.5 million subscribers, which increased tenfold to 25.4 million subscribers by 1984.⁶⁷ Music videos had been created and used in the past, mostly by European groups who were still based in Europe, and outside of touring did not get much exposure in the United States. Videos for songs were played on network television after the regular programming for the day was done. MTV took these and devoted an entire channel to them, singlehandedly transforming them from niche promotional tools to a new form of visual and musical art. Founder and CEO

⁶³ Considine, "Black music/white music."

⁶⁴ Just a curious historical intersection: It was actually Michael Jackson who told Freddie Mercury that "Another One Bites The Dust" should be the first single off Queen's album *The Game*, after Mercury played him the just-finished record. Mercury took his advice and the song was a huge hit.

⁶⁵ Considine, "Black music/white music."

⁶⁶ Marsh, *Trapped*, 203.

⁶⁷ Andrew Hempp, "Readers: I want my MTV back from Snooki," *Advertising Age*, February 15, 2010, accessed March 5, 2011. <http://adage.com/article/mediaworks/cable-readers-i-mtv-back-snooki/142099/>

Bob Pittman, who started in radio, adopted the AOR format and criteria for the channel, selecting only songs that would be recognized as "rock" to be played. But the highly subjective reasoning of radio DJs, who were essentially their own masters, in determining playlists would not fly on television, where the channel's success depended on massive viewership and more lucrative ad sales. As such, Pittman and his vice president of programming Les Garland conducted huge marketing research surveys in order to confirm that their prime demographic – in the 12-34 age range, middle class, largely suburban (where cable subscriptions were sold), and white – was as uninterested in black music as radio listeners. It's hard to tell now if the surveys were conducted intentionally to skew the data collected or if MTV was just able to twist the responses to serve their assumptions about the appeal of black music to white suburban kids; suffice to say the moral at the end of this story is *not* that white kids hated black music. But Garland insisted to the *Sun*, "In the studies we've done... we haven't found a great amount of information that says the people who like Van Halen, the Who, or A Flock of Seagulls like Rick James. That's two different groups, overwhelmingly."⁶⁸ Pittman was brasher about it. The *New York Times* reported that, when defending charges of racism in MTV's programming, "he cites the fact that black and white popular music have always been segregated. 'We chose rock because the audience was larger,' Pittman explains. 'The mostly white rock audience was more excited about rock than the black audience was about contemporary rhythm and blues.'"⁶⁹ When *Rolling Stone* brought up the charges of racism that had developed into something of a national conversation in 1983, Pittman became defensive, upholding the argument that it's just the format. When pressed, he gets angry:

"If anyone says we should change, I'd like them to take our losses. I'd change our losses with theirs right now. They don't recognize that this is a business. ... MTV is a phenomenon of the youth culture. Our point of view music be hitting home.'

Some say that's because, while you may not be racist, you're catering to white suburban racism. And that you're in a position to change that, to expose people to great black artists as well as white ones.

'I don't know who the fuck these people are to tell people what they *should* like,' Pittman fumes. 'They sound like little Hitlers or people from Eastern-bloc communist countries.

The good thing about America is that people rule. That's the essence of America!"⁷⁰

The problem, of course, is that because all anyone knew about MTV's research and programming decisions came directly from MTV spokespeople, no one knew if it or the conclusions drawn from it were in any way accurate. As Marsh told the *Sun*, "The answer to [racism in popular music] isn't a format... Formats are the problem. There's a real danger right now of looking at music as something that's controlled by the radio, rather than seeing radio as something which

⁶⁸ Considine, "Black music/white music."

⁶⁹ Ed Levine, "TV Rocks With Music," *New York Times*, May 8, 1982: SM42.

⁷⁰ Steven Levy, "Ad Nauseum: How MTV Sells Out Rock & Roll," *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983: 37.

intuits certain trends and tries to drive them home. Basically, if people weren't lied to all the time for marketing reasons, they'd be willing to accept pluralism."⁷¹

Certainly Americans were looking to accept *something*. Though MTV was a phenomenon by 1983 and had contributed to boosting record sales for its most heavily played artists, the industry at large was still in a tailspin. Record sales had been slipping for years, and nothing seemed to help. "Beset by recession," *People Magazine* lamented, "seemingly abandoned by an entire generation that grew up on rock, bereft of formative figures like Elvis and Lennon, an out-of-sync music industry is asking not just what is its future, but is there a future at all?"⁷² While melodramatic, *People* was far from incorrect. The reinstatement of segregated formatting for music on radio and now, with MTV, on television in the wake of the anti-disco backlash also robbed the music scene of much of its creative vitality. The rigid boundaries put in place by programmers and marketing executives dampened the spirit of racial mixing that makes pop and rock such vital and exciting genres. Without an open exchange of ideas and sounds inspiration dwindles. By enforcing arbitrary standards of what does and does not constitute "rock," and by in turn defining all other music as "black" and "black" as "bad" or "unappealing" or "unmarketable," the music industry effectively enacted a slow suicide by discouraging its artists to experiment at all with sound and beat. The youth hungered for something as exciting as what older generations had gotten to experience with Elvis and The Beatles. "The late music mogul Neil Bogart," *People* noted, "once theorized that overwhelming musical trends emerged in 10-year cycles, starting around the fourth year of every decade: '54 the rise of Elvis, '64 the advent of the Beatles, and '74 the disco explosion. Is something in the wings for '84?"⁷³

One potential option was New Wave, an aggressively white fusion of pop and rock that managed to incorporate some of the appealing funk of black music by smuggling it in with heavy use of synthesizers and drum machines. Technology kept New Wave in line with the supposed European art rock tradition of rock music while actually taking advantage of the appealing groove of black music. DJs and VJs (Video Jockeys, MTV's programming hosts) alike noticed but refused to acknowledge that the appeal of New Wave was in the incorporation of these black musical themes. At the same time, cries of racism rose up from all sides: from the popular press, from the music press, and from musicians themselves, most vocally Motown funk artist Rick

⁷¹ Considine, "Black music/white music."

⁷² Carl Arrington, Chet Filippo, and Eric Levin, "Is Rock Dead?" *People*, January 17, 1983: 51.

⁷³ Arrington, Filippo & Levin, "Is Rock Dead?"

James. There were small concessions: Prince, who is half-African American and half-Hispanic but who had always made music very much in the traditional rock idiom, got limited play on AOR and MTV alike, as did long-established black artists like Tina Turner. "Then," as *Rolling Stone* put it, "came Michael Jackson."

Thriller was released into this world of segregated popular culture in 1982, and initially it performed like any other good record by a black artist with some crossover appeal. "The Girl Is Mine," the duet with Paul McCartney, was the first single released in anticipation of the album and benefitted from having one white and one black singer. It performed well on the Black Singles and (predominantly white) Adult Contemporary *Billboard* charts, and the combined star power of Jackson and McCartney's names pushed up to number three on the Hot 100 singles chart. When *Thriller* was released a few weeks later, it was met with overwhelmingly positive reviews and positive reaction from listeners as it began to get play on black radio stations. In the 1980's, radio DJs still played album cuts that were not officially released as singles regularly, especially just after an album was released and the general public had not yet gotten to know it. This applied to *Thriller* as it would with any of its peers, but with *Thriller* something strange happened. Enticed by the music and by the presence of Eddie Van Halen, AOR disc jockeys played "Beat It" for their white audiences, and *they liked it*. "Michael Jackson Cut Breaks AOR Barrier," *Billboard's* front page crowed on December 18, 1982. The triumph for the album served only to highlight how blatantly racist radio programmers and radio listeners could be. Epic Records Senior Vice President Don Dempsey told them, "Some stations played the record without identifying the artist and got good phones all along. And then after maybe a week of airplay they'd say, 'This is Michael Jackson we've been playing,' and some AOR listeners would have a problem with it."⁷⁴ Jackson's sharp showman's eye recognized that this was a moment of flux and uncertainty in American culture and identity, a moment in which the weakness of the prejudices that dominated the American past were exposed and vulnerable. His single-minded determination to make *Thriller* the biggest album in the world had produced a record containing nine of the best pop songs yet recorded. Now all he had to do was make that greatness legible to the general public, a public conditioned to ignore black artists. He had to make sure that he was simply the most compelling thing anyone had ever heard or seen, and he knew the way to do that was on MTV.

⁷⁴ Paul Grein, "Michael Jackson Cut Breaks AOR Barrier," *Billboard*, December 18, 1982: 58.

The brief and unlikely success of "Beat It" on AOR was encouraging for both Jackson and his label, though *Billboard* reported that "it's unlikely 'Beat It' will be the second single from [*Thriller*]," and said Dempsey would "prefer to follow 'The Girl Is Mine' with a more mainstream black track, probably 'Billie Jean.'" ⁷⁵ As I noted in the previous chapter, "Beat It" is not a straightforward rock song in which a black artist is co-opting a white sound in order to appeal to a black audience, but a "black" song utilizing the black tradition of rock 'n' roll naturally, as an heir apparent to the form. Jackson must have been encouraged that white audiences accepted his black rock so readily, even if the unspoken racism of rock caused listeners to reject it once they were told who'd created it. That extra boost of confidence also must have informed his decisions for his second single, which was indeed "Billie Jean." It entered the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart on January 22, 1983, at number 47 ⁷⁶ along with a brief and extremely positive review that lauded his tense vocal as "one of his finest performances." ⁷⁷ The public agreed; by the following week it was the second-most-added record to AOR and black radio stations in the country, with 50% of AOR stations and 61% of black stations reporting its addition ⁷⁸, and had risen ten points on the Hot 100 to number 37. *Thriller*, which had debuted on the LP chart at number 11 on Christmas day the year before, had been holding steadily in the middle of the top 10 since the beginning of January. Three weeks after its release the song reached number one on the black singles chart ("the fastest climbing black chart-topper since the Jackson 5" ⁷⁹ had their string of three number one singles in 1970); a week after that it reached the top 10 on the Hot 100 chart. *Thriller* finally reached number one on the LP chart in the last week of February, and "Billie Jean" achieved primacy on the Hot 100 one week later on March 5. With over 90% of black and AOR stations playing the song often, and with such swift success on the charts, the label and Jackson decided a music video was overdue.

They decided to use Steve Barron, a British director who had developed a reputation for his videos after his 1981 video for The Human League's "Don't You Want Me" became a touchstone for the emerging genre. Still finding their place, music videos ranged from simple lip-synched performances to elaborate and opaque concept films. Barron shot videos with plots and more firmly linear stories, something that, in 2010, he recalled appealed to Jackson: "He had seen don't you want me and he liked the cinematic edge of that. He really was looking for something

⁷⁵ Grein, "Michael Jackson Cut Breaks AOR Barrier."

⁷⁶ "Hot 100," *Billboard*, January 22, 1983.

⁷⁷ "Top Singles Picks: Michael Jackson, 'Billie Jean'," *Billboard*, January 22, 1983: 69.

⁷⁸ "Radio Additions," *Billboard*, January 29, 1983.

⁷⁹ "Chartbeat," *Billboard*, February 12, 1983: 6.

magical."⁸⁰ Jackson didn't come to the table with an idea for the video, and Barron suggested a treatment he'd originally come up with for another band referencing the Midas touch by having different parts of the set light up when touched. "I thought he had wonderful ideas," Jackson recalled to MTV in 1999, "but I let him go with it. The only part I wrote in the piece was I said, 'I just want a section—' I said, 'Just give me a section where I can dance.'"⁸¹ Barron agreed and they set a date to film. The original idea for the set was far more elaborate than what the budget eventually allowed, and he ended up with only eleven sidewalk stones that lit up (as well as a number of other elements, including a lamppost and a trash can). What at first seemed like an obstacle, however, ended up not even being a nuisance because the performance Michael turned in was truly extraordinary. Barron recalled:

"What I had planned for him in terms of walking on the street and the dances and things is that all the paving stones were being directed, so pressure—he'd step on one and the light would come on. Of course with our budget the director couldn't deliver what he'd promised and when I got onto the set on the day I had to take Michael through what worked and what didn't. And I said 'Unfortunately we've only got eleven of these stones that light up.' And I said this is one this one and those two and then you've got to skip that one and then those two and that one, and Michael goes 'Okay, okay, that's fine.' And I said, do you like to rehearse, and go through it, we can spend a bit of time on it, and he goes, 'No, just let me just do it,' so we yank the track, the chorus, the chorus came up really loud, filled the stage, and then he started.

And he moved onto the first stone and moved onto his toes and then he spun around and as I was moving the camera back I was pretty gobsmacked at what I was seeing. It had moved to a completely different plane from anything I'd ever seen before, and the eyepiece literally steamed up and I could hardly, by the end of the take it was so steamed up from my energy and my energy seeing this energy I could hardly see through it. But I saw enough to see that this was phenomenal. That this was something that was about to be launched on the world that was going to go beyond what we had ever known before."⁸²

Jackson's performance is the key to why "Billie Jean" (and then shortly after it, "Beat It") was the spark that finally lit the fire under *Thriller*. I've already discussed the potency of the musical performance, and at the end of my last chapter I tried to emphasize that Michael's musical performances were inextricably linked to his bodily interpretation of the sound. To reiterate, Jackson consumed music with the totality of his body; all of his producers over the years have recalled that they knew they had recorded a truly good song when it made him dance. More than any other performer of his time or since, Jackson composed for performance. The overall story of his life and his meteoric rise to stardom as a child is linked to him being a dance

⁸⁰ *The Music Video Exposed: Steve Barron*. Broadcast by VH1 Classic, February 26, 2010. 0:01-0:02.

⁸¹ VH1 Classic, *The Music Video Exposed: Steve Barron*, 0:02.

⁸² VH1 Classic, *The Music Video Exposed: Steve Barron*, 0:02-0:03.

prodigy, for it was not just the extraordinary voice that got America's attention in 1970, it was also his incredible moves. He learned from watching James Brown perform first on television, and then from the stage wings, absorbing every shuffle and spin. "I'd stare at their feet," he recalled of his days on the Chitlin' Circuit, "the way they held their arms, the way they gripped a microphone, trying to decipher what they were doing and why they were doing it. After studying James Brown from the wings, I knew every step, every grunt, every spin and turn."⁸³ Brown and Jackie Wilson, another regular performer on the circuit and at the Apollo Theater in New York (where the Jackson 5 took up a kind of residency, winning amateur nights before they were picked up by Motown), were probably the most important influences for Jackson's dance style, along with street dancers. A handful of professional choreographers who were still involved in the street dance scene, like Vincent Patterson and Michael Peters who both became regular Jackson collaborators, kept the star connected to the emerging styles of breakdancing, including popping and, most crucially, a move known as the backslide or moonwalk.

Though "Billie Jean" and the moonwalk are forever linked in the public imagination, it doesn't appear anywhere in the video. Instead, Jackson seems to be combining Brown and Wilson's frenetic footwork, popping's angularity and sharpness, and Fred Astaire's easy grace into a style that was immediately and distinctly his own. Clad in a slim-cut black leather suit (the pants are cut a few inches above his slim ankles, instantly and permanently becoming part of his stylistic signature), light pink shirt with small red bowtie, light pink socks and black and white wingtip shoes, his face soft and rich brown, his hair curled into a loose Jheri curl, Jackson struts, skips, spins, and pops up on his toes, his every move lit from below. The choice to wear his pants short and with white, sparkling or brightly colored socks was intentional; it ensured that people watched his feet when he danced. Combined with the sidewalk's bright glow the result is that Jackson looks truly otherworldly, like a celestial creature floating and spinning his way down a dirty Los Angeles street. It's exactly that magic Jackson and Barron had been looking to capture. To enhance it, Barron strategically employs the freeze-frame, capturing Jackson with his fists clenched in agony, popping his collar, and perched weightlessly on his toes. The frozen images are shown on their own, in pairs, and in groups of three; Barron also focuses on certain body parts at key moments, cutting out his sparkling eyes or using a shot of his hands, thumbs confidently extended, and then an overlaid video of him moving into that position before letting the movement resume. Several long shots of Jackson dancing along an empty street with a large

⁸³ Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 47.

billboard are thus cut and dispersed through the video; the original treatment, intended to be the centerpiece, becomes an interesting but unnecessary side story as his body becomes the real star.

The rest of the video involves Jackson walking sullenly along an anonymous and dirty Los Angeles street as he is stalked by a private eye/paparazzo. The paparazzo tries to capture him on film a number of times, perhaps to disprove his musical claim that "Billie Jean is not my lover," but fails each time. As Jackson walks and dances his way to a hotel room the sidewalk lights up under his feet; when he pauses to shine his shoe on a trash can or lean against a light post, those objects light up as well. At one point he tosses a quarter into a homeless man's cup. The cup glows brighter and brighter until suddenly the sleeping homeless man, in rags, wakes up to find himself clad in a white tuxedo with a red bowtie and cummerbund. When Jackson drops the tiger-striped rag he used to clean his shoe, it transforms into a tiger (together these images recall *Thriller's* cover picture, which features Jackson in a white suit posing with a tiger cub). Eventually he makes it to the hotel, holding a finger to his lips when a neighbor notices him climbing the fire escape to his lover's room. His steps light up the stairs and the hotel sign; the paparazzo follows and the woman picks up the phone to dial the police. Jackson contemplates his lover's bed, eyeing the lump of her body beneath the sheets, and then climbs in fully clothed. The bed glows white, the paparazzo tries one last time to take a picture, but by the time the glow has faded Jackson has disappeared, his form totally invisible under the covers. In the video's final seconds the police come and arrest the paparazzo and, on the street below, we see the sidewalk tiles light up as an invisible Jackson makes his escape.

This video in many way sets the standard for all subsequent Jackson videos and along with "Beat It" redefines the standards for the new genre. Though in the end "Beat It" may be the more obviously influential piece, it is crucial to recognize "Billie Jean's" role in introducing the public to a set of visual signifiers that become instantly and permanently associated with Michael Jackson as an American icon and superstar. First, there is the style. New Wave and British pop had employed a number of different flamboyant hairstyles, makeup trends, and fashion trends, so color or unusual cut were far from unknown to the American youth at the time. Jackson, however, presents a distinctively black stylistic sensibility. His hair gestures to the pompadours and long hairstyles of Little Richard, Chuck Berry and James Brown. The Jheri curl had been around for a while, and was as assertively black as the Afro had been a decade earlier (the style in which the Jackson 5 had worn their hair). The combination of hard leather and feminine pink in his clothing came from a distinctly black sense of style as well. White artists preferred to either present

themselves as futuristically masculine or effeminate; though they would both be referenced later as part of the "new androgyny," there is a palpable difference between the gender bending of Boy George and stylistic flair of Michael Jackson. The gestures to effeminacy seen in the color choices is balanced by the tribute to street hardness in the leather clothes worn by break dancers and cool inner-city youth. Second, there is his dancing. Jackson was as voracious a consumer of dance as he was of music; by many accounts he continued to take dance classes in all the basic styles (jazz, tap, ballet, hip hop) regularly until he died in 2009, as well as learning from countless musicals, movies, and fine arts performances. Yet when we think of Michael Jackson the dancer, the images that come to mind are strikingly consistent. We think of the sharp and unbelievably precise movements, the astonishing speed at which he was able to move (the video introduces his signature whip kick, when his outstretched leg jerks back and forth so quickly you can miss it with a blink), and his apparent ability to defy gravity.

The combination of Jackson's exceptional performance and Barron's directorial skills produced a video whose MTV appeal was readily apparent to all involved, yet when it was first submitted to the channel it was rejected out of hand for not complying to the station's format. "When we first finished it we heard that MTV probably wouldn't play it because it wasn't in the demographic or whatever and that nearly became an explosive situation,"⁸⁴ Barron recalled. But CBS Records, recognizing the video's potency, refused to let it go that easily. "The widespread rumor has it that CBS Records threatened to pull all its clips from MTV unless it aired 'Billie Jean,'"⁸⁵ *Rolling Stone* reported (and other magazines and trade journals, like *Billboard*, also helped this legend spread). At the time, and in all the years since, CBS Records, MTV and Walter Yetnikoff (president of the label) have all categorically denied that threat was made, but the legend persists. We must assume that the video was met with quite a bit of resistance for the story to even emerge in the first place, and considering Pittman's stringent policy of format-based racism it's hard to imagine him giving up without a fight. "Billie Jean" is an aggressively black-sounding pop song, rooted in funk and soul and lacking the rock undertones that propelled "Beat It" to equivalent heights. It did not just break MTV's unspoken ban on putting black faces on screen, it broke the channel's spoken policy of keep black sounds out of suburban white ears. However the negotiations went down, the end result is that "Billie Jean" was not just added to MTV's playlist, but added in heavy rotation (guaranteeing the song would be played about once an hour). This was the first time *any* black artist had a video added to the heavy rotation playlist.

⁸⁴ VH1 Classic, *The Music Video Exposed: Steve Barron*, 0:04.

⁸⁵ Steven Levy, "Ad Nauseum: How MTV Sells Out Rock 'n' Roll," *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983: 37.

When "Billie Jean" premiered on MTV in March 1983, in heavy rotation, Michael Jackson effectively and permanently destroyed the channel's color line.

The reaction to "Billie Jean" was immediately and overwhelmingly positive. Barron's ethereal setting and camerawork combined with Michael's superhuman dancing captured the imagination of the American public. The video helped keep "Billie Jean" at the top of the Hot 100 chart for seven weeks; moreover, it was insanely popular amongst MTV's youthful and white audience, disproving Pittman's research that insisted those kids "didn't like black people or their music."⁸⁶ It also led to another boost in sales for *Thriller* as it became appealing to a whole new audience, one not often reached by black music. It is in this moment – and more intensely in the moments that follow over the next 10 weeks – that Jackson begins his act of unprecedented cultural integration. Despite the blackness of his image and performance in "Billie Jean," what white suburban fans latched onto was the power of his performance, that magnetic yet inarticulable something that distinguishes harbingers of pop explosions from simply talented performers. There is true magic in Jackson's performance, magic that made the sidewalk glowing under his feet seem not like a music video gimmick but something that surely must happen as he walks down the street. The energy that fogged up Barron's camera lens shot through our television screens unadulterated and, in that moment, Michael Jackson became something much more than a simple superstar.

The reaction to "Billie Jean" also ensured one other important thing: that the video for "Beat It" would get made and would get played. For his second video (which he was already filming when "Billie Jean" broke MTV's color line), Jackson hired Bob Giraldi, known for his Miller Lite commercials, to direct a gritty short film for the rock song. Giraldi eagerly agreed, and the two set about creating a concept. They decided that the video would be shot on the real Skid Row – a dangerous part of East Los Angeles – and would show Jackson intervening in a gang fight, stopping the violence with the power of music. They also decided they would use real gang members to flesh out the crowd scenes. The concept was elaborate and the price tag matched, at a reported \$150,000. Though record companies were recognizing the importance of music videos more than ever before, such an exorbitant price tag was practically unheard of in the industry at the time, and then only for already-established rock legends like David Bowie. Unsurprisingly, CBS Records refused to provide the money for the video. Instead of capitulating to his record

⁸⁶ Levy, "Ad Nauseum," 37.

company, as other artists would have had to, Jackson simply told them he would fund the video by himself, and retain all artistic control and ownership of the copyright.

It's important to keep in mind the unique position Jackson occupied in the music industry in 1983. As many media outlets were quick to point out as *Thriller* set and broke sales records for the next year and a half, Jackson had been a star in the music industry since he was a 12 year old fronting the Jackson 5 on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1970. Their unprecedented string of four number one singles in 1970, several wildly successful group albums, and a string of successful singles and albums as a solo act for Motown and then Epic Records in the 1970's had made Jackson a wealthy man. This put him in an extremely unlikely and uncommon power relationship with CBS Records and the industry at large in the moment when he was making his most important crossover moves. Unlike other artists of his caliber and his age, he was not dependent on the record label to fund all of his ventures. If he wanted a production far more extravagant and expensive than the record company was willing to pay for, he could simply pay for it himself – and he did. His wealth gave Jackson more agency than other black musicians at that time, and would prove crucial to his pop explosion. These videos – even "Billie Jean," which got its concept from its director instead of its star – are all partially or wholly financed by Jackson himself, and in turn he was either co- or sole owner of the final product. As such, we can view and interpret them as self-representations that are almost entirely unmediated by any person or group other than Jackson. He controlled the production, the editing, and the final cut. He placed his faith, money, and good will in the hands of directors he thought were the most talented and innovative of the time, but in the end nothing was put on a screen that didn't have Jackson's full approval. More than any other music videos of that time, or perhaps ever, "Billie Jean," "Beat It," and eventually "Thriller" exist as records of how Jackson saw himself and how he wanted the public to see him.

How he wanted America to see him was as a black man. He spends "Beat It" navigating a complex web of visual tableaux representing the struggles of young black men in America. Jackson appears in this video every bit as sweaty and dirty as his co-stars; the privilege of his wealth and fame is erased from his body from the first moment we see him. He is lying on his stomach on a twin bed in a cheap, Spartan high-rise apartment where you imagine one *must* hear police sirens at all hours of the night. His white shirt and red pants emphasize his brown skin, his hair is dark and shining and curly, but slightly deflated by the heat. He looks like every good-looking ghetto black teenager roaming the streets of Los Angeles (though, once again, his pants

are too short and his white socks and black loafers are on display; he may be playing an everyman but he will not let you forget he's Michael Jackson). While the two gangs are integrated the racist association of gang violence with primarily black youth casts Jackson automatically in solidarity with these gang members even as his function in the video is to stop the violence (with dance, of course). It is interesting to note that Giraldi chose to light the video stingily, so that the not-so-bright lights of the abandoned bar or pool hall are the only moments when Jackson is fully lit, and lit only to the point of exposing his black heritage. In the rest of the video Jackson is in low light or shadow, *darkening* him. The record company most likely would have insisted that Jackson be over-lit for this video, whitening him to make him more palatable for the elusive and necessary suburban white audience. Jackson, on the other hand, insists on his darkening, on confronting the audience with the reality of his blackness.

Jackson also reclaims his connection to the lives of the poor and the underprivileged even though he hasn't been either of those things in fifteen years. Jackson's decade-plus in the industry served to erase for many (especially white) critics his connection to the African American experience of poverty and racism. Though many noted he was born in Gary, Indiana, in 1958, few chose to dwell on what that meant. Gary was a steel industry town with a majority black population. It was poor and suffered early from deindustrialization. It also served as a Midwestern center for Civil Rights organizing, hosting rallies and conferences of black leaders. Moreover, it was only 30 miles away from Chicago and intimately connected to the racial politics of that urban center. Jackson remembered Civil Rights vividly, and remembered the 1968 Chicago and Detroit race riots. Though he was not an overtly political superstar, refusing until the early 90's to openly address politics in either his music or his public appearances, Jackson does infuse his music and performance with the essence of the black struggle in America. His success is part of the achievement of integration that he enacts, but more important he finds a way through these songs and videos to imbricate black youth experience back into the mainstream narrative of American youth and adolescence.

"Beat It" confronts the harsh reality of normative black American life head on and turns it into a mesmerizing pop performance. Jackson stops the violence of the gang fight in the warehouse simply by placing a hand on each leader's chest, pushing them apart, and beginning to dance. They fall into step behind him with no resistance or skepticism with the rest of the gang members joining in a moment later. Though the real gang members remain on the sidelines (the dancing is left to the professionals), stories from the set tell of Jackson's real-life peacemaker

abilities. Giraldi recalled that the Crips members (distinguished in the crowd by their blue clothing and bandanas) had been grown disgruntled by the long waits on set, and crew members were starting to become seriously concerned about their safety. Then, Michael appeared on set in full regalia (the red leather jacket, blue shirt, and black pants that became instantly iconic after the video was released) and these big, burly, dangerous men instantly calmed down and glanced at him in awe. Michael moved easily through the crowd, greeting everyone personally and asking them if they were having fun. That was the first and last time anyone on the set felt the threat of violence. The story sounds overblown and suspiciously messianic but it's one of many variations on the same theme. Simply, there is something *special* about Jackson, the way there was something *special* about the Beatles 20 years before. That specialness is as potent in person as it is through his videos; Leon Schwartz, a 10 year old boy who was inspired by "Beat It" to learn to breakdance from older kids who attended once-weekly Hebrew school at his Jewish day school, explained to *Newsweek*, "Michael Jackson sent out the word to stop fighting and start dancing,"⁸⁷ which is exactly what he did.

"Beat It" was even more popular on MTV than "Billie Jean" had been, providing the spark that lit the short fuse for Michaelmania's explosion. That explosion happened on May 16, 1983, when NBC broadcast a television special called *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* commemorating Motown Records and produced by Suzanne DePasse. Word about the special had been floating around since it was filmed on March 25, 1983, and covered two basic topics. The first was that the special was largely underwhelming and Motown's brightest stars like Diana Ross had not just failed to impress, but had acted cattily towards their former label- and group-mates. The second was that the performance of the night had come first from the Jackson 5 reunion (touted because it featured all original members including Jermaine, who had chosen to stay with Motown in 1975 when the rest of the group had moved to Epic Records and changed their name to The Jacksons) and then from Michael's solo performance of "Billie Jean." Buzz about that performance grew over the month and a half between filming and broadcast, but no concrete details leaked. Originally Michael turned down Berry Gordy's request to be on the program, as agreeing would necessarily force him to perform with his brothers. Gordy asked him to participate shortly after *Thriller* was released, and when Jackson wanted to distance his career from his career with his brothers more than ever. As first Gordy and then DePasse, who had forced Gordy to watch the Jackson 5's audition video in 1968, begged him to sign on he negotiated, saying he'd agree if he was allowed to perform his new single "Billie Jean" by himself

⁸⁷ "Breaking Out: America Goes Dancing," *Newsweek*, July 2, 1984: 49.

after his Jackson 5 set. Desperate to add his name to the bill they agreed, and unwittingly scheduled a performance that would change pop history. "May 16, 1983," Richard Harrington wrote in the *Washington Post* almost a year after *Motown 25* aired. "That's Michael Jackson's media birthday, as much as Feb. 8, 1964 (the Ed Sullivan Show) was for the Beatles, as much as Sept. 9, 1856 (also the Sullivan show), was for Elvis Presley,"⁸⁸

What happened on *Motown 25* goes something like this: About mid-way through the show, the original Jackson 5 plus youngest brother (and Jacksons member) Randy take the stage for their reunion. They're all happy, beaming to the audience. They run through a medley of their early hits: "I Want You Back," "The Love You Save," "Never Can Say Goodbye" (Michael's first Motown solo hit), and "I'll Be There." The rendition of "I'll Be There" is particularly soulful and moving, and ends with a big brotherly hug between Jermaine and Michael. The brothers wave as they exit the stage, leaving Michael dressed in his high-water black pants, white socks, black loafers, silver sequined shirt and a black sequined cardigan sweater he'd borrowed from his mother's closet, as well as his soon-to-be-signature white sparkling glove, in the spotlight. "Thank you," he says in his high, soft voice, "You're beautiful! Yeah, those were the good ol' days. I love those songs. Those were magic moments with all my brothers, including Jermaine. But, uh, those were good songs. I like those songs a lot. But especially I like... the new songs." His microphone is back on its stand now; a black fedora appears in his hand. The rest of the stage lights dim as the first beat of "Billie Jean" explodes from the speakers and, in perfect time, Jackson slams the hat down on his head. The dancing in this performance is completely different from what was featured in the video. Jackson rocks his pelvis sharply in time with the beat, kicks one leg out in front of him, then turns and does the same with the other, slapping his thigh confidently. When the synthesizer chords begin he flings the hat offstage, mimes combing his hair, and begins to flick his ankles on beat with astounding speed and precision. The crowd is already cheering and clapping along and he hasn't even started singing yet. Jackson's performance is full of youthful verve and confidence, hypersexual arrogance, and sultry provocation. He dances freely, building upon the musical phrasing with his body. His feet skitter, his ankles whip, and his pelvis thrusts suggestively through each verse, building in intensity until, just before the chorus, he must either jump or stamp the excess energy out. As the camera pulls back into the audience we see about half of the professionals and industry veterans in attendance standing to dance and clap along – one woman's hand sways in the bottom of the shot like she's in church. Then we reach the bridge.

⁸⁸ Richard Harrington, "Who Is He?: Somewhere Over the Rainbow With the Enigma of the '80s." *Washington Post*, March 18, 1984: L1.

With each "Hoo!" Jackson points out towards the audience. He pauses in profile, knees bent, hips cocked, and looks from side to side. And then he executes the move that will forever be associated with him and him alone: he moonwalks. Sliding backwards across the stage three long steps, he then pauses, spins three times in a row, then abruptly comes to a stop on the very tips of his toes. The audience screams in shock, awe and adoration and for the final choruses they are oddly muted, as if they've all been stunned into silence. When Jackson finishes, posed with hand raised triumphantly high in the air, they leap to their feet, cheering and applauding. Jackson stares defiantly out at them, eyes blazing, panting as he slowly comes back from whatever transcendent realm he'd traveled to and then his façade breaks, exposing a truly delighted grin before he gives a deep bow. At home, viewers cheered and squealed. "In a constellation of superstars, there was a single backwards-walking, swirling-dervish, stick-thin supernova," Harrington remembered, "There had been an original Jackson Five reunion, and then there had been Michael's solo spot, a transcendent moment that arrived to the beat of 'Billie Jean.' The transformation was as visceral as the one we'd see six months later in 'Thriller.' And the next morning, Michael Jackson's name was on the smiling lips of America."⁸⁹

It is not a perfect performance. When the camera cuts in close it's clear Jackson's microphone is no longer on – he appears to be singing, but we're hearing the record cut of his song. And the toe-stand that caps off his moonwalk/spin sequence over the bridge is too short; Jackson planned the choreography in threes: three moonwalk steps, three spins, three seconds standing on his toes. He hits the toe-stand wrong, and maintains it for only a moment. Yet even after many viewings, enough to make the flaws not just visible but glaring, it still inspires in any audience the same chest-tightening thrill you feel the very first time. It is a moment, captured almost unintentionally on film, of a star exploding into a superstar, a genius finding the correct creative foothold, and a pop explosion exploding. It's rare for the energy of a live performance to successfully be transmitted through a television screen and arrive in the home with as much potency but this energy does not just transmit well, it sustains its freshness and excitement through repeated viewings. The sheer glee of the audience witnessing the moonwalk for the first time remains contagious 28 years later, an astounding feat for a dance move that is so ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture. "Dance, as cultural form, and sexual ritual," explains Kobena Mercer, "is a mode of decoding the sound and meaning articulated in the music."⁹⁰ The power of

⁸⁹ Harrington, "Who Is He?" L1.

⁹⁰ Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, New York (Routledge, 1994), 39.

Jackson's performance on *Motown 25* is rooted in the exceptional decoding abilities he had in his body, and in the potency of the translation received by the audience watching in awe at home.

There is no underestimating the importance and profound impact of the *Motown 25* performance. For one thing, it became the template for every single live performance of "Billie Jean" that Jackson would perform for the rest of his life. By the time he stopped touring in the late 1990's, his moonwalks and toe stands had become to stuff of pop legend. But in the most immediate sense, it did for Jackson what Sullivan had done for The Beatles and Elvis: it pushed him from the realm of mere superstardom to pure American iconography, turning him into a phenomenon. Yes, he'd been a household name for many for some time. But on the morning of May 17, 1983, the words "Michael Jackson" suddenly meant something entirely new. He was now a symbol of genius, of the energy and vitality of youth in its positive, productive forms, the embodiment of a new American, a new pop star, and a new hero for young Americans black *and* white. Sales of *Thriller* (which was already sitting atop the LP charts thanks to the power of his music videos) shot through the roof. Children and teenagers began searching for that sparkling white glove, began cuffing their pants well above their ankles, and began trying to hunt down black sequined jackets for themselves. Teenage girls of all races declared their love for Jackson and their intention of marrying him. Teenage boys of all races declared their intention to *become* him. Everyone began devoting hours a day to learning to moonwalk. The country went absolutely crazy. For the rest of the summer the words "Michael Jackson" were always on the tip of everyone's tongue.

Over the summer of 1983, in the wake of the *Motown 25* performance, we see the Marcus's pop explosion begin to manifest. The "walk, talk, dress, symbolism, heroes, family affairs" he uses to define "the surface of everyday life" that is so profoundly affected by the pop explosion are immediately molded by Jackson. His style becomes the hottest trend. His goody-two-shoes persona which would have only undermined his credibility as a rock/pop icon in the past is seen as both attractive and in some ways irrelevant; teenagers, girls especially, are more inclined to focus on how sexy he is, how good of a singer and dancer he is, how stylish his clothes are, and his impressive music videos. He becomes *the* standard-setter for MTV with bands and solo artists clamoring to work with Steve Barron and Bob Giraldi, trying to replicate the phenomenon for themselves. And, perhaps most importantly, adults are utterly baffled. Though his music and style are not as immediately alienating of the older generation as The Beatles or Elvis, and though some adults (who were fans of Jackson in his younger years) jump on the

Thriller bandwagon as eagerly as their children, the vast majority of adults, critics, journalists and other "establishment" folk cannot make heads or tails of this phenomenon. Unlike the Beatles or Elvis, no one goes so far as to question his innate talent, but most cannot understand what it is about him that makes their children go so damn crazy. Jackson is "[dividing] society itself by age."

In Michael Jackson, American youth find an identity that was both familiar and novel. As an entertainer, he challenged staid and overwhelmingly white representations of youth that, due to their origins in rock 'n' roll and the baby boomer generation, had become simultaneously iconic and institutionalized. Though the idea of adolescence and adolescents has existed since the turn of the 19th century, what "teenagers" and "teenage culture" constitutes to the average American are ethics and identities linked with archetypes that emerged in the 1950's and 1960's through the movie and music industries, perhaps most crucially through rock. Domestic- and community-based rebellious activity in the 1950's transformed into statewide and national political involvement and protest in the 1960's. Of course, as a black-born musical subgenre, rock had from its inception been associated with rebellion but when rock musicians openly took up the cause in the late '60s the relationship became codified and, eventually, institutionalized. By the 1980's Americans expected their rock (and, thanks to the Beatles' genre-bending sound, pop) to shock, offend, or at least attempt to fight against the mainstream tide. What many didn't seem to realize was that their very expectations had become the center of the mainstream. Jackson is a superstar superficially unconcerned with being perceived as rebellious in any traditional sense. He professed an admiration of traditional show business and for atypical (for a black performer) musical genres including musicals, classical and folk.⁹¹ In his rare interviews he spoke openly about his love for his mother and family, his closeness to his brothers and sisters, and the fact that he still lived at home. He admired, to the point of fetishization, Disney, Peter Pan, E.T. and children. In many ways as a person he seemed more engaged with pre-adolescents than with the teenagers who formed the majority of his fan base. Yet his music, style, and performance spoke to a more mature mind and artistic sensibility than any reprinted quote. When he sang and especially when he danced, Jackson seemed very much a young man.

⁹¹ In the supersized summer 1983 issue of *Rolling Stone* Michael responded to a request to provide a short summer mix-tape tracklist. Along with The Beatles and Sly and the Family Stone, he included "Oh! What a Beautiful Morning!" from *Oklahoma*, "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*, and "Sunshine On My Shoulders" by John Denver.

By openly embracing that internal contradiction and presenting himself without elaborate verbal justification as many of his peers did, Jackson conveyed to his fans that duality and inconsistency was acceptable. Basically, he takes the implied notion that identity is always the self-in-progress and makes it palpable. One need not conform to the obvious and stereotypical signifiers of adolescence in order to authenticate their youth identity. Instead, embracing the full scope of their personhood was a way to amass a cache of coolness that would act as social capital amongst one's peers. And for young men especially, Jackson presents an alternative vision of masculinity while simultaneously proving its appeal to young women. He's not a jock, he's not a trauma-scarred loner (not in his public self-presentation, at least), and he's not a juvenile delinquent, the three archetypes of female-attracting masculinity that emerged from the rock 'n' roll explosion. In the context of black masculinity in particular, he is quite the anomaly. Locating Jackson's work, the context for his particular androgyny, "entirely in the Afro-American tradition of popular music and thus must be seen in the context of imagery of black men and black male sexuality," Mercer points out: "Jackson not only questions dominant stereotypes of black masculinity, but also gracefully steps outside the existing range of 'types' of black men."⁹² Mercer is pointing to the ways in which Jackson combines elements of idealized black masculinity, like commitment to nuclear family and sturdy religiosity, with elements of aberrant black masculinity like his slender frame, androgynous style, high voice and passive nature, to create a black masculinity that is quite novel. There is a certain amount of aggressiveness expected in teenage male identities and culture, black or white, that Jackson simply disregards, and when it does come out in his performances it does so without the undertone of machismo prevalent elsewhere, "explicitly refus[ing] a bellicose model of manliness."⁹³

Unlike Boy George, whose fame was concurrently rising and who as a gay man openly embraced femininity as well as androgyny, Michael's performances maintained a sense of masculinity that allows our reading of him as androgynous or sexless to go only so far. His dance and stage performance embodies strength, aggression, power and confidence, four markers of traditional heterosexual masculinity that are easily recognizable across the spectrum of American identities, but his everyday performance of blackness and maleness superficially stands in contrast to those. Looking at the cover of the *Thriller* LP, Mercer sees the tiger cub draped across his knee as "a brilliant little metaphor for the ambiguity of Jackson's mage as a black male pop star. This plays on the star's 'man-child' image and *suggests a domesticated animality*, hinting at

⁹² Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 50.

⁹³ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 50.

menace beneath the cute and cuddly surface. *Jackson's sexual ambiguity makes a mockery out of the menagerie of received images of masculinity*"⁹⁴ (emphasis mine). He refuses neat categorization, which can by this point is easily applied to models of teenage rebellion alongside the normative categories we define identities against. Adults, and in particular the baby boomers who had helped institutionalize adolescence in the first place, found the embodiment of these two extremes of maleness confusing, but young Americans were wildly attracted to it. To them it was liberating for many reasons, not the least being that it was *different* from their parents' adolescent rebellion. When Steven Stark, a Harvard law lecturer and culture writer, chastises Jackson for being "a symbol of a youth culture stripped of defiance,"⁹⁵ he misses the point of Jackson's representation of youth. Stark can only think of defiance as understood by mid-century rock's political and cultural standards, and though he recognizes adolescence's institutionalization he thinks that Jackson represents an Establishment-friendly performer who can help keep the masses of teenager consumers attached to capitalist ends. He naively insists that the "many of the hostilities that fueled the youth culture had disappeared"⁹⁶ by the 1980's, as if the 1965 Civil Rights Act and the de-escalation of the Vietnam War had actually effected the structural causes of their injustices in ways other than the most superficial. He doesn't seem to understand that assuming rebellion in the 1950's, the 1960's and the 1980's would look the same and use the same cultural signifiers is faulty in its premise. Different times produce different problems, and are populated by different people who will cope in different ways. Sit-ins, love-ins, and another Woodstock would not seem like rebellion to a teenager in 1983; instead, they'd be acting like their parents had when they were young. And is anything as repulsive to a teenager than being like their *parents*?

The power of Jackson's influence eventually becomes front-page news when high school students in Bound Brook, New Jersey, gain national attention for fighting a school ban on wearing Jackson-inspired clothing, specifically studded belts and single white glove. "About 60 students, along with 70 parents and teachers, attended the board meeting to back up protests contained in a petition signed by more than 280 youths who want the right to mimic the outfits worn by Jackson,"⁹⁷ the *Washington Post* reported. School officials tried a number of tactics to explain their decision, variously declaring that the attire (and the glove was focused on more than any other accessory) was a violation of school dress code, that it was distracting in the classroom,

⁹⁴ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 47.

⁹⁵ Steven Stark, "Michael's Moonwalk Out of Adolescence." *Hartford Courant*, May 27, 1984, p. B4

⁹⁶ Stark, "Michael's Moonwalk," B4.

⁹⁷ "Students Protest Ban on Attire," *Washington Post*, March 13, 1984, C12.

and that it could signal gang membership. "It's nice for Michael Jackson to wear a glove," Superintendent Edward J. Rachford, told the *Chicago Tribune* when the newspaper covered similar actions taken at public schools in the Chicago metropolitan area, "but this is the Chicago metropolitan area and in this area it's a gang symbol."⁹⁸ It's exceedingly difficult to imagine that officials in New Jersey and Chicago would have made these same claims if the white glove was something worn by a white star. They may have sought to ban the glove because it was a distraction all the same, but the racially charged language surrounding these particular conflicts cannot be ignored, especially since gang membership is essentially racially coded to begin with.

If we remove the language of criminality from this debate, we can see another way in which the glove symbolizes an unacceptable threat to the status quo by signaling a new cultural and identity-based affiliation between white and black teenagers. It may not signal membership to a criminal gang, but the white sequined glove *does* signal membership to the vast American Michael Jackson fan base, a fully integrated group of youths who idolize a black superstar. School officials may not want to say it – they may not even be aware they are thinking it – but their swift disciplinary action implies that this kind of racial mixing and interracial social allegiance is a threat to the order of the school and to society in general. If black and white teenagers can be on the same page about one thing, why can't they agree on many more things? The last time allegiances formed over racial lines deep and ugly wounds were inflicted upon American culture, forcing changes to law and to social status quos in order to allow African Americans more fully into citizenship. As I've shown, much of what followed those changes tried to reinscribe the segregated standards of living on this new terrain. Now that work is being undone once more, and that undoing is being sartorially signaled to all Americans. It's an unacceptable situation and those who protect the status quo sweep in as soon as they can to try to prevent it. They succeed only in keeping the accessories out of schools; the bonds of cross-racial allegiance are already formed and too strong to be broken by such trivial objections.

Though the summer of 1983 belonged unequivocally to Michael Jackson, he made startlingly few public appearances. And though he released three more singles ("Wanna Be Startin' Something," "Human Nature" and "P.Y.T."), he didn't film videos to accompany them. On MTV, "Beat It" and "Billie Jean" remained heavy-rotation staples, and he dominated the radio, but Jackson himself remained scarce. His influence and popularity, however, continued to

⁹⁸ Robert Davis and Casey Banas, "Jackson attire fails to thrill principals," *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1984, A1.

grow. Americans, white Americans especially, developed a more vested interest in dance, particularly street styles of breakdancing. Fashion began to respond to his high-water pants and especially to that single sequined glove. Sales continued to not just hold strong, but grow. In 1984 *Newsweek* mused, "Jackson's videos helped him pull off an unprecedented feat: for well over a year, with scarcely any new music, few public appearances and without any of the live performances that traditionally have effected a symbiotic fusion between audience and artist, the interest in him was not only sustained but *intensified*."⁹⁹ The magazine calls our attention to a crucial difference between Michaelmania and the manias that have preceded it, namely the lack of live performances taking place immediately after the initial cultural explosion. Elvis and The Beatles both launched comprehensive American tours in the wake of their initial bursts of popularity, ensuring that their bond with the audience would be sustained through the gap between the album that initiates the pop explosion and its follow-up. Jackson not only didn't tour, he retreated almost entirely from public life. Instead, he left his videos and the *Motown 25* performance to stand in for his physical presence, once again attesting to the incredible power of his performance even as recorded and mediated by the television set. And just when his fans were on the verge of begging for something new, something to augment the excitement of the videos they now knew so well, Jackson announced a project beyond the scope of what anyone had imagined for the music video in the first place. That fall his representatives spread the word that Jackson was working on a short film for "Thriller," his next single, and that when he said "short film" he meant it. Jackson had hired Jon Landis, director of *Animal House*, *The Blues Brothers*, *Trading Places*, and *An American Werewolf in London*, to shoot a fourteen-minute film for which Jackson planned a theatrical release that would, in turn, allow him to be considered for an Oscar.

An American Werewolf in London was the deciding factor in Jackson's choice to hire Landis. He was enraptured with the physical transformations in the film, the special effects and elaborate makeup, and thought Landis would be the perfect director to bring to life the horror film-inspired "Thriller." Together they conceived an elaborate production that began with a film-within-a-film, the initial sequence set in the 1950's in which Jackson and his girlfriend, played in both iterations by *Playboy* playmate Ola Ray, break down on a drive home from a date. As they walk, Jackson asks Ray to be his girlfriend and tells her, in that immortal line, "I'm not like other guys" just before the clouds expose a full moon and he transforms into a werewolf and chases her through the woods. The short film cuts from the chase to Jackson and Ray, now clearly in the present time, watching the scene in a movie theater. Ray is scared and demands to leave, Jackson

⁹⁹ "The Tour: The Money, The Magic," *Newsweek*, July 16, 1984: 69.

is clearly enjoying himself and rebuffs her request; she leaves. He follows her out of the theater, teases her about being scared, and then as they walk home the song starts and he sings to her about the fun of horror movies. As they pass a cemetery, zombies emerge from graves and surround them, and as Ray tries to escape she turns and finds that Jackson too has turned into a zombie. The zombies, led by Jackson, dance and then chase Ray to an old, abandoned Victorian home. As they close in on her they scream—and the scene abruptly cuts to Jackson, once again the human and caring boyfriend, shaking her awake on his couch, asking, "What's the matter?" She dreamed the whole thing, you see, and Jackson helps her up with the promise, "C'mon. I'll take you home." All seems to be right with the world again until, in the final second, Jackson turns back to the camera and reveals the bright yellow cat eyes he had when he first turned into a werewolf. The scene freezes as Vincent Price's eerie laugh echoes in our ears.

The video for "Thriller" transformed the music video much the same way that *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* transformed the music album. It elevated the form to art, and set a standard above even Jackson's previous releases to which all pop artists would forever aspire. It also provided Jackson's vast audience, including professional critics and scholars, with an artifact with which to attempt to decode and understand the man and his phenomenon. "Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine," Kobena Mercer wrote in his lengthy examination of the video, "Jackson's star-image is a 'social hieroglyph,' as Marx said of the commodity form which demands, yet defies, decoding."¹⁰⁰ A moment later he noted, "Unlike stars such as Lionel Richie, Jackson has not 'crossed over from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularized black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style that has always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson has opened up a space...at the interface between the boundaries defined by 'race.'"¹⁰¹ "Thriller" becomes the exemplary video through which to examine Jackson's social hieroglyph precisely because it operates within this space that Mercer is pointing to, from its premise to its effect on the population. Take, for example, the opening images of "Thriller," in which Jackson and Ray play 1950's-era boyfriend and girlfriend. Jackson is dressed in a letterman's jacket, the hallmark of the varsity athlete and signifier of high school popularity that was rarely afforded to black teenager during Jim Crow. Also note that he is driving a car – it breaks down, enabling the walk through the woods that exposes his lycanthropy – and that his confidence leaving it by the side of

¹⁰⁰ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 35.

¹⁰¹ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 36.

the road (without fretting about an angry parent he'll have to answer to) implies that he might own it. This image contradicts what we know of African American experience in the 1950's, especially the experience of black teenagers who were never allowed into this kind of archetypal adolescence in popular culture or real life. Without making sweeping generalizations about a population with plenty of socioeconomic diversity, it is safe to assume that there were far fewer black teenagers with their own cars in the 1950's than white teenagers. Yet Jackson as, at first glance, archetypal teenage boy does not seem like much of a stretch now in 2011, nor did its revisionism leap out at fans in 1983 and 1984. Critical race scholars like Mercer, however, took sharp notice. They understood that Jackson was openly playing with character embodiment that would not have been allowed in the past. As the star of "Thriller," Jackson was able to recast blackness itself as normatively American and his audience, his fans, took in those images without recognizing them as problematic. The very act of watching "Thriller" becomes an act of identity transformation; a shift in expectations of what is included in "the norm."

Just because "Thriller" works to imbricate black adolescence visually into the web of "normal" teenagehood, however, should not signal that Jackson embodies an unproblematic or uncritical position through the piece. By the end of 1983, questions about Jackson's racial and sexual identity had begun to circulate through the country via the popular media, questions that I will address more fully in my next chapter. But just because the critical questioning of Jackson's race, gender and sexual orientation should not be addressed here does not mean that those aspects of his identity and self-presentation are irrelevant to our discussion of the mania surrounding him, especially in relation to "Thriller." Mercer, like many subsequent scholars, fixates on Jackson's ambiguities (as evidenced by his location of Jackson in the liminal spaces between child and man, black and white, man and woman quoted above) especially as they are brought to life by the oft-cited line of dialogue "I'm not like other guys." What an understatement! The line is rendered more potent with each available reading of it: Jackson is not like other guys because he is black, because he is non-normatively masculine, because he possesses uncommon talent, because he is famous. His otherwise inarticulable specialness finds voice in this line, as does a kind of doubleness. Jackson is at once what he knows he is and what we know he is, a private man and a public star. The public star, by the time of "Thriller's" official television release in early 1984, has become ubiquitous to the point of saturation but the private man remains a mystery because of his overwhelming reticence. The schism between these two, the gap of unknowability, frustrates critics and delights fans. For critics, it produces frustration because Jackson is refusing the expected role of accommodating Negro that is still so pervasive among white folks in their view

of black identity and social status. Both as black man and as entertainer, they expect him to fulfill what they see as an obligation to let his audience, vicious critics included, know who he really is in what seems to be a call to verify authenticity. Because Jackson withholds this information, critiques that he is inauthentic, empty, vapid, and a symbolic distraction from the noble cause of black politics accumulate from white and black critics alike (again, this will be addressed fully in the next chapter); borrowing from Mercer, "[the metamorphoses in "Thriller" play] on the audience's awareness of Jackson's double role; thus, the credibility of the special effects violates the image of the star himself... The very appearance of Jackson draws attention to the artificiality of his own image."¹⁰² It is essential to remember that these critics are outsiders to the Jackson pop explosion even if they are fans of his music and videos; a pop explosion, after all, "divides society itself by age." To Jackson's young fans the unknowability of Jackson becomes another thing they seek to emulate alongside his style or coolness. They recognize the refusal to capitulate to hegemonic demands for insight into the personal as an act of rebellion they can take up, much as their parents took up the Beatles' irreverence as reprimand to the serious adult world in the 1960's.

Perhaps the ways the youth took up Michael and his image in 1983 could have been dismissed as a passing fad in 1984 if *Thriller* had begun to flag and fade by the end of the year. I doubt a pop explosion could ever be stopped once it has started, mostly because the power of a pop explosion comes from below, from the participation of an astounding number of American youths who believe it is their right to like what they like and for what they like to be recognized as legitimate in the face of its detractors. Perhaps if the establishment had refused to legitimize Jackson's accomplishments the subsequent efforts to trivialize him and his influence would have gained footing. But the establishment *cannot* withhold their accolades from Jackson anymore. Jackson constructed *Thriller* as an album, a phenomenon, and a cultural artifact to be undeniable, and in that he succeeded unequivocally. When the major music award nominations are announced in the early weeks of 1984¹⁰³, Jackson dominates them all. He is nominated for 10 American Music Awards (and is nominated against himself in two categories), as well as being awarded a special Award of Merit, and 12 Grammy Awards (again, competing in two categories against himself) including a nomination for the narration he provided on the *E.T. Storybook* album. From the start Jackson is considered a front-runner in eight Grammy categories, setting him up to shatter the previous record for most Grammys won in one night, which was five. It is no surprise

¹⁰² Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 48-49.

¹⁰³ The Billboard Music Awards and Billboard Video Awards were held in 1983, and garnered Jackson 13 awards in the former and 5 awards in the latter.

that Jackson cleans up at the American Music Awards, but what should not escape us is Jackson's wins for Favorite Male Artist, Favorite Album, and Favorite Video in *both* the Pop/Rock and Soul/R&B categories. Just as "Beat It's" unexpected popularity on AOR and "Billie Jean's" breaking of the MTV color line, these awards show explicitly the ways that Jackson and *Thriller* are breaking down codified racial barriers in America. Since "Soul/R&B" is a euphemism for "black," the wins in both the white and the black categories here at the AMAs show Jackson occupying a space of pop stardom not delineated or defined by racial tropes. America testifies through these awards that Jackson is not just the best black pop artist in America; he is the best pop artist in America period.

Jackson is clearly delighted¹⁰⁴ at the American Music Awards, which he attends with Brooke Shields and Emmanuel Lewis (his dates for all of these award shows). His shyness never fully recedes but a playful side not often shown but often insisted upon by his fans emerges. He jokes about his soft-spokenness, leaning close to the microphone and asking "Can you hear me now?" when he accepts his third award. He becomes giggly, laughing and raising a hand to interrupt himself by saying "Hi" to no one and everyone during one of many acceptance speeches, and ducks behind the podium in a moment of playful self-consciousness, drawing a huge cheer from the audience. Accepting the award for Favorite Video for "Beat It," he thanks Bob Giraldi without seeing him standing next to him and when he notices him a second later squeaks "Oh Bob! Hi Bob!" He even breaks out a couple quick dance moves when accepting his Award of Merit after a lengthy tribute. Dressed in his signature high-water pants, bright white socks, loafers, a black sequined glove (instead of the otherwise iconic white glove) and a red sequined military-style jacket with gold beaded embroidery, epaulettes and a gold-and-black sequined sash, and with his dark aviator glasses and wet-look curls, he literally sparkles as the most iconic representation of himself. When he attends the Grammys that March he wears a nearly identical outfit, this time with the signature white glove and with the jacket rendered in royal blue. He looks every bit the untouchable pop king receiving his coronation, but his demeanor undermines the aloofness of that projection. Jackson's typical reservation gives way in the face of affirmation and recognition by his peers, his fans, and the music establishment, a group notoriously unwilling to recognize currently popular phenomena. The American Music Awards in the end mean less to Jackson and to us than the Grammys because they are awards bestowed by the American public and are just a reaffirmation of the public's love. Jackson makes sure to thank the public at large

¹⁰⁴ "Michael Jackson American Music Awards 1984 Part 1," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQCfhME2lmM> accessed on March 25, 2011.

and his fans specifically in each acceptance speech, knowing that they are the reason for and site of his transcendent success and not the music and culture establishment who would just as happily revoke their blessings. The Grammys, on the other hand, are awarded by a body of music elites who presume their tastes and judgment are superior to the average American. The Grammys have lost much of their cultural capital unlike the equally trivial Oscars, but they carried more weight in 1984. More importantly, their voters have historically been extremely reluctant to recognize the achievements of black artists. Jackson wins eight Grammy awards on March 10, 1984, the most Grammys won by any artist in one night,¹⁰⁵ losing only to The Police's "Every Breath You Take" in an upset for Song of the Year. He even wins the Grammy for Recording for Children for the *E.T. Storybook*. Two awards he shares with Quincy Jones, for Producer of the Year and the aforementioned Recording for Children. He also wins Best Pop Vocal Performance – Male, Best Rock Vocal Performance – Male, and Best R&B Vocal Performance – Male, once again enacting for all to see the destruction of the racial barriers erected in the music industry.

At the Grammys, Jackson is more reserved than at the AMAs, and seems considerably more overwhelmed. He brings his sisters up on stage at one point to stand with him and support him, and seems to shrink a little bit more with each award as evidenced by a moment when, accepting the record-setting eighth award for *E.T.*, Quincy Jones meets him on stage by jumping up and down with delight and grabbing him in an enthusiastic hug, all while Jackson stands nearly stock-still, stunned. When he enters at the very beginning of the telecast and takes his seat in the front row (once again with Shields and Lewis by his side), the theater erupts into deafening cheers. This happens again and again, just about every time his name is mentioned by anyone, and especially when he wins each award. But the loudest screams come late in the show when, accepting his seventh award he announces, "I made a deal with myself that if I won one more award, which is this award, which is seven, which is a record, that I would take off my glasses." The crowd goes crazy (by now it is interrupting him constantly); he looks embarrassed and continues, "Now, I don't want to take them off really but, um... But Katherine Hepburn, who is a dear friend of mine, says I should and I'll do it for her, okay?" He pulls back from the mike, ready to make good on his promise, then holds up his index finger and leans back down, "And for the girls in the back."¹⁰⁶ As soon as he says the words the screams start and they're amplified a

¹⁰⁵ This record has since been tied but never broken.

¹⁰⁶ "Michael Jackson Grammys 1984 Part 3," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cYRbPHisMA&feature=related> 3:25-3:58.

hundred times seconds later when he whips off the glasses and looks around, smiling shyly. One of the keys to the Jackson mystique that so many adults found confusing was in the way he kept his eyes covered by dark, impenetrable sunglasses at all times. Now, at the same moment his *Thriller*-induced fame is reaching its zenith, those eyes are exposed for the world to see and they reveal not an enigma, or a star-image, or a facsimile of a person, or an image created for the purposes of public dissemination, but a young man who is brimming over with happiness. He averts his gaze from the camera directly, waves, blows a kiss, and shuffles abashedly off stage with his sisters surrounding him, but that glimpse was more than enough for us. When we see his eyes we see the ways in which he could be us and we could be him; we see the individual that creates the group, binds the group together, and attaches that group back to itself. And in that moment we can also see his allegiance to that group he has created, the new American youth. Jackson's sunglasses – which function, for him, as a shield to protect his vulnerable self (he described himself to *Rolling Stone* reporter Gerri Hirshey as a "hemophiliac who can't afford to be scratched in any way."¹⁰⁷) – are not pried off in the name of his promise to himself ("I don't want to, really") or even in the name of Katherine Hepburn, despite his mention of her; in the end, he dedicates his unveiling to "the girls in the back," the representatives of his fans all over the country who shower him with love and adoration, who have taken him on as their imaginative boyfriend, lover, brother, leader. In the end, Jackson knows that he is most indebted not to the academy or the industry, but to the millions of young Americans who saw enough of themselves in Jackson and enough of Jackson in themselves to allow Michael to become the man and the pop icon he always knew he was.

Jackson's awards sweep temporarily quiets his critics and galvanizes his fans, who return to buying records, video tapes (*The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, aired as an hour-long special on MTV, is repackaged with other previously released material onto VHS and quickly becomes the highest selling home video of all time), and merchandise with all the enthusiasm of the year before. *Thriller* jumps back to the number one spot on the *Billboard* LP charts. Having spent a good chunk of the previous year reluctantly recording an album with his brothers, The Jacksons' *Victory* is released to good (not great) reviews. Shortly thereafter, the brothers announce they will be touring that summer. Though it is billed as a Jacksons tour – the Victory Tour, named after the group's album – America reacts as though it is a Michael Jackson solo tour, and everyone including music critics expect that to be the final result. *Victory* is an acceptable R&B album with some great pop moments, but everyone knows that more than ever the main

¹⁰⁷ Gerri Hirshey, "Michael Jackson: Life in the Magic Kingdom," *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 1983: 11.

attraction for audiences will be Michael. This puts Jackson, his image, his person, and his pop explosion in a precarious position, caught between two sets of expectations. His family pressures him into recording and then touring again with his brothers but *Thriller* is a clearly emancipatory project, intended to establish Michael Jackson as a star and musical entity outside of his familial group once and for all. In that it is a resounding success, and as a result the tour cannot really be a Jacksons tour because no one wants to see any Jackson other than Michael. And in its takeover of American culture, *Thriller*, its singles, and its videos have all presented Michael to his fans in an exceptionally pure way. Paired with Jackson's singular dance and live performance skills, expectations for the Victory Tour are set extraordinarily high. This is, after all, the way in which musicians had traditionally solidified the bonds between themselves and their audience, and with a year of unprecedented success behind him Jackson must produce something nearly inconceivable in scope and spectacle. And this time he must do so for an audience vastly more integrated than any audience he had faced before.

The Victory Tour is essentially the beginning of the end of the zenith of the *Thriller* phenomenon and induces a vicious backlash that I will be covering in detail in the next and final chapter of this thesis. Problems arise almost immediately when the Jackson family announces that boxing promoter Don King will oversee the tour, then are compounded when King announces that tickets will cost \$30 each (unaffordable for most of the Jacksons' poor black fans) and will only be available in maximum groups of four through a confusing mail-order system that involves fans sending in money orders and then waiting to hear back if they won tickets through random selection. It's outrageous and the public responds with justifiable anger. To make matters worse, an itinerary emerges with excruciating slowness and at first seems to pass over most majority-black cities in favor of larger stadiums in predominantly white parts of the country. On the one hand, the new and enormous group of white Michael Jackson fans necessitates this – you have to go where your public is, and in this instance they also had to go to stadiums with enough seats to accommodate the largest audiences the Jacksons would ever play to – but on the other it's an at best confusing and at worst ignorant decision that alienates a significant segment of Jackson's fan base. As I've been arguing, Jackson's pop explosion serves to integrate the America youth via a shared cultural experience, thus bridging deep historical and cultural scars and schisms. Between the exorbitant ticket prices and the poorly conceived tour route, Don King and the other tour promoters are actually undoing Jackson's achievements to this point, reinscribing racialized hierarchies of importance on his audience. White fans, who are in a better position financially and geographically, seem to be privileged over black fans, and the fact that white fans now outnumber

black fans (an assumption we can make simply through population statistics) means they are more likely to win tickets in the convoluted ticket sales scheme. The black community is outraged, and rightly so.

Jackson, for his part, is deeply embarrassed. He distances himself from his family, hiring his own set of advisers to oversee decisions about the tour and informs Don King that neither he nor anyone in his family is authorized to speak on Michael's behalf, to make decisions in his absence, or to do a single thing without explicit approval from the star.¹⁰⁸ He delivers a statement at a press conference for over 100 reporters to denounce the ticketing system, and announce that he will be donating all the money he earns from the tour to charity. He also forces King to abandon the awful ticket lottery, reinstates ticket sales through normal outlets (though he cannot bring down the \$30 cost), and donates some of the best tickets in every city to underprivileged youth who would otherwise be unable to attend. It helps, but not much. The press continues to chastise him at every opportunity. But the fans do not follow suit. Once it becomes clear that major black metropolitan centers are *not* being passed over, and once access to tickets becomes open to all, Jackson's fans absolve him of all wrongdoing and get busy getting excited for the tour to commence. Anticipation for the tour is immense. *Rolling Stone*, *Time* and *Newsweek* all run cover stories about it and Michael in the run up to opening night. When the Jacksons relocate to Birmingham, Alabama, to rehearse for a week before the tour they cause pandemonium. Massive crowds gather around their hotel and stay all hours of the day and night and one afternoon, the brothers decided to head up to the roof and wave to their fans. *People Weekly* interviewed one teenage girl who was there when they did. "I'll never forget it as long as I live," she sighed wistfully to them, "Even if Michael didn't play, he came. He waved. He showed us he loved us."¹⁰⁹

The Victory Tour embodies another conflict for Jackson. The fact is America wants a Michael Jackson tour. They want to see the songs of *Thriller* and *Off The Wall* (which, during the two years that *Thriller* dominates the country, climbs back up the *Billboard* charts and almost back into the top 40, peaking at No. 44 on April 7, 1984¹¹⁰) choreographed and staged like never before, they want to see him moonwalk, they want to see him sweat and sing and lose himself in his music just as they do. And, when reading through the extensive archive of media coverage

¹⁰⁸ Michael Goldberg and Christopher Connelly, "Trouble In Paradise?" *Rolling Stone*, March 15, 1984: 28.

¹⁰⁹ Pamela Andriotakis and James McBride, "On Tour," *People Weekly*, July 16, 1984, accessed March 22, 2011, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20197107,00.html>.

¹¹⁰ Top 100 LPs chart, *Billboard Magazine*, April 7, 1984.

surrounding the tour, one gets the sense that Jackson wanted the same. His reluctance to work with his brothers and his family again may go unspoken (the closest he comes to explicit reluctance is when his lawyer, John Branca, tells *Rolling Stone*, "The tour is important to Michael because it's important to Michael's family. I'm not sure the tour was Michael's first choice. He might have preferred to do other things. But he found it important to tour at his brothers' request and his family's request."¹¹¹) but when one looks at the photographs and video footage of the Victory Tour press conferences one sees a young man sullen and subtly embarrassed to be seen in the center of such a spectacle. As I've discussed regarding his music videos, Jackson is at the end of an extended period of unhindered self-representation, and has reaped unimaginable rewards from the acts of trusting his own instincts and following his artistic vision. Now he must compromise all of those things in the name of family unity, for a family that is exposing itself as increasingly greedy and self-centered. It's startling to look at the Jackson brothers at these tour press events. Most of them are dressed more flamboyantly than the family's star, all sport Michael's dark sunglasses (Jermaine at this time looks the most like a Michael Jackson impersonator and it's really quite sad when the real thing, his younger brother, is sitting only a couple chairs away from him), all but Michael grin ear-to-ear as Don King hypes the concert events to eager reporters. Only Michael seems embarrassed by King's histrionics, scrunching further into himself as if it will allow him to disappear. When Jackson announces he will be donating all his earnings from the tour to charity, none of his brothers follow suit. Granted, they have not enjoyed the culture-shattering success Michael has since the release of *Thriller*, but they've also been as famous and successful as him up until that point and should have amassed the same considerable wealth their brother used a year earlier to make three of the most influential music videos of all time. They haven't, squandering their money on the trappings of fame and fortune instead, and their uncontrollable desire for more has much to do with what bogs the tour down from the start. The burden of performance and power fall to Michael while the brothers sit back and reap the rewards.

Because his brothers must be part of the show, Michael cannot dedicate his performances to the new songs his fans want to see so badly. Part of this is a matter of staging and effects; technology limits what he can do, how much of his vision he can fulfill. On this tour he wrestles as much from special effects as he can, using lasers, puppet, massive video screens, and pre-filmed interludes to augment the experience. Only four years later, in 1988, when he launches the second leg of his first real solo tour in support of *Bad*, most of these effects have been cast aside

¹¹¹ Goldberg and Connelly, "Trouble In Paradise?" 27.

in favor of highlighting Jackson's supernatural performance skills and the decision serves him well. The Victory Tour, reviewers agree, is ultimately bogged down by the way in which these effects sometimes draw the attention away from. One reviewer even notes "fans seemed to head for the refreshment stands only when Michael left the stage for a breather and another Jackson briefly assumed the spotlight."¹¹² Where utilizing the most advanced technology for that time doesn't distract from performance, its limitations make other songs unstagable. Jackson was never able to perform "Thriller" on the Victory Tour because he couldn't figure out how to properly stage it, perform it musically (its layered synth effects never sounded quite right until the Bad Tour), and was regularly criticized by reviewers for the oversight.

Still, what he can stage he does spectacularly. Jackson may not be able to fulfill his vision in terms of staging and special effects, but he can outperform just about everyone in the business and he does. "He's arrogant on Beat It, tender on She's Out Of My Life, triumphant on Billie Jean," *People* crows, "His Heartbreak Hotel is so full of pops, stops, bangs and breaks that by the time he's done the crowd is inspecting its arms for imaginary bruises."¹¹³ *Rolling Stone* stated unequivocally, "the show-stopper was a telescoped version of the 'Billie Jean' performance that upended the Motown twenty-fifth anniversary special, Michael Jackson in black jacket and fedora, all glide, pop and spin combos – a brilliant sequined solitaire."¹¹⁴ And it wasn't just the body that surprised and transformed, but the voice as well. Critics across the board praise Jackson for inserting previously unheard gospel tonalities into these concerts. "One of [the show's] finer moments," Gerri Hirshey wrote in *Rolling Stone*, "is a quirky segment at the end of a medley of old Jackson 5 hits, when Michael winds up 'I'll Be There.' Alone in a white spotlight, he shrieks and moans, a cappella, in a gospel voice hitherto unheard... the thirty or so seconds of soulful improv was a revelation – and, as he tamped it down and stuttered into funk-scat to slide into the next song, an extended dance version of 'My Lovely One,' the racial nattering of the preceding weeks – the demands that there be more local black promoters, the complaints about the discrimination caused by the high ticket prices – was drowned out, at least for the fans inside the stadium."¹¹⁵

¹¹² Dennis McDougal, "45,000 Shriek as Jacksons Open Tour in Kansas City," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1984: 4.

¹¹³ "The Jackson Fireworks," *People Weekly*, July 23, 1984: 46.

¹¹⁴ Gerri Hirshey, "Michael's Magic Show," *Rolling Stone*, August 16, 1984: 32.

¹¹⁵ Hirshey, "Michael's Magic Show," 28-29.

Since critics are quick to point out how many more white attendees there are at these concerts than black, the inclusion of further identifiably black musical forms in the performance is important. For one, it's not done to assert their blackness in the face of criticism from the white and black medias (Hirshey reports in the above-cited review, that Michael added in the gospel runs after being exposed to the work of legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson¹¹⁶ and quickly becoming obsessed), but because it felt like a natural musical inclusion in their performances. By drawing on an even wider tradition of black music than he had on *Thriller*, Jackson is once again enacting moments of identity transformation by having white and black fans bond through the experience of live music, and through a genre and a sound that previously would have served to divide instead of bring together. The shared experience of attending a Victory Tour concert, like the shared experience of viewing a Michael Jackson video or listening to *Thriller* as an album, becomes a point at which black and white experiences intersect and form a bond with each other that is not mediated or mitigated by racial stratification. The joy experienced at these concerts is the same for both races and will serve in the future as identificatory touchstones that allow for the bridging of racial divides when most other cultural artifacts are being used to pull black and white Americans further apart. Further, the insertion of gospel vocalizations into a pop ballad allows white audiences to internalize the emotional affect that gospel has made central to black American identity, giving these youths a glimpse into an affective life they've been kept out of before. I won't go so far as to claim that this brief moment of affective voyeurism neutralizes the effects of centuries of ingrained racism, but I do think it's important when one considers that the generation that is attending Jackson's concerts will subsequently have to face and work through the consequences of the re-segregation of American culture since the Civil Rights movement in the rest of the 1980's and early 1990's. As in the original 1960's moment, the pain and strife of the consequences of that re-segregation finds its voice in a distinctly black music, hip-hop and rap, that this generation of Michael Jackson fans will listen to. Though race relations in America will have to get worse to get better, the generation of young Americans that found themselves so powerfully in Jackson is also the generation that remains committed to bettering the lives of all Americans, to erasing social tensions between blacks and whites, to providing equal opportunities and advantages to all instead of calling for the maintenance of a deeply damaging status quo. It is hard to believe that that generation did not learn quite a bit about equality, compassion, and the

¹¹⁶ It is absolutely crucial to remember that the Jackson brothers would not have naturally been inducted into the gospel tradition through church attendance in their youth. Katherine Jackson joined the Jehovah's Witnesses in the early 1950's, and all of the Jackson children attended services at Kingdom Halls in Indiana and California while still living in their parents' home. Though their knowledge of black music was extensive, they would have been sheltered from gospel because of their mothers' (and Michael's personal) devout commitment to the Witnesses.

commonalities between black and white Americans from the moments when Michael Jackson clutched his microphone and wailed a gospel-inflected promise to his audience that, despite the pain and suffering we can hear in the grain of his voice, he'll be there.

The elements, pitch, and cadence of Michaelmania provide for us a roadmap to the ways in which the pop explosion enacted by the Michael Jackson event changed the cultural landscape of the 1980's and of America forever by allowing American youths to forge interracial allegiances and bonds that will shape the trajectories of their lives. Cultural scholars make much of the ways in which race shapes experience, making Americans of different races experience the same event or consume the same product from different and implicitly alienated perspectives. But this magical moment of pop explosion that began in 1983 and lasted all the way through the end of the Victory Tour in 1984 allowed white Americans and black Americans to come together and experience a cultural product together in a way that allowed them for a time to understand each other without needing to augment that understanding with racially specific qualifications. To love Michael Jackson, to want him, and to want to imitate him, were emotions experienced by black and white youths with equal intensity, and carried the promise of equal possibility. For that generation, this possibility and promise was liberating, galvanizing, and transformative, subverting the racial status quo in favor of imagining and attempting to create a world that existed beyond the scars left by centuries of virulent, institutionalized racism. It was a moment as powerful and transformative as the moment when the youth decided to band together to create a new world in the 1960's. It may have been enacted without parades or public protests, but it happened all the same, and those who wanted to protect America as it was took notice.

The flip side to any massive act of identity transformation is always backlash, a loud and public attempt by critics to disavow and disprove the positive power of a cultural artifact in order to protect their stake in the status quo. Jackson faced a backlash as fierce and violent as any other performer, perhaps moreso. "You sure never claimed to be bigger than Jesus," Dave Marsh wrote in 1985, reflecting on the phenomenon he'd just lived through, "but the idea of a black man performing such a massively successful and enticing act of unification had to be nipped in the bud. Somebody must have feared that otherwise people might get the idea that the things that hold them separate but equal are either bullshit or...visited upon them for reasons other than the obvious. There are a lot of suburban kids out there who are going to have a hard time that their white skin is an automatic sign of superiority after spending the happiest years of their childhood

trying to be just like you. Not that they won't be given lots of opportunity and encouragement to deny it."¹¹⁷ It is to these deniers, these opponents, these nippers to whom I now turn my attention.

¹¹⁷ Marsh, *Trapped*, 9.

Chapter Three

Sissified Man-Children and Reconstructed Noses: The Backlash

So far I have argued for and shown the ways in which Michael Jackson, *Thriller*, and Michaelmania provided a locus around which a generation of Americans, black and white, formed a new youth identity and forged bonds of solidarity with each other that have effected the components of American culture and identity ever since. I've also alluded here and there to the strong negative feelings that grew and coalesced around Jackson at the same time these young Americans were hailing him as their hero, their idol, their great pop cultural love. No act of identity formation is one-sided. Stuart Hall reminds us that, "[identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the making of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identically, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)."¹¹⁸ Jackson's act of pop explosion and identity formation took place at the intersection of greatly contested modes of American power, including the oppressive power of racism, the liberatory power of youth rebellion, and the economic power of market domination. At stake at this intersection is the upholding of American power infrastructures that keep certain populations, defined racially and socioeconomically, in their "proper place." When Jackson's music and persona transcended that "proper place," it didn't just bestow upon young Americans a sense of new possibilities they'd never felt before; it also caught the attention of Americans who sought to protect the status quo, to shore up the boundaries that kept American society stratified and unequal.

Because of the racially charged underbelly of the Michael Jackson phenomenon, it would be easy to assume that these critics were all white but that's not true. Conservative white Americans had strong feelings about Michael Jackson and especially about the great act of interracial love that constituted his pop explosion, but old-guard African American leaders and community members also raised red flags about this transcendent young man. While not fighting to maintain the status quo that maintained their oppression, they were fighting to use a specific kind of Black Nationalism and black identity to fight for African American advancement at this time. In outlining two strategies of combating structuralized racism in America, Paul Gilroy

¹¹⁸ Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Paul de Gay and Stuart Hall, ed., (London: Sage Press), 1996: 4.

defines the prevailing political strategy being espoused by the black community in the early 1980's as the essentialist strategy. He ties to it "gender-specific forms," and emphasizes that it "sees the black artist as potential leader."¹¹⁹ Most importantly, "It looks for an artistic practice that can disabuse [the black community] of the illusions into which they have been seduced by their condition of exile. The community is felt to be on the wrong road and it is the artist's job to give them a new direction, first by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness that the masses seem to lack."¹²⁰ Michael Jackson, with his unprecedented fame and success, seems like the perfect artistic leader despite his music's distinct lack of political message, but he does not give himself over to the cause. As I will show, this reluctance along with the way superstardom complicates racial coding, consumption and ideology, eventually turned Jackson from darling of the black community to target. The essentialist strategy also found a leader in another Jackson, the Reverend Jesse Jackson who in 1984 mounted a bid for the Democratic Party's nomination to the U.S. Presidency and amassed a collection of scandals all his own. The Reverend, despite his historical connections to Dr. King and extremely prominent position within the African American community, was ultimately not as popular or pervasive as Michael Jackson was in 1984. Some African American leaders see Michael as a distraction from the nobler and more important goal of getting Rev. Jackson elected, and eventually characterize the stylistic hallmarks of his music and image as damaging to the African American community.

The chorus of voices both black and white that rise in an attempt to discredit and undermine Jackson and his influence on American youths, is the noisy byproduct of the other side of the identity creation coin. As I noted in my introduction, those who love and embrace Jackson are not the only ones who use him to form a new identity; his critics are also using him and what he stands for to modify and then solidify a new iteration of a conservative American identity, just as the 1960's counterculture had an immense effect on the creation of the identities of those who counted themselves among the Silent Majority and who later ushered neo-conservatism into power with Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency. Examining the increasingly violent backlash against Jackson allows us to see how critics are using him to rearticulate their conservative identities, as well as illuminating once and for all the sites of Jackson's subversion. If Michael were, as critics often claimed, only a fluffy, insignificant fad that would certainly pass, then there would be no reason to criticize him as harshly and personally as they did. Everything

¹¹⁹ Paul Gilroy, "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At," from *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, (London: Serpent's Tail), 1993: 122.

¹²⁰ Gilroy, "It Ain't Where You're From...", 123.

from Jackson's music, to his intelligence and mental capabilities, his race, and his sexuality is called into question in an increasingly hysterical tone as these insults fall on deaf ears. As Jackson's popularity and influence builds with no signs of slowing, detractors pull out every trick they can think of to undermine him but to no avail. It is not until the Victory Tour – which itself is situated in conception and planning at the uneasy intersection of racial pride and mainstream popularity – that they are able to gain some footing. The outcome of this success (the reach of which can, should, and will be debated) also has far-reaching consequences. "Someone had to sit down and try to divine just how things had reached the point where the most beloved cultural hero of one year was being reviled," Dave Marsh wrote in 1985, "not just discarded but mocked and attacked. And mocked and attacked not only by those whose social role dictated disapproval of all pop stars, but by a significant number of those who formed the near-unanimous consensus around him less than a year before."¹²¹ To best understand what happens, how it happens, and what it does, I'll take up this backlash chronologically, tracing its build, the ways it changes, and how Jackson's massive fan base and establishment supporters attempt to fight back against it.

Before we embark on a journey that tests even the most optimistic American's faith in their country's capacity for acceptance and change, I'd like to note that when *Thriller* was first released and began to gain the momentum that led to the pop explosion ignited by "Billie Jean," its detractors were few and not too vocal. It was a vastly enjoyable album, a veritable shot in the arm for a lagging, flagging music industry whose post-disco output had been less than exciting. Critics white and black all rejoiced in the opportunity to hear new, exciting sounds and have groove that compelled them to dance. A little dancing, after all, never hurt anybody. In these months, those who bristled the most at the mention of Jackson were the radio DJs and MTV executives who found themselves increasingly the target of accusations of overt racism in the industry. For them, Jackson represented a sore spot that would just not go away. As I've mentioned before, black artists had been questioning the demographic research that fuelled the AOR radio format and eventually MTV's programming decisions for years before Jackson released *Thriller*. Brian O'Neal, member of the Bus Boys, told the *Baltimore Sun* in early 1983, "What happened was that blacks began to play something that became idiomatically associated with them... There has always been a strain of white prejudice running through the very structure of this country, and even in the early days there was a practice of calling that [style of music] 'colored peoples' music.' So while the music itself was highly influential on white artists in every

¹²¹ Marsh, *Trapped*, 4-5.

field of music, in its purest form it was still 'colored music' to many."¹²² Disc jockeys and, shortly thereafter, MTV executives were forced to assert over and over again that their policies were not racist but determined by demographic research that, through its association with science and sociology, was an unprejudiced indicator of what would and would not be acceptable to their target audiences. That meant that covers of black music, like Phil Collins' cover of "You Can't Hurry Love," received radio and MTV play that black artists could never dream of. The hypocrisy of those decisions are as evident today as they were back then, though in the early 1980's there were still elaborate logic systems in place to allow the average American and disc jockey alike to blind themselves to this racist reality. *Thriller's* first act of racial transcendence, breaking the AOR barrier, was and is still viewed by the majority as a triumph of sound over social conditioning, but it was not without its controversy. "Jackson elicited violent reactions," Larry Berger, program director for New York's WPLJ radio station told the *Los Angeles Times* in August, 1983, "Petitions, phone calls, letters. A certain small percentage of people are vocal, and – I hate to say it – are prejudiced. Certain small groups of people don't want any black music at all on WPLJ."¹²³ Berger adds in the same breath that within a few weeks these complaints turned to requests, and the fact that AOR and MTV both acquiesced to the Jackson phenomenon fairly quickly should restore some of our faith in Americans' capacity to change both expectations and assumptions, especially about music. At this point, Jackson is symbolic of America's continuing triumph over racism, even a welcome distraction from the kind of indirect racial oppression enacted by the policies of the Reagan Administration. Jackson's emblematic act of integration works not just to unify the youth of America under his umbrella, but also to cover up the violent acts of segregation and oppression visible in other aspects of society.

The initial waves of success in breaking down racial barriers in 1983 allow the black community to hold Jackson up as a triumph in the ongoing fight to raise the status of African Americans as citizens. It also allows him to take on the role of icon and object of sexual desire for white teenagers. This is enacted explicitly. In the "heated debate over who's got the sexiest videos, Michael Jackson [wins] by a landslide,"¹²⁴ the *Los Angeles Times* reported. The raw sexuality of his music and performance, as discussed in my previous chapters, can and should be seen as an act of cultural miscegenation in its most classic definition, as a previously illegal and frowned-upon act of interracial love. As such, some of the earliest signs of backlash manifest in

¹²² J.P. Considine, "Black music/white music: Is racism rocking rock?" *Baltimore Sun*, January 16, 1983, D1.

¹²³ Wayne Robins, "A Thriller: Pop Battles Race Barrier," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1983, R56.

¹²⁴ Patrick Goldstein, "Fans Turned Off And On By MTV," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1983, H1.

the insistence by critics and observers that Jackson's sexuality, while present in his performance, is some kind of artifice. "His high-flying tenor makes him sound like the lead in some funk-ed-up boys choir, even as the sexual dynamism irradiating from the arch of his dancing body challenges Government standards for a nuclear meltdown," *Time* wrote in 1984, qualifying that rather astounding assessment by adding, "His lithe frame, five-fathom eyes, long lashes *might even be threatening if Jackson gave, even for a second, the impression that he is obtainable*"¹²⁵ (emphasis mine). Though they insist he embodies "eroticism at arm's length,"¹²⁶ the way white teenage girls latch onto him belies that unobtainable sexuality; they concocted elaborate plans to make him fall in love with them, sending him love letters, camping out in front of his house in an attempt to meet him, even trying to scale the walls of the Hayvenhurst compound to achieve their goal. Jackson had been an object of desire in the black community for a long time, but when he transcends the racial barrier between black girls and white girls, he complicates matters for himself. Elvis Presley had also offered teenager girls an unacceptable sexual object to fixate upon in the 1950's, challenging social standards by adopting the brazen sexuality of African Americans in his music, his look, and his dancing, and parents largely succeeded in tamping down their daughters' desires. Susan J. Douglas remembers hiding in her closet to listen to Elvis records when her father was home, and contrasts that with the relentlessly public sexual love expressed for the Beatles a decade later. Jackson's fans operate in the Beatles' mode, not Presley's, taking their love for him to the very-public arenas of the street, the fan magazine, the radio request line, and MTV. They do not retreat from their desire. And, in a move that surprises most, Jackson seems to validate their hopes when he begins appearing in public with Brooke Shields as his date. She accompanies him to the many events honoring his achievements in 1983, as well as to the highly publicized sweeps at the American Music Awards and Grammy Awards in 1984. Shields, at this time, represents an iconic American white sexuality; as a model and movie star, she occupies the highest level of all-American desirability. Thus, her relationship with Jackson allows for several interpretations. First, we can read it as a way of confirming Jackson's full citizenship. Instead of dating less-famous girls or exclusively black girls, as is befitting his station as a young black man, his romantic entanglement with Shields elevates him from the second-class citizenship automatically bestowed upon African Americans. This elevation is further bolstered by his public friendships with Jane Fonda and Liza Minnelli, two other symbols of white American sexuality and sexiness.

¹²⁵ Cocks, "Why He's a Thriller," 59.

¹²⁶ Cocks, "Why He's a Thriller," 59.

Second, we can read the pairing of Shields and Jackson as a way of casting his looks and sexual appeal as its own iteration of all-Americanness. It is difficult to imagine Shields pairing herself publicly with anyone who challenges the ideals of American male beauty, as it would be detrimental to her image and her career. Since her mother was notoriously involved and invested in her career, it's incredibly difficult to imagine that the pairing would have been allowed to happen if it wasn't condoned. If that is the case, one must imagine Jackson seemed like an appropriate partner/boyfriend/date not just because his and Shields' childhoods in the industry allowed for a bond between them, but also because her all-American image can be bolstered by his image, not just his fame. If she's iconically American, he must be as well. And so, for the first time, an iteration of African American beauty, sexuality and appeal is being held up as a norm and not an exception. It should be evident how threatening and subversive this is at its core. Essential to the cultural infrastructure keeping African Americans in their place as an American underclass are the narratives that circulate around black beauty and black sexuality as "exotic" and "primitive," outside the civilized boundaries of the white ideal. Moreover, in the few instances in which black beauty has crossed over to mainstream appeal (a move that is usually temporary and fleeting), it has done so via the beauty of women. To view Michael – with his big eyes and long lashes, his long Jheri curled hair, his streamlined nose and chocolate skin, his lithe, slender body and affinity for makeup – as a mainstream and not exotic emblem of beauty and sexuality is to undermine the white idealization of rugged masculinity, working- or middle-class machismo and strength, dominance and assertiveness.

Though black looks, male and female, were still kept out of the standardized notions of American beauty at this time, the frenzy over Jackson cannot be ignored or transferred onto white pop stars. To deal with the threat he is posing to the status quo, Jackson is immediately shuttled into the androgyny trend, represented along with Jackson by the gender-bending Boy George and traced historically back to David Bowie's bisexual Ziggy Stardust character in the 1970's. "Whatever happened to the days when teens would swoon over guys who had the macho look?" Trina Dailey asked in the *Chicago Tribune*. Referring to Jackson and Boy George she wonders, "Why are these androgynous male entertainers so attractive to young girls? One reason might be that their parents are so turned off by something that doesn't appear natural to them."¹²⁷ So here, teenage rebellion becomes the answer, a way of dismissing the broader and deeper implications of the shifting of sexual desire onto the body of a man like Jackson. Though articles like this (which abound as Jackson and Boy George grow ever more famous) work to deflect the power of

¹²⁷ Trina Dailey, "Androgynous teen idols: Why so attractive?" *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1984, G1.

sexual attraction and force Jackson back into the box of the Other in order to neutralize his subversive threat to the status quo, they also work (and fail) to obscure the more important work his looks are doing. "At best, [stars like Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Boy George] have used androgyny and sexual ambiguity as part of their 'style' in ways which question prevailing definitions of male sexuality and sexual identity,"¹²⁸ Kobena Mercer points out. Lest we think this deployment of androgyny is accidental, he continues, "Key songs on *Thriller* highlight this problematization of male sexuality and sexual identity."¹²⁹ His examples include "Wanna Be Startin' Something," "Billie Jean," and "Beat It" (which explicitly rejects machismo when it exhorts the listener, "Don't be a macho man"). For mainstream white America, the questions Jackson's looks are raising and the intensity of the positive response they get from teenage girls are deeply disturbing. They must not be addressed, lest a black man undermine the standard of white masculinity that dominates our cultural constructions of sex and gender. His relationship with Brooke Shields seems to place his beauty on the acceptable side of masculine attractiveness, upsetting the natural balance. To neutralize his effect, critics deploy a rigorous and disturbing set of accusations that Jackson is homosexual.

Rumors that Michael Jackson was gay started in the late 1970's when, during puberty, the star's voice seemed not to drop. Within the Jackson family, Michael is hardly an exception vocally – his older brothers Jackie and Jermaine both have speaking high voices, Jackie especially, and the whole family has a polite, soft-spoken manner that is partially natural and partially the product of their Motown publicity training. Though many have testified during his life and after his death that in private Jackson's speaking voice was notably lower than when speaking in public (and if you watch interviews with him over the course of his adult life you can hear his public speaking voice drop in register as he ages), the high pitch and soft volume he employs in interviews and public appearances is undoubtedly a calculated part of his image. It contributes to a version of himself that Jackson put forward in the press of a young man still deeply attached to childhood and its trappings, as well as a nonthreatening and typical black masculinity. The result of this affectation along with his slender frame and pretty, as opposed to handsome, looks are rumors about his sexuality, particularly his homosexuality. Steven Ivory, a music critic, interviewed Jackson in 1978 and asked him point-blank whether or not he was gay. Jackson requested the tape recorder be turned off for him to answer the question. Ivory recounted his answer after Jackson's death in 2009: "I asked him about the rumor that he was gay. And he

¹²⁸ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 50.

¹²⁹ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 50.

looked at me and he said, 'You know what I need you to do? I need you to turn off that tape recorder.' And I said, 'Okay.' He said 'No, I'm not gay.' And I said, well 'Why did you ask me to turn of the tape recorder?' And he said, 'Well, because I know that we have many fans that are gay, and I don't want to offend any of these people.'"¹³⁰ Jackson was romantically linked to actresses Stephanie Mills and Tatum O'Neil in the late 70's and early 80's, but rumors about his sexuality persisted, if slightly more remotely. Then, when Jackson achieved heights of fame and importance never before reached by a black musician, the rumors resurfaced with a bitter vengeance.

Since Jackson had now aged a few more years and his voice remained high, additional rumors that he was taking female hormones to maintain that pitch (and the upper registers of his singing range) augmented claims of homosexuality. And when Jackson had the first of his cosmetic surgeries in the early 1980's, rumors circulated that he was either preparing for a sex change operation or trying to look like Diana Ross. Jackson refused to comment on his appearance until late in 1984, which I will address later on. The official explanation for the changes to his nose was that he'd received a rhinoplasty after breaking his nose when he fell while dancing. The rhinoplasty was done for the sake of his breathing – an absolute necessity considering the demands of his performances – and the additional slimming of his nose was never mentioned or justified. One cannot miss the change in his nose, the way it was shaved down into a recognizably "white" shape. Additionally, by 1983 Jackson had lost quite a bit of weight due to his strictly vegetarian diet (and, by the admission of his family, a general aversion to eating that could be viewed in psychoanalytic terms as a manifestation of Jackson's desire to be fully in control of his life, career and future; control is a subject both Michael and, more famously, his sister Janet returned to through all stages of their careers), which emphasized his facial bone structure more than ever before. In particular it focused attention on his high cheekbones, slim neck, and high forehead, all feminine traits even though the strong angularity of his jaw is more traditionally masculine. These are mixed gender messages augmented by makeup – Jackson plucks his eyebrows into slim arches, wears eyeliner, foundation, and blush, a decision that may have its roots in his idol Jackie Wilson's image even though most American gossip and mainstream magazines miss that connection entirely – and they force Americans to do work they are uncomfortable with in order to understand him. "If we regard his face, not as the manifestation of personality traits but as a surface of artistic and social inscription," Mercer

¹³⁰ Transcript of "VH1 Presents: Michael Jackson's Secret Childhood," accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.silentlambs.org/education/transcript1vh1.htm>.

implores us, "the ambiguities of Jackson's image call into question received ideas about what black male artists in popular music should look like."¹³¹ James Brown, Marvin Gaye, and Jackie Wilson who all offer performances of exotic, primitive, animalistic masculinity, aggressive heterosexuality, hypersexuality, and traditional macho masculinity as embodied by musicians personify black male sexuality. Echoes of this traditional sexuality are seen in the influence of Wilson and Brown on Jackson's dancing and performance, but he does not embody any of those stereotypes beyond the stage. Instead he combines the winsome fragility of Diana Ross with the showmanship of his soul influences. By defying the conventions of black masculinity, Jackson undermines their importance in keeping black and white Americans alienated from each other.

What follows from these attempts to undermine Jackson's masculinity are attempts to undermine his racial allegiance. Richard Harrington wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Ever since the cosmetic operation that sharpened his nose and widened his eyes [another persistent rumor at that time], ever since he dropped the Afro of his youth for the California curl of 'Off The Wall,' but mostly since he was adopted by the mass audience, Michael Jackson has been described as raceless, sexless. These are stupid, insensitive words—particularly insulting to black Americans. But they reflect white Americans' continuing discomfort with a strong black male figure... How convenient that Michael Jackson is a non-threatening black male whose every movie is physical and sensual but somehow not sexual."¹³² Having called our attention to the inherent contradictions in the public reading of Jackson's person, he asks a crucial question: "How did Michael Jackson go from being a central figure in soul music to being raceless? Who took the black out of Michael Jackson?"¹³³ The erasure of Michael Jackson's race from his body is one of the most persistent mysteries of his life, and if the reasons for *why* it happened are obvious (the whitened black body, metaphorically or physically, is always more palatable to the white mainstream than a body proudly displaying its racial identity, and Jackson's drastic physical transformation through his life only augmented that), *how* it happened is incredibly opaque. Through my extensive research utilizing mass media and television coverage during *Thriller's* cultural takeover, I haven't been able to glean the methodology of this erasure, just that it happened and it happened fast. It seems as though once Jackson's success transcended the acceptable dimensions afforded to black entertainers (one of the "ritual roles"¹³⁴ white America approves for black citizens), the white media began to describe him as "raceless" or otherwise not

¹³¹ Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 50.

¹³² Richard Harrington, "Who Is He?" *Washington Post*, March 18, 1984, L9.

¹³³ Harrington, "Who Is He?" L9.

¹³⁴ "Editorial: Jackson Brothers," *The Nation*, March 10, 1984, 275.

black, insisting that instead of embodying blackness and forcing it into the American mainstream as never before, he now existed in a space between black and white while not embodying either.

We cannot interpret this astonishing act of denial as anything other than a kind of metaphorical violence against the black community at large and Michael specifically, punishment for breaking the unspoken rules of American racial stratification. This is not entirely lost upon critics, and not just Harrington. "Michael Jackson has made the most of his part," the editors of *The Nation* wrote in March 1984, "more than anyone of his generation. With his eight Grammy awards, he is the living definition of hot, and the heat he generates comes from the combustion of cultural styles at the point of crossover—when black and white merge in one media moment without threat, danger or dependence. *But for all the glitter and the celebrity, he cannot leap the wall beyond his role; they'll get him, too, if he tries*"¹³⁵ (emphasis mine). Dave Marsh puts a finer point on it a year later, writing, "when Elvis was belittled and attacked, he kind of naturally stepped back into line, which [Jackson] can't, since black and rich and famous is already too far out of line for some."¹³⁶ Marsh observes that as Jackson continues to dig into the tradition of black music as the mother and father of rock and pop alike, he stirs up more and more negative emotions, "as if there is a taboo on digging too deeply,"¹³⁷ on pushing blackness back to the center of pop so explicitly. As with his sexuality, the vocal minority seeking to oppose Jackson and his influence over the youth cannot stop his momentum, so they seek to neutralize his power by alienating him from the race that gives him the power in the first place. It is perhaps a paradoxical way of thinking about the power one gleans from their racial birthright to imagine a black man having a hand over the white majority in this instance, but we have to remember that what Jackson's pop explosion is enacting is a revolution from below in which blackness, finding a voice and bodily expression in his music and performance, is able to transcend and destroy the structures that confine it in order to assume something closer to its proper place as a legitimate American ur-identity. If Jackson is no longer perceived to be a black man, he cannot continue to embody integration and miscegenation. Moreover, if critics can cast his cosmetic surgery as a sign that he himself is fleeing from blackness they can cast him as a figure that is rejecting his African American heritage and use him to reconstruct the walls that segregate black and white culture.

¹³⁵ "Jackson Brothers," 275.

¹³⁶ Marsh, *Trapped*, 9.

¹³⁷ Marsh, *Trapped*, 45.

Having called his sexuality, gender, and race into question, the proponents of the growing backlash against Jackson move on to the final prong of their strategy to totally discredit and castrate the star: questioning his mental capacity. Specifically, they focus on Jackson as an emblem of arrested development, emphasize his ambiguous relationship with adulthood, and even bring up his poor origins and lack of formal education (compounded, of course, by his childhood spent not in school but on the road and in the studio with the Jackson 5). Jackson, in the precious few interviews he grants before and during the *Thriller* event, has a tendency to fixate on the aspects of childhood and innocence that can and do carry over into the best pop music, though they are often left unarticulated. He focuses on the "magic," as he frequently calls it, behind pop music, be it in his composition process (something he constantly attributes to God and the universe¹³⁸, telling *Ebony* in 1984, "Music started with nature. Music is nature. Birds make music. Oceans make music. Wind makes music. Any natural sound is music. And that's where it started."¹³⁹), or describing his idols (He sighs to *Rolling Stone*, "[James Brown is] so magic."¹⁴⁰). Steven Spielberg describes him as "one of the last living innocents"¹⁴¹ and "an emotional star child."¹⁴² His long life in the entertainment industry, which began when he was an actual child, has the effect of making industry colleagues refer to him in more juvenile terms than they may otherwise, and Jackson exacerbates it by talking about his close emotional relationship with the puppet that played E.T., how he identifies with Peter Pan, and how much he relates to children. Questions of arrested development will plague Jackson for his entire life, and in many ways will never be adequately addressed by the star or the critics who continue to fixate on it, and in this moment in 1984 it takes on a central role in deploying a neutralizing critique. Though he may try to maintain his personal link to childhood and innocence in his private life, there is no question that in music and business Jackson is fully adult and extremely bright; there's no way *Thriller* could have become what it did as musical album, visual record, or pop phenomenon if that wasn't the case. But even that intelligence is tangled up in the non-adult world. Jane Fonda told *Time*, "His intelligence is instinctual and emotional like a child's. If any artist loses that childlikeness, you lose a lot of creative force. So Michael creates around himself a world that protects his creativity."¹⁴³ Looking at the components of the phenomenon, it's hard to doubt her insight.

¹³⁸ In a rare moment of eloquence (Jackson, for all the cruelty of his detractors, was never a particularly articulate public speaker), Jackson told *Ebony* in 1992, "I believe that in its primordial form, all of creation is sound and that it's not just random sound, that it's music."

¹³⁹ Robert E. Johnson, "The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows," *Ebony*, December 1984, 157-158.

¹⁴⁰ Gerri Hirshey, "Michael Jackson: Life in the Magic Kingdom," *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 1983, 13.

¹⁴¹ Hirshey, "Magic Kingdom," 13.

¹⁴² Hirshey, "Magic Kingdom," 13.

¹⁴³ Cocks, "Why He's A Thriller," 60.

Jackson has the supreme confidence of childhood, the kind of faith in oneself that adulthood works over time to undermine by exposing us to our own flaws and helplessness in the face of a wider and more powerful world. By embracing magic and fantasy, and by avoiding the pitfalls of adult self-reflection, Jackson's creativity is allowed to grow unhindered by the constraints so many other artists fall victim to. The content of his work demonstrates startling maturity – his songs and dances are sophisticated, insightful, sexually powerful, and very much the work of a man in his mid-20's, not a young boy – while his method hews close to the possibility of childhood. As in sexuality, gender, and race, Jackson gracefully embodies the contradictions of age and aging. It's not much of a surprise, then, that the press most commonly chooses to describe him as a "man-child."

We can read "man-child," as I just did, as a positive descriptor, a way of articulating embodied duality that is in line with much of the doubleness forced upon African Americans since they gained their freedom from slavery. We can also deploy it as an insult, a term that undermines Jackson's mental capacity and judgment, that belittles and marginalizes him. We should not be surprised that the press largely decided to go with the second usage. It is sometimes deployed subtly and perhaps accidentally, as in the *Time* cover story when the language of ethereality is used seemingly with the intent to help convey the inarticulate, well, *magic* of Jackson's pop event and persona but ends up reinforcing the portrait of the artist as an out-of-touch half-man, half-alien who is so fragile he could disintegrate at any moment. More often, though, it is used to question his authority, his authenticity, his legitimacy as a star and a man, his capability to guide himself, much less his fans, through the world. Perhaps the most sickening example of this that I found was a TRB column in *The New Republic* written by Michael Kinsley and published on April 16, 1984. After describing Jackson as a young boy, pre-fame, as "a healthy, normal child with a talent for music," Kinsey then chastises him for "having no adult life," calls him a freak, and chastises the *Time* article for "[taking] as its theme that there is something wonderful about being an incompetent human being." In his final paragraph he mentions that Jackson "is supposedly writing a book," and concludes by snipping, "Write, hell. Can Michael Jackson read?" That final insult is revolting for the way it resurrects racist tropes about supposedly innate African American inferiority, stupidity, and backwardness. Jackson is a young man who has spent his life alienated from regular folks by talent and fame, and denied a traditional education in service of entertaining the public. Though he may be shy and publicly inarticulate, nothing Jackson has done as a public or private figure should provoke an otherwise intelligent cultural critic to question whether he is even literate. Kinsley transcends the typical

deployment of the trope of Jackson's arrested development as a way of neutralizing his influence on the youth and descends instead into an ugly bigoted critique of him as simply stupid.

As this chorus of white voices rises, trying ever more hysterically to strip Jackson of the transcendent, subversive power he wields, one would think the black community would step in to defend their newfound hero. But in finding fame and influence as a largely apolitical crossover pop phenomenon, Jackson sidestepped the role of artistic leader the black community wants him to take on. As I quoted Gilroy describing at the beginning of this chapter, the majority of the black community in the early 1980's sees popular music as an arena in which racially loyal artists can raise consciousness and awareness of black struggle and as a form through which the ideals Black Nationalism (equality, pride, and progress) can be espoused. Certainly many extremely successful black pop artists had taken up this cause, most notably James Brown ("Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)"), Marvin Gaye (the entirety of *What's Going On*), and Stevie Wonder (*Innervisions* and *Songs in the Key of Life*). Jackson's music is not explicitly political like the examples I just gave, though I hope I've shown by now that honest and confrontational representations of black life are embedded in his music and performance. Jackson's popularity, however, far surpasses that of Brown, Gaye, or Wonder – of most musicians writ large, black or white – and his influence puts him in a unique position to further the black struggle for equality and recognition in America. He is a proud black man and black musician, but he is not interested in being anyone's political puppet. He sees pop and politics as two separate spheres, and has no wish to imbricate the two.

Frustration builds in private, sometimes spilling over to the gossip columns when black writers start to question Jackson's decision to be seen in public so often with Brooke Shields.

Abiola Sinclair writes about this in the *New York Amsterdam News* and muses,

"I don't know what we want from Michael Jackson... We all wished him well because he sort of stood for hope in what seems like a hopeless situation... Right on, Michael? The Brooke Shields thing sort of made us feel 'If you can, get the best' which appears not to be us after all. Yes – I suppose [the rising negative sentiment in the black community] is just hurt. I'm worried though. Because this kind of hurt will take one of two forms. Either we'll pick him apart, or, and this is more likely, we'll push the hurt inward like we usually do and begin to hate ourselves. After all, he must be right, he's rich ain't he? White folks listen to him."¹⁴⁴

Sinclair is one of the first black voices I found that ties Jackson's choice to date Shields back to the legacy of American beauty and desirability standards that prize whiteness over all

¹⁴⁴ Abiola Sinclair, "Does mainstream Michael Jackson prefer babblin' Brooke?" *New York Amsterdam News*, March 31, 1984, 27.

else, and which used appearance-related rhetoric to hold black women as inferior mates, spouses and human beings. I doubt Jackson intended this interpretation (so does Sinclair: "Me myself I think neither one is necessary. Michael is just an entertainer, and he never promised us a rose garden...") and was probably dismayed that his own community would assume that he would view black women as inferior and undesirable, as he was vocal about his admiration of and pride in his mother and three sisters. But Sinclair's column tips us off to the ways into which massive acts of unification and integration can feel like slights to the community from which the integrating artist emerges. If we follow the voices of black teenage girls writing in to *Ebony* and *Jet*, nothing about Jackson's decision to publicly date a white woman quells their desire for him, nor does it dampen their dreams of one day marrying the star. But amongst the leaders of the community and the writers giving voice to their concerns, it's an indicator that Jackson may be betraying his roots, leaving his past – and the people in it – behind.

Then, a couple weeks later, the black backlash against Jackson explodes when Louis Farrakhan addresses him in a radio broadcast that makes front-page news. In it, Farrakhan accuses him "of projecting a 'female-acting, sissified' image that 'ruins' black youth."¹⁴⁵ The *Chicago Tribune* quotes him at length: "So, we have today a Michael Jackson who is winning all kinds of awards because he is a great and marvelous performer. But the image that he projects to young black men is an image that we should all reject." He continues:

"...this Jheri curl, female-acting, sissified-acting expression, it is not wholesome for our young boys nor our young girls... Certainly, the man is a great singer, certainly he's a powerful entertainer. We cannot and we would never try to take anything away from our brother. But the style that is being projected before the world actually ruins your young men and makes your young women have nothing to look up to as a real man for their own lives. This is a shame. But, of course men like this will live to die of old age, because they threaten nothing."

No one should take Farrakhan as a representative for mainstream black America; he was and remains an extremist devoted to a political agenda combining Black Nationalism with the extremism of his Nation of Islam that diverges from the more common expressions of the essentialist political views Gilroy described. But instead of provoking a loud and outraged reaction from the black community, who one would assume would want to defend the young man who has brought blackness and black struggles back to the center of American culture, a flurry of voices join in to support Farrakhan's homophobic and extremely conservative accusations. Jim Davis wonders, "How would I react to a son who imitated the image Michael Jackson has

¹⁴⁵ George E. Curry, "Muslim leader blasts 'sissified' Michael Jackson," *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1984, 1.

created?"¹⁴⁶ and admits "I was afraid to answer that question because I know how my father would have responded to me if I had come home dressed like [that]. Believe me, I can't write it in this column."¹⁴⁷ To try to answer it, he enacts an informal survey of his colleagues and friends. One tells him, "I'd throw up because I would be disappointed that this was the image that would carry on my name."¹⁴⁸ Another responds, "I'd kick my son in the (posterior)." He then asks his aunt, "a very religious person who probably would disavow any type of association with Farrakhan. To my surprise, she also agreed."¹⁴⁹ He ends on ambivalent note, relieved because he knows "nothing is wrong with me and that my father's image of a man has been firmly planted in me and will be passed on to my children," but allowing, "truthfully, I don't know if there's anything wrong with Michael Jackson."¹⁵⁰ Though in those final sentences he seems to try to distance himself from the narrow-minded views of acceptable masculinity he's now filled his column with, it's pretty ineffective. Instead we are left with the sense that being a "real" black man, a "proper" black man and wanting to be like Michael Jackson are insurmountably estranged and that Jackson, in daring to be different and a man of his own creation, is actually hurting his race by making over young boys in his image only to leave them in a position of powerlessness and ridicule inside and outside of their community.

A couple months later, the *Philadelphia Tribune* runs a letter to the editor from L.G. Miller who takes up Farrakhan's critique:

"When I see pictures of this young Black man with his silly one gloved hand, his Shirley Temple hairdo, and his equally ridiculous rhinestone Captain Kangaroo outfit, I am reminded of the monkey on the organ grinder's leash. It is said he is popular among Black youth and an inspiration to them. But what has he to offer our youth? ... The music of Michael Jackson does not enlighten, educate, inspire or instruct, which is what true art is supposed to do. Music is an art, but it is also a science. Those who cannot understand the science of music will not be able to understand when and how this science is being used against them."¹⁵¹

Miller does not expand on what this "science" is, exactly, but scientific discourse comes into play once again in the pages of the *Philadelphia Tribune* later that summer in a column by Dr. Charles W. Faulkner titled, "Curing the Michael Syndrome." Couching his critique firmly in the language of pseudo-psychology, Faulkner mourns the future black community being led by

¹⁴⁶ Jim Davis, "Michael Jackson: sissy or superstar?" *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 27, 1984, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Davis, "Sissy or superstar?" 5

¹⁴⁸ Davis, "Sissy or superstar?" 5

¹⁴⁹ Davis, "Sissy or superstar?" 5

¹⁵⁰ Davis, "Sissy or superstar?" 5

¹⁵¹ "Reader's Viewpoint: The music of Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 12, 1984, 4.

fans of Jackson's. "The problem for Black folk and the Michael Jackson 'gender blender' mystic," he laments, "is that many Black youngsters who idolize Michael Jackson are fusing the male and female appearance, behavior and role requirements. This represents a confusion of how people should behave. ... Many people will never be able to recover from the answers [to questions of self-identity] which Michael Jackson provides. *Make no mistake about it, this fusion of male-female roles will likely produce many problems when these youngsters, male and female, must relate to one another as adults contemplating marriage*"¹⁵² (emphasis mine). Faulkner assumes the future of the black community is wholly dependent on adherence to the rigid gender roles articulated in Black Nationalism, and that any deviation from those are necessarily destructive. He, and the other critics quoted and not who write and speak from this perspective, cannot envision any way in which the alternative modes of black masculinity Jackson expresses would be considered liberating, transformative or positive. For him and others there can be no alternatives, no other ways of thinking; everyone must fall in line behind essentialist politics and only then can African Americans *maybe* overcome.

The anger and intolerance these critics espouse perfectly encapsulates the frustration Jackson provokes from his community when he refuses to step into the role of essentialist political leader. Gilroy tells us that, "the power of music in developing our struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness and testing out, deploying or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency – individual and collective, defensive and transformational – demands attention to both the formal attributes of this tradition of expression and its distinctive *moral* basis."¹⁵³ He continues, "In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present."¹⁵⁴ The problem to critics like Farrakhan, Davis and Miller, is that Jackson's vision of "the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be" is different from theirs. He eschews many of the trappings of Black Nationalism's hypermasculinity, compulsory explicit political involvement, separatism, and strict gender subordination. He's not exactly taking up the "pluralistic position" Gilroy identifies as the opposite of essentialism and its main competitor in black politics, which "affirms blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of a black

¹⁵² Dr. Charles W. Faulkner, "Curing the Michael Jackson syndrome," *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 27, 1984, 5.

¹⁵³ Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from...", 133.

¹⁵⁴ Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from...", 133.

particularity that is *internally* divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age and political consciousness."¹⁵⁵

Instead, Jackson adopts a wholly integrationist position, wanting to leave the trappings of racial categorization behind, to transcend them, and in doing so to unite all people on a human level that rejects the specificity of race, gender and age in favor of recognizing the universal traits that make us all people and, as such, good and deserving of love and equality. In June of 1983, when the Jacksons were ending their contracts with then-managers Ron Weisner and Freddy DeMann, Joe Jackson (their father, not the singer of the same name) made public comments about hiring Weisner and DeMann because he felt he needed "white help" in navigating the racist music industry. Michael, who was already notorious for his public reticence, was moved to make a public statement to *Billboard*, saying, "I don't know what would make him say something like that. To hear him talk like that turns my stomach. ... I happen to be colorblind: I don't hire color. I hire competence... Racism is not my motto. One day, I strongly expect every color to love as one family."¹⁵⁶ And in the most extensive and revealing interview he granted during the era of *Thriller*, not accidentally given to Robert E. Johnson personally for *Ebony*, he says, "I'm prejudiced against ignorance. That's what I'm mainly prejudiced against. It's only ignorance and it's taught because it's not genetic at all. ... Look at the many wonders inside the human body – the different colors of organs, colors of blood – and all these different colors do a different thing in the human body. It's the most incredibly system in the world; it makes and incredible building, the human being. And if this can happen with the human body, why can't we do it as people? And that's how I feel. And that's what I wish the world could do more."¹⁵⁷ And though he refuses the black community's command to use his music for explicitly political purposes, he does not separate himself entirely from political efficacy: "I try to write, put it in song. Put it in dance. Put it in my art to teach the world. If politicians can't do it, I want to do it. We have to do it. Artists, put it in paintings. Poets, put it in poems, novels. That's what we have to do. And I think it's so important to save the world."¹⁵⁸

Unfortunately, Jackson's published rebuttals come at the end of 1984, in the December issue of the magazine. Farrakhan's statements come just before the announcement of the Victory tour and the mess of bad publicity that goes along with it. As I mentioned in the previous chapter,

¹⁵⁵ Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from...", 123.

¹⁵⁶ Goldberg and Connelly, "Trouble In Paradise," 26.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, "The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows," 160.

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, "The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows," 160.

Jackson is reluctant to do the tour in the first place and bristles even more when his parents and brothers announce they've hired the politically incorrect and unpredictable boxing promoter Don King to take charge of it. And, as I mentioned before, King's involvement takes a precarious situation and turns it into a disaster. King was, in many ways, more interested in promoting himself than the Jacksons, was publicly vocal about money (uncouth no matter what, and especially uncouth when the tour was coming under heavy fire for setting ticket prices out reach for most young black fans and the inane mail-order ticketing system), and made statements and promotion deals on Michael and the group's behalf without consulting them. Eventually, Michael sent him a widely reported-on letter instructing him "not to communicate with anyone on Michael Jackson's behalf without prior permission; that all moneys paid to Michael Jackson for his participation in the tour would be collected by Michael Jackson's personal representatives, not by Don King; that King did not have permission to approach any promoters, sponsors or any other persons on Michael's behalf; that King was not to hire any personnel, any local promoters, book any halls or, for that matter, do *anything* without Michael Jackson's personal approval."¹⁵⁹ But though he tries to distance himself from the mess King is making, it's already too late. The ticket prices and mail order systems are roundly and universally condemned by the press, white and black, music and mainstream. In an attempt to accommodate an audience far more diverse and vast than the Jacksons had ever played to before, the many tour organizers set their sights on large outdoor arenas, which pushes the tour agenda out of the urban areas where their black fans are concentrated and out into the suburbs, a move that is viewed by the public as another way of intentionally keeping black fans away now that Michael has achieved such stunning crossover success. Then it's reported that the Jacksons are also excluding local black promoters for the few dates confirmed, which provokes a public condemnation by the Reverend Al Sharpton. As the star around which the show orbits, Michael is personally vilified for these decisions as critics assume he condones them.

Caught between loyalty to his family (who employed the particularly manipulative move of hiring Katherine as one of the tour's managers, knowing Michael cannot stand to go against his mother's wishes) and loyalty to his fans and ideals, Michael can only offer the meekest of rejoinders against this accusation. Behind the scenes he works furiously to reorient the tour to make sure large majority-black urban centers like Washington D.C. and Chicago are not bypassed in favor of white suburban settings, to get rid of the inane mail-order ticketing system and ensure a fairer distribution of tickets (including setting dozens aside for underprivileged youths at each

¹⁵⁹ Goldberg and Connelly, "Trouble In Paradise," 28.

show), and he wins small victories: Rev. Sharpton retracts his criticism after more local black promoters are hired and urban tour stops are announced, and the public greets the abolition of the mail-order system with great relief and renewed excitement for the shows. The damage is done, though. As Dave Marsh observed in *The Nation* after the end of the tour, "The truth about the Victory Tour is that its main event was an after-thought in the public ritual of the coronation and decapitation of Michael Jackson."¹⁶⁰ *Newsweek* chimes in, writing as the tour begins, "in recent months, a tide of dissent has engulfed Jackson in the kind of controversy no pop star has experienced since John Lennon declared the Beatles more popular than Jesus."¹⁶¹ In many ways, when the black community joins the white press in criticizing all aspects of Jackson and undermining his transformative power, they do damage to him that he can never fully repair. They could have refuted white critics' claims that Jackson's androgyny is detrimental and reclaimed his black birthright against assertions he has become raceless. They could have spoken about the power his complex "man-child" identity holds in producing creative expressions that offer a new and powerful vision of an America in which race is no longer a means of marginalization and instead of articulation of positive difference that helps build and not break cultural bonds between citizens. Instead, they reject the plethora of possibilities he offers in favor of upholding an outmoded and oppressive articulation of black progress that stifles instead of liberating black politics from its constrained past. If Jackson embodies what Gilroy terms a "politics of transfiguration," which "emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors,"¹⁶² the black backlash against him is a resounding rejection of that new strategy in favor of an essentialism that hasn't worked in the past, and is more than likely not effective in the future.

I want to avoid casting the black community as a single, hegemonic voice that decries all things Michael Jackson once he fails to step into the role that many want him to fill. Through all this controversy, he maintained and even grew his fan base, capturing the attention and admiration of black and white youths alike. And some black media outlets remained devoted to upholding him as a unique positive force in the world. *Ebony* in particular, which had a long relationship with the Jackson family beginning when the Jackson 5 broke in 1970, continued to publish articles lauding Jackson as a symbol of racial triumph and transcendence, a locus for an

¹⁶⁰ Dave Marsh, "Music," *The Nation*, March 23, 1985, 346.

¹⁶¹ "The Tour, The Money, The Magic," *Newsweek*, July 16, 1984, 69.

¹⁶² Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from...", 134.

intensely beneficial movement among the youth to look past racial difference and recognize the vast commonalities between blacks and whites. Because of this, they were the publication that Jackson used to give himself a voice, to address his public directly. And music critics soon acquiesced to the power of Jackson's live performance, especially as the Victory tour relaxed out of the over-rehearsed stiffness of its earliest dates into an electrifying showcase for Michael's formidable talent. But the power accrued when the black community joined in on the Michael Jackson backlash cannot be ignored. Though it may not have been their intention, though they may have thought they were protecting something essential and desperately important to African American identity, in the end they undermined the greatest act of cross-racial transcendence and subversion America had yet seen. Reflecting on the backlash a year later, Marsh writes,

"Like Elvis, Michael was in trouble for doing what's not to be done: exposing the power potential of popular culture, engaging in race mingling, acting 'too sexy.' When he was a phenomenon solely within the world of music, Michael Jackson had enjoyed nearly universal acclaim. There may have been doubters, but there were no naysayers. Bursting past the normal bounds of pop discourse into the mainstream of American events, Michael became not just a hero but a controversy... Just as the press had boosted *Thriller*, it now concentrated upon breaking Michael, cutting him down to size."¹⁶³

To put it another way, what the editors of *The Nation* had warned about earlier than year came to pass; Jackson leapt the wall beyond his role, and they got him. They got him good.

James Baldwin observed this spectacle of outrage coalescing around Jackson and was moved to speak. In his 1985 essay originally titled "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (later revised and re-titled "Here Be Dragons"), he offers us an extraordinary reading of the backlash:

"The Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all. I hope he has the good sense to know it and the good fortune to snatch his life out of the jaws of a carnivorous success. He will not swiftly be forgiven for turning so many tables, for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring and the man who broke the bank in Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael Jackson.

All that noise is about America, as the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth; the blacks, especially males, in America; and the burning, buried American guilt; and sex and sexual roles and sexual panic; money; success and despair—to all of which may now be added the bitter need to find a head onto which to place the crown of Miss America.

Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires."¹⁶⁴

His choice to call the backlash a "cacophony" is interesting. A cacophony is a harsh, discordant mixture of sounds lacking form and order, often overwhelming. It is the opposite of music, and

¹⁶³ Marsh, *Trapped*, 228.

¹⁶⁴ Baldwin, James. "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York (Library of America, 1998): 828.

even more the opposite of Jackson's music with its rhythmic and harmonic balance. Jackson's music affected the American public, specifically the American youth, by offering them a new model with which to articulate and organize their identities, a model of shared experience and love that existed not along the lines of race but across them. In creating a cacophony around him – a cacophony that projected onto one singer, one entertainer, the expectations and grievances built up over centuries and the responsibility to somehow erase all of them in one fell swoop – those participating in the backlash tried to destroy the cohesion his pop explosion created, to scatter youths just now solidifying a new set of bonds to one another and just now finding their own generational voice. Some may have thought they were doing so in service of a better future, but what they were really doing was shoring up the repressive ideology of the past and calcifying rigid identities that perpetuated American racial stratification. Unable to other Jackson using traditional tropes of race, gender, and maturity, they turned instead to a vitriolic campaign of freakishness, doing everything in their power to alienate him from his fans, his birthright, and his last existing community. A man often described as "isolated," the cacophony surrounding Michael Jackson ensured he would never feel at home among his own people ever again while simultaneously denying him the comfort of his new white fans (to find comfort there, of course, would just affirm accusations of being a race traitor). If Baldwin's final assertion that "freaks are called freaks and treated as such...because they cause to echo deep within us our most profound terrors and desires" is true, and I think it is, then we can only conclude that Michael Jackson tapped into the deepest fears and desires of the American people with the profound act of crossover his *Thriller* pop explosion induced, and that America was far from prepared to confront those fears and desires and put forth the work necessary to overcome the persistent ghosts of its history. The only question left to ask, then, is did this backlash *actually* succeed in undermining and neutralizing the transformative power of Michael Jackson and *Thriller*? It is my pleasure to answer that question at the end of this unhappy chapter with a resounding: No!

Yes I Believe In Me, So You Believe In You

When I first started thinking about this thesis and this topic, I was motivated by very personal desires. In the wake of Michael Jackson's unexpected death on June 25, 2009, I found myself in a place of intense self-reflection. A lifelong fan, I was devastated by his passing. It felt as though I'd lost a parent or a close friend, a lover or a leader. Something deep inside mourned the loss of something so great I couldn't quite name it. It was, in a word, a very *unexpected* reaction. I had never met Michael, nor had I ever seen him in concert. I'd known him only through his public face: his records, his videos, his interviews, and his public appearances. What right did I have to mourn the man like he was family? And why would I even want to? Yet the feelings could not be stopped, and so as I worked through them I began to explore the potential intellectual reasons for such a deep emotional reaction. Eventually what I realized was that Michael (and really, are we not all on a first name basis with him?) had shaped my view of myself and of my country in ways I was only beginning to understand. I was born at the end of 1984; at the very end of the pop explosion I've dedicated so many words to documenting and analyzing, into an America that had been deeply and permanently reshaped by Michael and his event. As such, I was born into a world where the door separating African Americans from superstardom had already been kicked open. I grew up thinking it natural to idolize this young androgynous black man (*Bad* was the first tape I ever bought for myself at the tender age of four and a half in 1989), natural to lust after him (he was my first crush, concurrent with Ziggy Stardust, which speaks perhaps too candidly to my own predilections), and, most importantly, natural to see any and all black musicians and entertainers as perfectly legitimate superstars. I grew up in a world marred and marked by intense racial strife, yes, but I also grew up having unproblematically internalized the notion that there were no qualitative differences between black and white, that judgments of "good" and "bad," "worthy" and "unworthy" had to do with individual people and not racialized generalizations. It was a notion that was reinforced by my parents, but I learned it first from Michael's mere existence.

I believe deeply in the transformative power of music. I have argued for it here by exploring the ways in which the very sound of *Thriller* and America's affective response to it opened up experiential dialogues between black and white youths, and opened the minds of white youths in particular to the sounds of black life and black experience. I have argued for its augmentation when delivered by Michael's exceptional body, paired with dance so evocative and potent that it opened the eyes of the youth to new expressive modes of masculinity, interracial

desire, and interracial love. And I have argued that the depth and breadth of its power can be witnessed in how extreme the attempts were to silence its voice and quell its influence. At the end of the last chapter I answered my own question about whether the backlash had succeeded in undermining and destroying the positive transformation that was the Michael Jackson pop explosion with a resounding no. Allow me now, in these final pages, to explain why.

Viewed in the context of Michael Jackson's entire discography, it can be easy to dismiss *Thriller* as a lighter, fluffier pop album with a few astoundingly good tracks, but to do so would be to ignore the floodgates it singlehandedly opened. *Thriller* thrusts black music and black musical tradition back into the center of pop music, revealing it as vital to a generation that had been sheltered from it by the re-segregation of the music industry; those floodgates remain open well after the Victory Tour has ended and Jackson retreats briefly from the public eye. As the Jacksons are mounting the Victory Tour, Prince – no stranger to stardom, but nowhere near the iconic figure that Michael has now become – releases what many now consider to be his magnum opus, *Purple Rain* and its attendant movie. By the end of 1984 a new black vocal group, New Edition, achieves a breakthrough top 10 hit with "Cool It Now." In 1985 Whitney Houston and LL Cool J release their debut albums to unexpected mainstream success. And if we continue to chart the path of black music in the 1980's, especially the rise of hip hop and rap, we can see an increasingly strong presence on mainstream radio, higher overall record sales, and noticeable increases in visibility by MTV. In fact, black music's presence on MTV becomes so essential to the network's continued success that only four years later, in 1988, MTV launches *Yo! MTV Raps*, an hour-long program dedicated to what was new and hot in hip hop and rap. *Yo! MTV Raps* was crucial in exposing white Americans all over the country to all forms of hip hop, from the playfulness of Run D.M.C., to the romance of LL Cool J, to, perhaps most crucially, the confrontational politics and rage of gangsta rap.

In the years since the rise of hip-hop, dozens of scholars have devoted thousands of pages to analyzing it, exploring its signifiers and coded images, and picking apart its lyrics to determine the politics of the genre and its effect on gender relations within the black community and race relations in America at large. Of particular interest to these intellectuals is the way hip hop has transformed from niche race music to the new American pop music, beloved and enjoyed by as many white Americans as black. They speculate on appropriation and attempts to co-opt experience, or the ways in which hip-hop gives urban poor whites a voice that other genres cannot. Michael Jackson's greatest musical – if not musicological – legacy may be the way he

prepared us – as in white folk, the American mainstream – to receive hip hop and rap. Michael was not the first to bring black music to white ears, but he was the first to give white Americans a way of relating to black music, and in turn black people, without reinforcing the walls between them. This is not to imply that Michael somehow erased racial privilege or the power structures that continue to stratify black and white American life, but that he taught a generation that those obstacles are surmountable and, ultimately, less important than recognizing the common humanity in all of us and using that recognition to forge bonds in our identities as Americans.

Of course, Michael's music casts a specter over all modern pop, dance and R&B. The music press carefully documents those poised to assume his crown as King of Pop – Usher, Chris Brown, Justin Timberlake, Ne-Yo, an endless cavalcade of talented young men whose bodies reveal that their dance training began not in a class but in front of the television blaring "Billie Jean" or "Thriller." His supremely elastic voice set the standard to which all male singers now aspire, and his exceptional ear, along with his always-improving facility for songwriting (Michael writes the majority of his albums' songs for the rest of his career, his confidence bolstered by the success of his contributions to *Thriller*), redefined what constitutes a good pop song. Many of his own songs become the sampled foundation for some of hip-hop's most popular and successful releases (LL Cool J's "Hey Lover" samples "Lady in my Life," Public Enemy's "911 Is A Joke" samples "Thriller," Puff Daddy's "Can't Nobody Hold Us Down" samples "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," Jay-Z's "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)" samples "I Want You Back," Naughty By Nature's "OPP" samples "ABC," the list goes on and on). He also set new standards for touring and live performance, both during the Victory Tour and in his first real solo tour, the Bad Tour of 1987-1989. In his lifetime he won almost every award he could be given, broke almost ever record he could attempt, and became such an iconic personification of America and American music that when the Iron Curtain fell we sent him over to be the first artist to perform around the former Soviet Union, making him quite literally an ambassador in service of the American way of life.

We also never stopped trying to destroy him. Perhaps better documented than any of his cultural achievements are the accusations of child molestation he faced in 1993 (they were settled out of civil court; criminal charges were never brought against him) and then again in 2003, for which he stood trial in 2005 and was found not guilty. In one of the open letters to Michael that comprise every other chapter of his 1985 book, Dave Marsh wrote, "...somewhere buried deep in American cultural memory is the story of your own rise and fall from public grace told over and

over and over again as continuing multiracial passion play."¹⁶⁵ The deeply subversive and transcendent power that Michael unleashes on American identity during the *Thriller* pop explosion cannot simply be shoved back under the rug because he is imperfect, nor can critics negate his influence enough to diminish his stardom; he continues to dominate popular music in the 1980's, first with "We Are The World," a benefit single recorded with an impressive choir of music giants (Bruce Springsteen, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Cyndi Lauper, Dionne Warwick, Billy Joel, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Kenny Loggins, Hall & Oates, and at least a dozen more) immediately after the 1985 AMAs, then with 1987's *Bad* which sold almost as well as *Thriller*, and produced five No. 1 singles, a slew of groundbreaking music videos, the highest-grossing tour of the 1980's, the most attended tour of the 1980's, and a tripped-out feature film, *Moonwalker*. During this time, the freak narrative that began to emerge in the moment around *Thriller* – the preoccupation with Jackson's seemingly arrested development, his affection for animals, mannequins, Peter Pan and Disney, and the accusations leveled at the authenticity of his race, heterosexuality, and masculinity – becomes even more pronounced. Rumors fly that he has purchased an hyperbaric chamber in which to sleep in order for him to prevent aging; he develops a public friendship with Elizabeth Taylor and is rumored to have built a shrine to her in his home; Bubbles, his pet chimpanzee, also becomes a tabloid darling; and as his skin continues to lighten and his features seem to change further, rumors of skin bleaching and plastic surgery addiction reach a frenzied pitch. By the 1990's the rumors have turned from sensational to downright nasty, and the sheer amount of time and energy devoted by the tabloid press to bringing about his downfall is astounding. Eventually they succeed with the 1993 accusations of child molestation.

The deployment of child molestation charges against him, as opposed to other more traditional narratives of criminality applied to black stars, is provocative but ultimately the subject of another paper. In short, it speaks to the specifics of Jackson's "freak" narrative developed in the *Thriller* moment, so firmly entrenched in backwards notions about what constitutes "appropriate" adulthood. It also speaks to deeply regressive tropes of gender in general and masculinity specifically; they are rooted in the perceived inappropriateness of a man caring about the welfare of children. To ask an exceedingly simplified question: Would the amount of attention Michael devoted to children, especially underprivileged and terminally ill children, seem as odd or unnatural if he were a woman? The bonds forged between Michael Jackson and the American people, especially the generation of youths that found themselves in *Thriller*, were too strong to be broken by petty racial narratives, and so something much more serious had to be used instead.

¹⁶⁵ Marsh, *Trapped*, p. 46.

Yet the same folks who had once set out to destroy Michael joined in with his fans and the rest of the world 15 years later in an overwhelming spectacle of public mourning. Why would those who hated him cry along with those who loved him? The answer, I think, lies in how deeply he wormed his way inside our selves and our identities. Michael exhorts us to examine and attempt to answer incredibly complicated questions about gender, sexuality, race and American identity in this moment in the early 80's and for the duration of his career. His music remains the conduit for these exhortations, even as his dominance in American culture and American music begins to wane. He unseats and unsettles assumptions about what it is to be black, to be a man, to be an American, and never again so powerfully as during *Thriller*. So profound was his impact on us that for many he ceased to be a person and instead became a symbol, a signifier for America and its complex racial history, for hope and possibility, for transgression and subversion, for everything we did right and everything that's gone wrong. He acted as a lens through which we saw ourselves. The youth saw an identity free from the constraints of their parents' generation, from the obligation to 1960's counterculture and white rock music, from compulsory self-segregation and increasing alienation. The critics saw a man who challenged all the notions they believed in, who broke through the barriers they'd so carefully erected, who represented a casting-off of the standards of morality they had worked so hard to maintain. Black America saw sometimes their liberation, sometimes their downfall. White America saw sometimes their new hero, and sometimes their biggest threat. Or allow those involved to tell it, through two letters printed side-by-side in *Newsweek*:

"The sequins and glitter, the mansion, the 'sotto voce manner,' all mark Michael Jackson as the Liberace of the 80's.

James Sullivan

Temple City, Calif.

Michael Jackson's personification of the pain of growing up makes him this generation's James Dean.

Cecily Cannon

Kansas City, Mo."¹⁶⁶

Michael Jackson was whoever you wanted him to be, whoever you needed him to be; "[An] entity [that] must itself be capable of easy, instantaneous and varied imitation and extension, in a thousand ways at once; [which] must embody, suggest, affirm and legitimize new possibilities on all fronts even as it outstrips them."

¹⁶⁶ "Letters: The Age of Jackson," *Newsweek*, July 30, 1984, 9.

We've now come full circle, back to the pop explosion, that incredibly rare and incredibly powerful phenomenon we've only been able to experience thrice. Marcus told us that "at its heart, a pop explosion attaches the individual to a group—the fan to an audience, the solitary to a generation—in essence, *forms* a group and creates new loyalties."¹⁶⁷ I hope by now I have proven just how fully Michael Jackson fulfilled that role in 1983 and 1984, when, along with *Thriller*, he formed the magnetic center of pop music and pop culture, a center that drew together youths of all backgrounds, races, classes and genders under the umbrella of love, goodwill, and good old fashioned American entertainment. He was not a canvas for us to paint our images on – he was too individual, too exceptional, too fully realized for that. Instead, he provided us with a new palate of paints to use to paint ourselves; he gave us the tools and the permission to see ourselves differently than we had been told we could, to see beyond prejudice and bigotry, beyond tradition and history, to a new and different future of our own making. "So hold your head up high / And sing out to the world / I know I am someone," he told us, singing the words in that indescribable tenor, whooping with the joy of self-determination and emancipation. "No one can hurt you now," he continued, that voice lifted by that chant, and both lifting us, the listener, higher and higher into aural ecstasy, "Because you know what's true / Yes, I believe in me / So you believe in you!" In this exceptional moment in American culture, we not only heard his exhortation but we listened, using him to know ourselves and opening the door to the possibility that the future of American identity could one day be freed from its shameful history. The echoes of that possibility still reverberate through our culture to this day. May they one day find themselves fully realized.

¹⁶⁷ Marcus, "The Beatles," 214-215.

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