

# **Michael Jackson's Performance of Difference:**

## **Dance as Ostracism and Wonderment**

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Senior Seminar in Dance

Fall 2013

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During his reign as the world's "King of Pop," Michael Jackson inspired as much fascination with his physical appearance and private life as his artistry. The media made an industry based on the worldwide obsession with the "stranger" parts of Jackson's private life and behavior, magnifying issues such as his alleged cosmetic surgeries, his skin color, his complicated sexuality, and claims that he slept in a hyperbaric chamber. From this, we can see that difference is socially constructed and defined by society's standards and norms. Difference is defined as that which and those who do not fit those standards. In addition to being aware of his difference, I argue that Michael Jackson consciously performed his difference. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, a performance is "an act of staging or presenting a play, concert, or other form of entertainment" such as "a person's rendering of a dramatic role, song, or piece of music."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I say that Michael Jackson performed his difference because he explicitly staged and presented his difference in a dramatic fashion, using his music videos, films, and performances on and off stage as mediums of acknowledging, highlighting, responding to, and even altering his audience's perception and reception of his difference. We often see Jackson portrayed as freak, alien, machine, science fiction, zombie, magician, the inverse of normalcy, a new frontier, a cautionary tale, or even a nightmare. However, I am suggesting that we focus on the underlying theme of difference that exists in Michael Jackson's artistic work and more specifically, in his body and movement, a crucial aspect of Jackson's performance of difference that has gone virtually overlooked, which is ironic, given that he was perhaps most famous for his virtuosic and innovative dance moves.

In this thesis, I will approach Michael Jackson's difference by concentrating on his movement—more precisely his dancing—and delineating it as that which determines his

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<sup>1</sup> Angus Stevenson and Christine Lindberg, "Performance," *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford, 2010).

difference *and* that which helps the audience find likeness in him. That is, the function and thus power of Jackson's movement is two-fold: it is both what sets him apart and what permits his acceptance. Michael Jackson's dancing serves as a bridge between his difference and his normalcy. Ultimately, Jackson demonstrates the intense power of the body and of movement, and the varied influence they can have over his audience's perception and reception of him. My thesis can be broken down into two parts: the problem that Michael Jackson's difference poses for society, and the response, in which Jackson has adopted and responded to the problem of his difference in order to deflect political issues.

According to performance scholar Judith Hamera, Jackson's dancing makes him human *and* something else, thus demonstrating the dual function of his movement as that which determines and links his difference and normalcy. She argues that his repertoire of moves makes him a "mash-up of metaphors. Virtuosos are 'angels,' 'devils,' 'heroes,' 'monsters,' 'magicians,' and 'machines,' sometimes all at once. As these images suggest, virtuosos are human, but not quite: they are something else, something more than the sum of their merely human parts."<sup>2</sup> While these metaphors are similar, they are certainly not the same. Throughout my thesis, I will look at the various metaphors that people use to describe Michael Jackson and explore the unique consequences and implications of each one, particularly with regards to the way Jackson's movement participated in his performance of paradoxical identity.

Just as Jackson's body defied normative perceptions of gender and race, his movement defied laws of physics. In her article, "The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Border Text," author Victoria Johnson analyzes the different factors, that make Jackson a science fiction border text. Through his music videos, constant changes in physical appearance,

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Hamera, "The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work," *PMLA* 127, no. 4 (October 2012): 751–765, doi:10.1632/pmla.2012.127.4.751. 752-753.

and dancing, Michael Jackson turns his body into what Johnson describes as a science fiction text in that “his body, as a malleable, newly ‘rewritten’ text, might be located between these poles [‘rational acumen’ and ‘fantastic imagery/appeals’], as a site of mediation between the rational and the supernatural.”<sup>3</sup> Supernatural is defined as “attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature” and “unnaturally or extraordinarily great.”<sup>4</sup>

Johnson’s supernatural depiction of Jackson’s dancing underlines the paradoxical nature and thus appeal of his movement. Jackson’s movement capability is outside of our understanding as it does not abide by the laws of nature as we know them; however, this is what makes his dancing so intriguing. Furthermore, there is tension in the idea of Jackson’s dancing being unnaturally great. We cannot help but admit that we enjoy his movement, but the unnatural quality of Jackson’s movement makes our enjoyment of Jackson hazardous.

Related to her discussion of the supernatural, Johnson points out that Jackson’s dancing is often described as “unbelievable, fantastic fictions and as signs of bodily, ‘alien’ invasion,”<sup>5</sup> which highlights the way Jackson’s dancing portrays his being and body as otherworldly and non-human. This description of Jackson as alien characterizes him as being from another world, a domain with rules different from those of our own. Though he is an alien, Jackson lives in our world. However, he is not subject to our rules. Jackson’s alien nature frees him from the limitations of our world, allowing him to achieve otherwise improbable feats, such as the incredible ways in which he moves his body. His movement demonstrates his ability to surpass

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<sup>3</sup> Victoria Johnson, “The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Border Text,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1306635772/1407FAB2E6F6CF7D76A/17?accountid=1022> 6. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Angus Stevenson, “Supernatural,” *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, “The Politics of Morphing.” 60.

the capability of the human body as we know it. But Jackson's lawlessness also translates into danger for us, representing a power beyond our control. Thus, Jackson's role as alien serves as a double-edged sword; the allure of Jackson and his dancing stem from his ability to go beyond our standards for human movement but this otherworldly ability comes with a foreign power that we cannot regulate.

Perhaps the best example of Jackson's superhuman dancing ability is his signature move known as the moonwalk. The pop legend's autobiography entitled *Moonwalk* and his 1988 anthology film *Moonwalker* suggest that he recognized the move as a defining aspect of his identity. In his infamous 1993 interview with Oprah, Jackson described the moonwalk as "mainly like a popping thing."<sup>6</sup> "Popping" as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Dance* is: "One of the styles of funk street dance to come out of California in the 1970s. Popping's characteristic movements involve rapid and snappy flexions of the muscles, executed on the beat of the music to create a jerky 'popping' effect."<sup>7</sup> The moonwalk is Michael Jackson's modification and enhancement of the popping (more specifically gliding) technique known as the backslide.

Let's take a closer look at the different components that go into creating Jackson's famous illusion. One must smoothly shift one's weight between alternating balls of the feet and skillfully manipulate the ball and heel of each foot while sliding alternating feet backward. However, that alone is not enough to achieve the illusion of transcending friction. In order to give the illusion of gliding effortlessly across the floor, one must maintain even phrasing as the body moves backwards dimensionally in the sagittal plane. Although the body as a whole is

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<sup>6</sup> *Michael Jackson Oprah Winfrey Interview FULL*, 2012,

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wN1dTHdckzg&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wN1dTHdckzg&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>7</sup> Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell, "Popping," *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

moving backwards in the sagittal plane, it is essential to keep the torso relatively vertical and ensure that the shoulders remain in the same horizontal plane for the duration of the movement; in other words, the key is to keep the upper body level as one moves backwards. Michael Jackson mastered this technique, branded it, and made it his signature illusion.

Contrary to popular belief, Jackson did not invent the moonwalk. He learned it from street dancer and choreographer Jeffrey Daniel.<sup>8</sup> In the popping world, the moonwalk is in fact a separate dance move altogether that existed prior to Michael Jackson branding the backslide as what is now widely referred to as the moonwalk.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Michael Jackson performs the original version of the moonwalk quite often in his dancing as well. (For clarity purposes, from here on out, I will use the term “moonwalk” to refer to Michael Jackson’s version of the backslide.) Like the name implies, Jeffrey Daniel explains that Jackson’s moonwalk “makes it look like you’re on the moon and it’s less gravity than you would have on earth.”<sup>10</sup> And so, for a few seconds Michael Jackson transcends friction, he defies gravity. In this way, the moonwalk renders Michael Jackson an alien, or at least with superhuman capabilities. While moonwalking, Jackson somehow defies the laws of nature. It’s a movement paradox we see in many of Jackson’s dances, and as I would argue, the key to his widespread transnational appeal. In other words, Jackson performs his difference by moonwalking. And it is this difference that proves intriguing.

This discussion of the moonwalk contributes to my idea of gender and race with regards to Jackson because Jackson’s ability to transcend the rules of physics when moonwalking parallels his ability to transcend the limitations and boundaries of gender and race. The

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Usher, “Night to Remember,” *The Stage*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *How Michael Jackson Learned the Moonwalk*, 2010,  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOJ2\\_jaBIJM&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOJ2_jaBIJM&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

difference in Jackson's dancing enables him to defy the laws of nature while the difference in his physical appearance and sexuality grant him social mobility across cultural borders. As Racquel Gates, Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, said, Michael Jackson is "a shape shifter who willfully, gleefully moonwalked across boundaries."<sup>11</sup> The fluidity with which Jackson executes the moonwalk symbolizes the ease with which he navigates the loopholes of societal hierarchies.

Another one of Michael Jackson's famous movements, the lean, has a similar quality, and thus effect, to that of the moonwalk. The extreme lean featured in Michael Jackson's music video for "Smooth Criminal" has an air of impossibility to it. Maintaining both feet fully planted on the ground, Jackson holds his body in a straight line as he leans forward over 45 degrees away from his initial central standing position.<sup>12</sup> Like the moonwalk, the lean appears to defy the rules of physics, thereby portraying him as the master of antigravity. By performing a movement that is typically thought of as inconceivable and unattainable by humans, Michael Jackson makes himself superhuman in relation to his audience and the general public. This superiority is reinforced by Michael Jackson's music video for "Jam," which features another legendary MJ, acclaimed basketball player Michael Jordan. At the end of the video, we see Jackson attempting to teach Jordan his signature dance moves and Jordan struggling to learn them. Jordan's failure to execute the movement at Jackson's level supports the claim that no one can move like Michael Jackson, not even another great athletic mover like Michael Jordan, thus securing and further bolstering Jackson's unattainable ability as a virtuosic mover of the physical body.

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<sup>11</sup> Racquel J. Gates, "Reclaiming the Freak: Michael Jackson and the Spectacle of Identity," *The Velvet Light Trap - A Critical Journal of Film and Television* (Spring 2010): 3–4. 4.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), the lean is a diametrical, suspended, even, bound movement within the sagittal plane.

Michael Jackson also exhibits his superhuman nature by repeatedly presenting himself as a machine or cyborg through the technological manipulation of his body in his music videos and films. A scene in *Moonwalker* dramatizes this process quite literally when Jackson transforms into a giant mechanical version of himself with his face and body literally reconstructing themselves. In addition to these very literal representations of Michael Jackson's body as a machine, this idea of his body as something out of this world is also illustrated through his dancing: "Jackson's performance expertise is often spoken of as reminiscent of automation and mechanical intervention."<sup>13</sup> While Michael Jackson's performance expertise plays a strong role in rendering him bionic, this mechanical nature to Jackson's movement is also largely founded in and generated by popping techniques such as animation, gliding, electric boogaloo, isolation, tutting, and waving.

Michael Jackson incorporates popping a great deal into his movement. I already mentioned some of the gliding techniques Michael employs: the moonwalk (originally known as the backslide) and the original moonwalk (a circular gliding motion around oneself). Additionally, Jackson incorporates animation techniques throughout his dancing such as the robot (where one imitates a robot or mannequin, which can be seen in Michael's performances of "Dancing Machine" with his brothers) and the dime stop (where one finishes a movement with an abrupt and precise stop, giving the illusion of "stopping on a dime"). Animation was inspired by stop-motion animation, and more specifically by Ray Harryhausen's "Dynamation" style.<sup>14</sup> This type of movement can be seen in Michael Jackson's music video for "Human Nature." Jackson also incorporates waving into his dancing (a liquid movement intended to give the

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, "The Politics of Morphing."

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Wiggles (last), "Move Lessons," *Dance Lessons*, accessed October 10, 2013, [http://www.mrwiggles.biz/move\\_lessons.htm](http://www.mrwiggles.biz/move_lessons.htm).



illusion of a wave traveling through one's body), which can be seen in much of Jackson's freestyle dancing, such as in clips of his rehearsals in *This Is It*. All of these popping techniques contribute to the mechanical nature of Jackson's movement, thus depicting him as bionic.

This bionic nature in Jackson's dancing is captivating, especially since we think of machines as being technologically advanced. However, this view of Jackson as bionic or machine-like immediately characterizes him as nonhuman. Machines lack emotion and emotional intelligence and are thus incapable of vital human functions such as empathy. It is important to distinguish between this metaphor of Jackson as a machine and the earlier description of him as an alien. Although neither is human, unlike an alien, a machine is still subject to the rules of physics. Therefore, we do not fear machines the same way we fear aliens. We like to employ machines for designated tasks, like dancing. However, we do not trust machines to make decisions that require a human-level of judgment. And so the bionic quality to Jackson's dancing is inherently dichotomous; a machine-like nature is desirable when confined to Jackson's dancing, but it is risky if it extends to activities that require emotional intelligence.

The mash-up of metaphors surrounding Jackson is not surprising considering that artists transform themselves all the time in order to play fictional characters and take on different roles. Michael Jackson embodies multiple identities onstage and in his music videos, but he differs from many artists in that he continues to shift between various selves offstage as well. Jackson cannot be confined to a single demographic, particularly when considering the opposites and extremes that exist in and define his artistic image and work, binaries such as black and white, male and female, gay and straight, and child and man. Michael Jackson is the physical representation of paradox. This paradoxical nature allows him to straddle many spheres and transcend many divisions (or at least give the illusion of doing so), making it possible for him to

reflect and represent the diversity of a universal identity. Furthermore, Jackson's mobility is a vital component of his plasticity. It allows him to repeatedly revise his image and identity. In "The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson's 'Grotesque Glory,'" cultural critic David Yuan distinguishes between stasis (which he describes as being fixed or frozen) and plasticity (defined as being "free to move and moves to remain free").<sup>15</sup> Yuan underscores the importance of plasticity in maintaining celebrity status. It is also interesting to consider that, in addition to maneuvering social spheres, Jackson literally moves to remain free; he dances. The value of plasticity also applies to Jackson's dancing. Just as we must recognize Jackson's plasticity, and thus his ambiguity, as instrumental to his continuous intrigue, his movement must maintain a certain level of impossibility if we are to continue loving it. Just as a magician never reveals his secret, Jackson must not reveal the secret behind his movement. Michael Jackson must remain an enigma to us. He must continue to be a thriller.

The music video for "Black or White" serves as a rather literal representation of Jackson's plasticity. The music video ends with the morphing of different faces, which reflects and represents Michael Jackson's embodiment of all races (this is illustrated through the reconstruction of his face to create a truly international mask, both in the video through special effects and editing, and in real life through cosmetic surgery). In "The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson's 'Grotesque Glory,'" David Yuan explores this concept of an international mask. Yuan argues that Jackson's manipulation of his complexion and physical appearance is not meant to distance him from his blackness or masculinity "but to include all the things Jackson is *not* supposed to be."<sup>16</sup> Yuan contends that Michael Jackson's physical alterations are intended to

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<sup>15</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996). 371.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 379.

make him androgynous and multiracial (Yuan describes Jackson's eyes as Asian and notes his considerable range in skin tone), characteristics that are all-encompassing. Thus, Yuan emphasizes the aforementioned notion that Jackson lives and exists in the space between binaries, able to move fluidly between them rather than being limited by categories:

It is as if Jackson, who has long aimed at entertaining all the world's people despite profound differences of language, culture, and race, has tried to make himself *look* the part of the universal entertainer. The modification of his face allows him to appear utterly unique, and in appearing unique he becomes accessible to everyone.<sup>17</sup>

In the above quote, Yuan points to Michael Jackson's reconstructed face as a crucial factor in his identity as a universal performer and as a compelling determinant of his extensive popularity.

Like Yuan, author John Izod also explores the significance of Jackson's face as a mask in his article "Androgyny and Stardom: Cultural Meanings of Michael Jackson," in which he attributes much of Jackson's widespread appeal to the ambiguity and intrigue of androgyny. Izod asserts that Jackson's mask serves as "an aesthetic surface on which society writ large its own preoccupations."<sup>18</sup> Michael Jackson's all-inclusive mask makes him unique, and thus different, but its ambiguity allows many different members of his global audience to find him relatable, and thus acceptable. Therefore, Jackson's physical body shapes his difference and normality and acts as an intersection between the two.

Yuan's and Izod's thinking about Michael Jackson's face and physical body parallels my thinking about Jackson's movement. Jackson uses his dancing as a vehicle toward transnationalism by creating an international movement style. In "Black or White," Michael Jackson dances with people of all cultures throughout the music video. By integrating the dance

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John Izod, "Androgyny and Stardom: Cultural Meanings of Michael Jackson," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 1995): 63–74, doi:10.1525/jung.1.1995.14.3.63. 67.

moves and genres of other cultures into his own style Jackson performs his global self, thereby making him accessible to people of all races around the world. Jackson continues with his strategy of pulling inspiration from other cultures by incorporating a great deal of tutting—a popping technique inspired by ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics<sup>19</sup>—in his music video for “Remember the Time.” Furthermore, as Judith Hamera describes it, “Jackson’s dances conjure many bodies...His moves quote Josephine Baker, Cab Calloway, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and anonymous street dancers, to name only a few sources.” Thus, we see that, like his physical body, Jackson’s dancing contributes to his paradoxical nature because its fusion of influences makes it new and different but at the same time its elements are familiar.

In addition to the universality of Jackson’s physical appearance and dancing, America’s obsession with freakery or freakishness (that which is freakish is defined as “bizarre or grotesque; abnormal”<sup>20</sup>), and essentially difference, is important in analyzing the nation’s view of and mania for Michael Jackson. America’s mania for freakery and for Michael Jackson are, perhaps, best explained by author and civil rights activist James Baldwin (1924-1987).

According to the *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, through his work Baldwin “tries to reveal how racism and sexism are inextricably linked to deep-seated American assumptions. In Baldwin’s view, race and sex are hopelessly entangled in America’s collective psyche.”<sup>21</sup> In 1985, the celebrated author took on the subject of Michael Jackson in an essay

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<sup>19</sup> Mr. Wiggles, “Move Lessons.”

<sup>20</sup> Angus Steven and Christine Lindberg, “Freakish,” *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Porter, Horace, “Baldwin, James,” *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3444700098&v=2.1&u=columbiau&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=caa664cef589ca23258111a85e4d93a3>. 178.

published in *Playboy*, a men's magazine known for its nude photographs of women and thus the least likely place to publish an article written by one of the foremost black gay men about a sexually ambiguous male performer.

In "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Baldwin illustrates the freak as defined by American society and cites Michael Jackson as a freak. Baldwin personally identifies as a freak, pointing to his experience of being a gay black man living in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. He suggests that these "non-normative" characteristics of race and sex not only designate him as a freak; they make him a threat to American standards and ideals of normality. Like in the case of Baldwin, Jackson fails to adhere to America's standards of normality, making his difference, and thus himself, a threat to the structure of society. In addition to the threat freaks pose for societal order, Baldwin argues that we cast people who terrify us as freaks and reject them because they are a reflection of ourselves: "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."<sup>22</sup> In this quote, Baldwin calls attention to the inherent dichotomy in freakery, and thus, the discord and mental stress that freaks conjure in us. As I will discuss later, the theory of cognitive dissonance may offer some insight as to why this disharmony proves problematic for people.

In his article, Baldwin discusses Michael Jackson's role as a freak. Baldwin argues that freakery is not something organic, but rather a social construct. Thus it follows that normality and freakery, too, are not natural but in fact constructed. Although Baldwin does not explicitly address Jackson's movement in his article, his concept of socially constructed definitions of normality and abnormality is central to my thinking about Jackson's kineticism. Normalcy and

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<sup>22</sup> James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays* (The Library of America, 1998).

abnormalcy are both socially constructed categories, and in that sense more similar than one might think. This parallels the role of Jackson's dancing as a bridge connecting his difference and his normalcy, his role as freak and non-freak. Michael Jackson is able to perform his difference and his normality through his movement. Additionally, if he had considered Jackson's movement, Baldwin might have noticed that the aspects of Jackson's dancing that make him a "freak" are the non-normative ones, as deemed by American society. These non-normative elements include "black dance," that is, "the dance forms of people of African origin,"<sup>23</sup> and Jackson's dancing ability, by which I mean his virtuosic skill level is considered non-normative. In combination, I think Baldwin would agree that these elements make Jackson's dancing both intriguing and a threat to society's standards and order.

First proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in his cognitive consistency theory, cognitive dissonance is the state of tension that occurs when we hold conflicting or inconsistent cognitions.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Michael Jackson, as audience members our cognitive dissonance lies in what we simultaneously desire about Jackson and what we fear about him. We desire Michael Jackson because of his difference, because of the different ways he can move his body, because of the different ways he approaches music. His difference makes him new, exciting, and intriguing for us. But we also fear Jackson because of his difference, because he looks different, because he does not fit into any previous standards or norms of gender or race. And so we see that the reason we desire Michael Jackson is precisely the same reason we fear him. As mentioned earlier, it is impossible to avoid encountering many conflicting binaries when dealing with Michael Jackson (i.e. black and white, masculine and feminine). Michael Jackson's

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<sup>23</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, 2nd ed. (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Andrew M. Colman, "Cognitive Dissonance," *A Dictionary of Psychology* (Oxford, 2008).

embodiment of these polar categories simultaneously requires us to grapple with a similar type of cognitive dissonance. Perhaps the greatest source of tension lies in his dual role as god and demon, as artist and criminal. We cannot help but simultaneously condemn and glorify him.

Furthermore, we experience conflicting cognitions when we watch Michael Jackson dance. We are fascinated by his dancing but cannot ignore its “taboo,” and at times raw, sensuality. Jackson seduces us with his dancing but his movement represents the fine line between loving him and feeling guilty. We condemn Michael Jackson because he fails to conform to our norms; however, we, ourselves, are committing a crime by loving a freak, as defined by our own standards, because we are then condoning his “bad behavior.” Regardless, we are continuously drawn in by his dancing and continue to subscribe to his movement. Therefore, Jackson’s dancing represents the slippery boundary between his roles as artist and criminal. It is his dancing that allows us to discount his transgressions and pardon ours.

I argue that Michael Jackson eventually accepted the role his audience assigned him as freak. Instead of continually resisting this label, he seemed to try to find new ways to empower the freak, or to persuade people that there is humanity in difference, and thus in himself. In her book *On Michael Jackson*, Margo Jefferson acknowledges people’s aversion to freakishness but argues that art has the ability to make it acceptable, contending that “Art orders contradictions and unwelcome longings; glorifies what’s perverse or infantile, lavish and dream-bright, suave, abject, incurably romantic.”<sup>25</sup> This explanation informs our understanding that Michael Jackson engages in a constant balancing act, with the art of movement holding the power to make freakery and difference acceptable, even respectable and beautiful. Michael Jackson relies on more than the art of music; he integrates the art of dance to empower the freak and make it

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<sup>25</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006). 14-15.

appealing. This is illustrated in his music video for “Leave Me Alone,” in which Michael Jackson dances with the skeleton of the Elephant Man, a response to the star’s perceived obsession with the celebrated freak. The fact that Michael and the skeleton dance in unison reflects his ability to relate to and sympathize with the Elephant Man, and thereby the freak.

Jackson also uses art to neutralize his freakishness in his most influential and successful music video “Thriller,” from his Thriller album, which was deemed world’s best-selling album by Guinness World Records.<sup>26</sup> The 1983 “Thriller” music video, choreographed by Broadway choreographer Michael Peters, did not only present black street dance competitions in a new way,<sup>27</sup> “Thriller” revolutionized the format, expectations, and possibilities for music videos. The “Thriller” music video, in which Michael constantly transforms, switching between zombie and his teen human self, depicts the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. About eight and a half minutes into the music video, the girl and teen human Michael find themselves encircled by zombies. The girl looks around desperately only to meet the gaze of a transformed Michael. This zombie version of Michael goes on to lead the group of zombies in a minute long dance. As Michael spins around, he mutates once again back to his teen human form. Despite this transformation, human Michael continues to lead the zombies in dance, repeating the same dance moves he executed in his zombie form. In both his teen human and zombie forms, Michael stands and remains at the pinnacle of the pyramid formation of zombies as they dance in the dark street, emblematic of his ability to attract fans worldwide. By staging his position in the group of zombies, Jackson asserts his authority. He is simultaneously one of the walking dead and their leader regardless of which form he takes on.

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<sup>26</sup> “Largest Poster - Michael Jackson,” accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/archive/2010/12/largest-poster-michael-jackson/>.

<sup>27</sup> Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*. 363.



By assuming this dual role and staging himself as the leader of the pack, Michael Jackson seems to be performing and prescribing his relationship with the audience. Jackson performs his difference and alien nature by portraying a zombie; however, he strategically casts his zombie self as the leader of the pack. In doing so, he is telling the audience how to receive and deal with his difference; he not only acknowledges, but highlights his difference while simultaneously staging and performing his superiority, eliminating his difference as an obstacle to his title as leader of the group, or perhaps it is precisely his difference that makes him superior. Regardless, Jackson's dual role of human and zombie represents his embodiment of both the familiar and the unfamiliar. As discussed earlier, these conflicting cognitions of the familiar and the unfamiliar generate dissonance for the audience, producing a feeling of discomfort that they will seek to lessen or eradicate.

Michael Jackson's ability to perform the unimaginable, as discussed with his dancing, proves both intriguing and terrifying, a duality characteristic of freakishness, as revealed in cultural critic Margo Jefferson's book *On Michael Jackson*. In her chapter "Freaks," Jefferson explores the reasoning behind people's love of the "Thriller" music video, claiming that it is the perfect artistic representation of the horror story of the double, reminiscent of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. While the monstrous side of Jackson may frighten us, his dancing, a human activity, reminds us of his humanity. "Thriller" begins with Jackson asking the girl to be his. Michael Jackson tells her, "You know I'm not like the other guys." This highlights Jackson's awareness of his difference. The girl responds, "I know. That's why I like you." We can read this as Jackson advising the audience on how to receive his difference; Jackson is telling us that it is his difference that makes him appealing.

This concept of prescribing audience perception and reception is more evident in the following quote, in which Jefferson illustrates the parallel between the girl in the music video and us, Michael Jackson's audience:

And then, right there before her eyes, the transformation. The defacement. He turns from a beautiful young man into a hairy, red-eyed werewolf. She shrieks, turns away and starts to run. He chases her, pins her down; we watch her eyes widen as she stares up at him and waits—often the last moment in the horror film: the camera focused on the wide-open eyes of the victim. They're our eyes, of course, but we get to keep watching. So does the girl in *Thriller*. She's us. She keeps getting pulled back to safety so that she can keep watching and loving Michael as he doubles and divides.<sup>28</sup>

As illustrated by this passage, the "Thriller" video provides Jackson's audiences with a "script" for how we should respond to his performances of differences. Jackson does not simply tell us that we should not fear his freakishness; he seems to be arguing that it is his freakishness that makes us keep watching him: his freakishness as defined by America (his unique physical appearance, his blurring of racial boundaries, his unclear sexual orientation, etc.), but perhaps more specifically, the otherness of his dancing. Furthermore, like the girl in "Thriller" who gets pulled back to safety, we get pulled back to safety by Jackson's dancing, the thing that we associate with his human, and "safe" side. It is his dancing that keeps us "safe" from his freakishness. Jefferson affirms that, "on-screen Michael will swap selves forever."<sup>29</sup> But Michael Jackson perpetually swaps selves off-screen, too, and perhaps that is what scares us.

In 1985, at the height of Michael Jackson's success following "Thriller" which was released shortly before in 1982, James Baldwin wrote about Michael Jackson, words that several authors, including popular culture critic Joseph Vogel, have described as prophetic:

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 having turned so many tables,

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<sup>28</sup> Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*. 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring, and the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael. 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 on which to place the crown of Miss America.<sup>30</sup>

And so we can view Baldwin's commentary on Jackson and American society as an accurate prediction of Jackson's eventual downward spiral throughout his career, catalyzed by child sexual abuse allegations against him. This shift in our view of Michael Jackson also changed the way he performed his difference and the role of his dancing. I will illustrate this shift in the following two examples of Jackson's dancing at his court appearance and in the film "Michael Jackson's Ghosts."

Michael Jackson did not limit his performance to the stage and his music videos. Rather, his entire life was a performance. Jackson's recognition and use of the power of movement and the body was perhaps most strikingly and unexpectedly demonstrated at his court appearance, a political performance where he got out of his car and stood on top of it. By doing so, he made himself, particularly his body, visible to his audience, to both his fans and critics. Not only did Jackson wave to his fans—blowing kisses and flashing the peace sign—he danced in front of them. Although he did not break into a full-blown dance performance, Michael clearly bobbed his head and clapped his hands to the beat of his song "D.S." being played by fans in the background.

The song "D.S." (from Jackson's 1995 album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*) is in itself a political response to Tom Sneddon, Santa Barbara County District Attorney who led

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<sup>30</sup> Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood."

two investigations of child abuse against Michael Jackson in 1993 and 2005.<sup>31</sup> The first investigation was closed with no charges and the second investigation led to a trial that ended in 2005 with Jackson being acquitted of all charges.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of the outcomes of the investigations and trial, Sneddon, described as “pugnacious and tenacious,”<sup>33</sup> succeeded in permanently tarnishing Jackson’s career. In “D.S.,” Jackson sings, “Dom Sheldon is a cold man,” a fairly transparent reference to Sneddon. In his book *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson*, popular culture critic Joseph Vogel delves into the many layers of Jackson’s albums and songs. Vogel uncovers the meaning behind “D.S” and its lyrics, interpreting the song as “Jackson link[ing] Sneddon to institutional corruption and discrimination” and as a display of “Jackson’s refusal to be a victim.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, “D.S.” served as the perfect soundtrack for Jackson’s trial and for his performance outside the courthouse. In this way, Michael Jackson staged and performed his innocence by using his dancing as a powerful means of communication and persuasion.

Comedian Dave Chappelle said, "One day people love you more than they've ever loved anything in the world. And the next, you're in front of a courthouse dancing on top of a car."<sup>35</sup> This reference to Michael Jackson reveals Jackson’s belief in the intense power of dance and of the body in that he relied on them in perhaps his most vulnerable moment. As discussed earlier, Jackson’s dancing represents the boundary between his roles as criminal and artist. We typically

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Vogel, *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson* (New York, NY: Sterling Publishing, 2011). 197.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Davis, “Jackson Supporters Celebrate Vigil’s End,” *BBC News*, June 14, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4090302.stm>.

<sup>33</sup> Tatiana Morales, “Who Is Tom Sneddon?,” *CBS News*, December 17, 2003, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-is-tom-sneddon/>.

<sup>34</sup> Vogel, *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson*. 197-198.

<sup>35</sup> Jim Carnes, “Dave Chappelle Lets Rude Crowd Have It, Sticks up for Cosby’s Comment.,” *Sacramento Bee*, June 19, 2004, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/1156342/posts>.

label Michael Jackson as an artist when he is on stage or in his videos and we tend to view him as a criminal when he is outside of those realms. This event of Jackson dancing on top of his car at his court appearance redefines our concept of possible performance spaces for Jackson. Michael Jackson took the activity associated with his artistry and brought it into a situation where he was viewed as a criminal. By doing so, he combined his opposing roles as artist and criminal through his dancing. Furthermore, Jackson seems to be capitalizing on the fact that, as discussed earlier, his dancing has the power to pardon his transgressions. To cope with his audience's view of him as a criminal, Jackson uses his dancing to remind us of the artist in him. This becomes even more apparent in another political performance by Jackson in "Michael Jackson's Ghosts."

"Michael Jackson's Ghosts" is a 38-minute short film/long-form music video directed by Stan Winston that premiered at the 1997 at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>36</sup> The film is based on an original concept by Michael Jackson and horror novelist Stephen King, who co-wrote the film alongside Stan Winston and Mick Garris.<sup>37</sup> Jackson conceived and staged all dance sequences.<sup>38</sup> Jackson's substantial and active role in the creation of the film is important because it exhibits his personal involvement in the film and his influence in shaping it into his ultimate political performance.

The synopsis of "Michael Jackson's Ghosts" greatly parallels Jackson's real life. The film begins in black and white as a mob of children and their parents follow the "Mayor of

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<sup>36</sup> "GHOSTS," *Festival de Cannes*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/ficheFilm/id/4813/year/1997.html>.

<sup>37</sup> *Michael Jackson's Ghosts (1997)*, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS1olsjtkFc&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS1olsjtkFc&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Normal Valley”<sup>39</sup> (who greatly resembles Santa Barbara District Attorney Tom Sneddon), torches in hand, to confront Jackson “The Maestro”<sup>40</sup> at his haunted mansion. When Jackson comes out to greet the townspeople, the Mayor speaks for all of them, accusing Jackson for disrupting their normal town: “We want you out of town. We have a nice normal town, normal people, normal kids. And then freaks like you telling ghost stories. You’re weird. You’re strange. And I don’t like you.” Jackson argues that the town’s children enjoy his “ghost stories,” turning to the kids who enthusiastically confirm this. The Mayor threatens Jackson: “Back to the circus you freak. Do yourself a favor, don’t force us to get rough with you.” Jackson recognizes that the Mayor is trying to scare him, so he proposes a game in which the first person that gets scared has to leave. It is critical to note that the Mayor actually uses the terms “freak” and “weirdo” to describe Jackson multiple times and the term “normal” to define the ideal. Thus, Jackson is actively acknowledging and highlighting the public’s (or perhaps more specifically Tom Sneddon’s) perception and interpretation of him as a freak and as abnormal not just in the film, but in real life.

When Jackson realizes the Mayor is unyielding in his judgment of him as a freak, he says, “Guess I have no choice. Guess I have to scare you,” at which point he manipulates his face, stretching his jaw impossibly wide, pulling the skin from his bones until he peels off his face entirely revealing his skull. Jackson then cracks his skull to reveal another layer of his human self. This transformation is interesting because we see Jackson’s face as a literal mask, rather than as solely the figurative one I spoke of earlier. Furthermore, this transformation illustrates Jackson’s role as human *and* as something greater or other than that.

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<sup>39</sup> “GHOSTS.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

The scenario has a striking similarity to Jackson's "Thriller" video from 1983 that cinched his global fame as a freak or at least a double-life living monster (werewolf). Jackson goes on to introduce his family of ghosts, a dancing army of the dead reminiscent of "Thriller." Like in "Thriller," Michael Jackson is the leader and The Maestro of the ghosts. He summons and commands them yelling "Ho" with his arms forming an oval overhead, his hands in fists. He uses this movement repeatedly throughout the film as a symbol of power. Jackson uses a call and response pattern of rhythms with his ghostly army, consisting of snapping, dusting off his shoulder, coughing, and slapping his arms across his body. Like in "Thriller," Jackson may be admitting and conceding to his role as a freak, but by playing the Maestro he is also telling us that he will be the *best* of freaks, he will be their leader. Jackson conducts the movement of his ghostly army, commanding them to walk up the walls, turning the ceiling into their new dance floor. The ghosts' ability to dance on the ceiling is not only an otherworldly or superhuman feat of defying gravity. It also literally forces the people of Normal Valley to look at the ghosts from a different perspective.

The film features three of Jackson's songs from his *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I* and *Blood on the Dance Floor: HIStory in the Mix* albums: "2 Bad," "Ghosts," and "Is It Scary." Joseph Vogel helps us take a closer look at these songs and their lyrics as important factors in Jackson's political performance. In "2 Bad," Vogel says Jackson is directly addressing his enemies, attacking not just individuals, but institutions and ideologies such as America's social constructs of normality and freakery. Vogel refers to "Ghosts" as "an exploration of what Edgar Allen Poe once called 'the terrors of the soul.'"<sup>41</sup> The ghosts that terrorize Jackson are racism, media lies, and societal norms. We can link this back to James Baldwin's notion that

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<sup>41</sup> Vogel, *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson*. 213.

freaks are a reflection of our own terrors and desires. Therefore, the ghosts that haunt Jackson are a negative reflection of us; they symbolize mainstream America's tradition of marginalizing what threatens its order and status quo. Vogel argues that the main theme song of the film, "Is It Scary," is perhaps Jackson's "best response to the public perception of him as some combination of spectacle, villain, and freak."<sup>42</sup> Jackson sings, "I'm gonna be exactly what you wanna see. It's you who's taunting me because you're wanting me to be the stranger in the night." Jackson highlights our desire to dehumanize him and cast him as a freak. He is torn between convincing us of his true nature and conceding to our unrelenting view of him as a freak. Vogel underlines Jackson's complicated dilemma: "he can only reveal himself by performing, perpetuating the ambiguous line between entertainer and human, persona and personhood."<sup>43</sup> "Michael Jackson's Ghosts" illustrates Jackson's struggle to escape his paradoxical fate.

Michael Jackson couples the above songs with dancing throughout the film. Approximately eleven and a half minutes into the film, Michael Jackson leads the ghosts in a dance, choreographed and staged entirely by Jackson. Jackson creates the nonhuman nature of the ghosts through choreography that emphasizes isolation, extreme angularity, and asymmetrical movement and shapes. (i.e. giving the illusion of breaking their necks). Ironically, Jackson and the ghosts incorporate a lot of breath into their dancing, something which is generally thought of as characteristic of the living, not the dead. After about three minutes of unison dance, Michael Jackson prepares for his solo by ripping the skin off of his entire body, becoming nothing but a skeleton. He proceeds to dance, and despite this new form he has taken on, Michael Jackson continues to incorporate his signature dance moves such as head and neck isolations, locking, the moonwalk, shoulder shrugs, crotch grabbing, and multiple spins, ending

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 216.



his solo by taking off his entire head as if to take his hat off to the audience. Even in this very different and freakish state as a skeleton, Michael Jackson is recognizable because of his dancing. This bolsters our understanding of Jackson's movement as a crucial part of his identity and his appeal. More importantly, his dancing is what neutralizes the "scariness" that Jackson's difference or freakishness evokes, perhaps even turning that terror into excitement as suggested in this film.

Then, Jackson possesses the Mayor and begins to manipulate and control the Mayor's body with his dancing. Jackson forces the Mayor to physically embody and experience freakery. This exemplifies Jackson's belief in the transformative power of dance as he uses it as a tool of persuasion or even weaponry. He is thus portraying his dancing as something that is powerful enough to combat the negativity surrounding his image. Jackson performs his difference and stages his audience's response much as he did in his "Thriller" music video. As in "Thriller," Jackson takes on multiple roles in this film, playing a ghoul, a skeleton, the Maestro, and the Mayor. In playing the Mayor, he demonstrates control of his difference and his audience's response to it, as he did in "Thriller" with the teen girl. In "Michael Jackson's Ghosts," the parents and children of Normal Valley, once terrified of the Maestro, are very impressed and entertained by his and the ghosts' dancing, and thus, by Jackson's performance of difference. Jackson asks the townspeople, "Did I scare you? Did we have a good time here?" thereby revealing Jackson's attempt to show that scariness, freakishness, or difference can be entertaining. Jackson uses his dance, in combination with his music, as weaponry against his critics. He uses dance to empower the freak through his dancing. His dancing sets him apart as nonhuman or freaky, but it is also the key to the neighborhood's, and his audience's, acceptance of him and his difference.

While the horror theme of “Michael Jackson’s Ghosts” is reminiscent of “Thriller,” the two works represent very disparate points in Michael Jackson’s career and life. Whereas “Thriller” represents the peak of Jackson’s career and success, “Michael Jackson’s Ghosts” reflects a time in Jackson’s life when his image was overwhelmed by negativity and dehumanizing labels like “Wacko Jacko.” Therefore, while Jackson had a great deal of liberty at the time when he made “Thriller” (in that he could essentially do no wrong), I argue that Jackson had to be much more calculating and deliberate about each of his choices in “Michael Jackson’s Ghosts.” Therefore, Jackson’s choice to use dancing to respond to his critics highlights his belief in the intense power of his movement, in that he believed it could win over his critics even at this low point in his life. No matter where he was in his career or life, Jackson’s dancing was his redeeming quality; it was what reminded us of his humanity.

In her article “Reclaiming the Freak: Michael Jackson and the Spectacle of Identity,” Racquel Gates acknowledges that America and the world have tried or are trying to forget Michael Jackson’s freakishness in the wake of his death. She cites journalist Greg Tate: “The unfortunate blessing of his departure is that we can now all go back to loving him as we first found him, without shame, despair, or complication.”<sup>44</sup> However, Gates claims that this is the wrong way of coping with Michael Jackson’s death. She encourages us to remember that “Michael Jackson *was* strange, and to ignore that is to ignore a crucial element of Jackson’s persona, the full integration of elements both utterly freakish and heartbreakingly human, the one often working in service of the other.”<sup>45</sup> Perhaps we viewed Michael Jackson as a freak, but we cannot deny that we could never take our eyes off of him, even after his death. In this sense, Michael Jackson succeeded in winning the attention of perhaps the most diverse, large, and

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<sup>44</sup> Gates, “Reclaiming the Freak.” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 4.

global audience. Freakishness is an integral part of Michael Jackson's identity, and thus, if we are to remember him after his death, this aspect *should not* and *cannot be* forgotten. As Gates noted, we often find ourselves trying to neutralize Michael Jackson's difference because difference makes us uncomfortable. However, I suggest that, rather than avoiding his difference altogether, we focus on and celebrate the difference in Michael Jackson's movement because it is precisely this otherworldliness that makes his dancing so great. By focusing on the difference in his dancing, we can once again view Michael Jackson with wonderment.

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