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Hagiography, Teratology, and the "History" of Michael Jackson

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HAGIOGRAPHY, TERATOLOGY, AND THE "*HIS*TORY" OF MICHAEL JACKSON

by

KELLY M. O'RILEY

Under the Direction of Isaac Weiner

ABSTRACT

Before his death, Michael Jackson was arguably one of the most famous living celebrities to walk the planet. Onstage, on air, and onscreen, he captivated the attention of millions of people around the world, whether because they loved him or loved to hate him. In an attempt to explain his popularity and cultural influence, I analyze certain theoretical and methodological approaches found in recent scholarship on western hagiographic and teratological texts, and apply these theories and methods to selected biographies written on Michael Jackson. By interpreting the biographies in this way, I suggest why saints, monsters, and celebrities have received considerable attention in their respective communities, and demonstrate how public responses to these figures are contextual, constructed, and often contradictory.

INDEX WORDS: Michael Jackson, Saints, Monsters, Hybridity, Metamorphosis, Sublime, Uncanny, Celebrity, Popular Culture, Religion

HAGIOGRAPHY, TERATOLOGY, AND THE "*HIS*TORY" OF MICHAEL JACKSON

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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August 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I will never forget the day that Michael Jackson died. On June 25, 2009, I was working at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens, catering an event for my restaurant job, when out of nowhere my phone started to ring non-stop. I asked my manager if I could step outside to make sure it was not an emergency, and when I opened my phone to check my voicemail, I had over a dozen unread text messages. I wish I saved those texts; the sweet condolences from my friends who just found out that Michael[1] had suffered a heart attack. Some of them already knew he was dead, while others had not heard that news quite yet: all of them knew I would be devastated once I found out that he was in the hospital. By the end of the day, I had received over fifty voicemail or text messages from friends and colleagues, many of which apologized for *my* loss, as if he was a close family friend that I knew my entire life.

I never imagined what it would be like the day Michael died, perhaps because I never imagined it would happen so soon. More than anything, however, I never anticipated that the public would react to his death with such an outpour of devotion. Since I started following his career in 1995, I have often felt like a defense attorney standing in front of a jury whenever I discussed his life and music with other people. In my experience, very few people held him in high esteem, and even fewer enjoyed his music as much as me. All of that changed the day he died. The news of his death dominated the major cable news networks for almost two weeks straight, and countless radio station across the country reintroduced his albums into heavy rotation. In the months following his death, thousands of fans from around the globe made

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[1] To avoid confusing Michael Jackson with the other members of his family, from this point forward I will refer to him by first name, rather than follow the standard approach of referring to an individual by last name. I understand

veritable pilgrimages to his memorial service in the Staples Arena in California, while others

setup shrines in locations closely tied to Jackson, such as Neverland Valley Ranch, the Apollo

Theater, and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Almost every televised broadcast of entertainment

award ceremonies in 2009 dedicated a portion of the show to his memory.

Perhaps the most fascinating response to Michael's death occurred when the book market

was flooded with publications about him. The total number of books written on Michael since

the start of his career is even more astonishing: at least one hundred different titles have been

published since 1973. This "canon" is by no means complete, for it excludes hundreds (perhaps

thousands) of print and online articles written about him, millions of YouTube videos tagged

with his name, and countless newsletters that have been distributed by international fan clubs;

indeed, it would be impossible to survey all the information circulating about Michael Jackson.

Yet as one looks at select biographies,[2] it becomes clear that their authors do not tell the same

story. For the most part, these biographies recount his life with stories that either glorify or

condemn his character and actions, and they do so with remarkable passion and attention to

detail. Some characterize him as a tragic hero who we all have misunderstood, others describe

him as a racist monster that molested children and swindled money, and some even call him a

pop culture saint. I soon found myself wondering why so many people wanted to record the life

of this particular individual, and how we might account for such vast divergences persisting

throughout his biographies.

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this may create an informal tone in my writing, but I do not want to sacrifice clarity for the sake of style. I also chose
to do this because almost all of his biographers use this approach as well.
[2] For a summary of each of the biographies I selected, see Appendix A.

In order to answer these questions, I have decided to interpret these biographies through the lens of sainthood and monstrosity. Besides the fact that some of his biographers explicitly label Michael a saint or a monster, academic scholarship on stories about saints (hagiography) and stories about monsters (teratology) deals with the same interpretative problems posed by Michael's biographies. To begin, I compare and contrast scholarship on hagiography and teratology in order to identify moments where sainthood and monstrosity appear to converge. Key terms that I will define and examine throughout Section One include sublimity, *das Unheimliche* or "the uncanny," hybridity, and metamorphosis. However, the qualities associated with saints and monsters that I explore in this section should not be interpreted as an empirical definition for sainthood and monstrosity, since the meaning of "sublimity," for example, tends to change depending on context. Instead, I want to offer a substantive-stipulative definition for sainthood and monstrosity by examining some qualities that many saints and monsters share, even though they may express these qualities in different ways. To repeat, I am not claiming these terms indicate "true" sainthood or monstrosity; rather, they are more like theoretical tools that scholars consistently use to assess stories about saint and monsters. Because the shape and function of these tools changes in each different context, it would be impossible to argue that every saint expresses sublimity in the same way. Instead, the academic scholarship on saints and monsters outlined in the first section will provide me with a "hermeneutic template" upon which I may build my analysis of Michael Jackson's biographies.[3] The scholars of hagiographical and teratological texts ask similar methodological and theoretical questions that I pose regarding

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[3] Simon Ditchfield, "Thinking with Saints: Sanctity and Society in the Early Modern World," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 583.

Jackson's biographies,[4] so by looking at how they answered these questions, I will be better suited to answer my own: how might we explain the global phenomenon that is Michael Jackson, and why do people care about saints and monsters?

The remaining sections will utilize scholarship on hagiography and teratology to conduct an analysis of biographies written on Michael Jackson. Each section focuses on a specific theme: Section Two looks at racial categories, Section Three examines generational categories related to age, and Section Four considers existential categories related to identity and personal authenticity. While I selected these themes because they are the most pervasive in the biographies that I selected, one could analyze these texts in terms of sexuality and gender as well. However, I must clarify that I did not yet have these categories in mind when I decided which texts to analyze. Instead of "cherry-picking" information that reflects some predetermined themes, I followed Kleinberg's approach[5] by focusing on texts that provide an eyewitness account and/or was written by a professional biographer who authored more than one book about Michael Jackson or other celebrity entertainers. By selecting the biographies in this way, I allowed the texts to speak for themselves and limited my own compulsion to portray Michael in

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[4] For example, some of the questions that Kleinberg asks include: "How were they written and by whom? Why do they contain so much that we—and some medieval readers—find hard to believe? What may we believe? What can we choose to believe? Should questions concerning the veracity of the *Lives* be asked at all or do such questions reflect a misunderstanding of the genre? How different is the way we read the saints' *Lives* from the way they were read in the Middle Ages?" Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40. Although Kleinberg's questions are formulated for a medieval context, the problems of interpretation that they address are relevant to my project nonetheless.

[5] According to Kleinberg, the readers of medieval hagiography "would not be edified unless they were convinced that the events described by the author were true in a concrete and verifiable way and that the event described a person who was worthy of the title of saint." Ibid., 53. Kleinberg focuses primarily on professional biographers and eyewitness accounts because they use specific rhetorical and literary techniques to achieve these goals: "The eyewitnesses' role was to tell what happened; the professional writer's was to reduce the 'noise' in their account so that a clear message could get through." Ibid., 130. Kleinberg also notes how eyewitness accounts are particularly useful in demonstrating the dialogical relationship between the saint and his biographer; according to Kleinberg, living saints participated in the construction of their sainthood just as much as the communities that venerated them.

one way over another. In truth, there are texts I did not include that might have made the connection between saints, monsters, and Michael Jackson more obvious, such as one book written by a woman who believes Michael was the living incarnate of Michael the Archangel. Yet my aim is not demonstrate how Michael is a saint or monster in the eyes of others (or, at least not in this paper); my aim is to explore the complicated relationship between sainthood and monstrosity through the character of Michael Jackson. By following Kleinberg's approach and limiting my analysis to eyewitnesses and professional biographers, I am less likely to venture beyond the goals of my project, and it will be easier to build my analysis on the hermeneutical template that other scholars provide if I look at similar types of texts.

A comparison of the texts I selected clearly demonstrates that the biographical information on this world-renowned celebrity is by no means homogenous (a summary of the biographies used in this paper may be found in Appendix A). For instance, while Nelson George focuses on Michael's musical legacy, for example, Christopher Andersen spends more time recounting Michael's scandalous personal life, and J. Randy Taraborrelli assumes both approaches in the longest, most extensive biography of them all. Furthermore, since the biographies were published at different times, they tend to concentrate on certain periods in Michael's life. Although Taraborrelli provides fewer details about the 1993 allegations of child molestation than Andersen, *The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story* also covers nearly fifteen years of Michael's life that occurred after *Unauthorized* was published. Yet stories written about Michael do not simply record his life; they try to persuade the reader to embrace a specific portrayal of his life as *the* authentic account, and to experience an emotional reaction to the story (e.g. admiration, disgust, astonishment, pity, etc.). Hence, there are important differences among them in both tone and perspective. For instance, the contributors to *L.O.V.E.* are die-hard fans

who unequivocally praise Michael, whereas the biography written by one of Michael's former employees, Bob Jones, seems to do the exact opposite. To look at another example, Rabbi Shmuley and Dave Marsh empathize with Michael at certain times and criticize him at others, although their empathy and criticism occurs at different points in Michael's life.

Because of the divergences among these texts, one question that I hope to answer asks, "How can ten books written about the same person tell strikingly different stories?" Indeed, scholars of hagiographic texts struggle with this same problem. Texts about a particular saint recount different miraculous performances, or include some of the same events but not others. A similar problem confronts those who study teratological texts: are the vampires in Bram Stroker's *Dracula* the same monsters that we see in the *Twilight* series? Or, how do we account for the "evolution" of zombies in contemporary American film? Perhaps even more problematic are situations where two texts disagree over the authenticity of a saint/monster. For example, after comparing two different accounts of Simeon Stylites, Kleinberg notices that the authors describe the saint's exaggerated asceticism in very different ways: whereas one hagiographer characterizes Simeon's actions as blameworthy exhibitionism, the other views them as acts of charity.[6] How do we decide which text is right?

Most scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts would respond to this question by simply answering, "We don't."[7] Determining the authority and authenticity of one text over another is not a task for the academic. Consider Kleinberg's assertion as he examines papal

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[6] Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2008), 173.

[7] Of course, there are some scholars, such as Richard Kearney, who would argue that it is our ethical duty to decide whether texts appropriately ascribe figures with sainthood and/or monstrosity. However, I am not interested in participating in debates of ascriptions; I only want to map the contours of these debates so I can better understand the social and ethical landscape from which these texts derive.

debates over the authenticity of medieval saints: "It is not relevant for my purposes whether *X* was really virtuous and his or her miracles authentic, just that others considered them to be so."[8] Similarly, Beal points out that we do not have to believe in monsters in order to study them, even though others do. Beal is not interested in determining the authenticity of monsters, "what the monstrous *really* is," but instead he wants "to explore those places where representations of the monstrous and the religious converge."[9] Like Kleinberg, Beal wants to examine the theological explanations for monstrosity that others provide without offering his own. Following the same methodological approach, I do not try to determine whether Michael actually was a bigot who molested adolescent boys, or whether the biographers who make such claims are lying; instead, I am interested in mapping the many ways Michael's biographers narrate his story (or rather, HIStory).

Accordingly, another point where hagiography, teratology, and Michael Jackson biographies converge is in the complex mixture of history with myth. As far as Kleinberg is concerned, "The texts that we are dealing with cannot be interpreted either as pure literary invention or as reliable real-life testimony; they are both."[10] Indeed, some stories about saints and monsters are so outrageous that it is hard to imagine how anyone could believe them at all, and sometimes it is difficult to determine which texts provide authentic accounts and which do not, especially when the stories originated hundreds of years ago. Although biographies written about Michael Jackson do not share the same historical distance as medieval hagiography and

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[8] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 8.
[9] Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 8.
[10] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 62. Here Kleinberg also argues that the categories "real/fabricated" or "authentic/inauthentic" are indispensable for historical analysis. The indispensability of these categories proves especially true in studies of medieval sainthood, but as we will see, these categories are applicable to contemporary stories as well.

teratology, for example, they also tend to lack verifiability. The most scandalous stories that his

biographers provide usually derive from anonymous eyewitnesses accounts, and so there is no

way to prove whether the account is true—though by claiming that it comes from an

"eyewitness," the biographers attempt to cloak the account with credibility.

To deal with this problem, we might examine how scholars have grappled with seemingly

inauthentic texts as well. One option taken by many nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars

was to disregard medieval hagiography entirely; according to them, these texts are "pious frauds"

that demonstrate "a total disregard of truth and probability."[11] Yet as Kleinberg points out, to

throw out inauthentic stories altogether would render any research in the field practically

impossible, an intolerable consequence for those who insist there is always something to learn

from even the most fabricated texts.[12] Instead, he argues, one might presume that the author

embellished a story to make the saint or monster fit an idealized mold; even if the story lacks

historical truth, the reader at least can learn about the author's perceptions.[13] Or, instead of

explaining away the perceived fabrications[14] or searching for objective, historical truth,[15] the

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[11] Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 55-56. According to Heffernan, these responses reveal a "quite ahistorical assumption that the ancient Christian panegyrists distinguished, or should have, between causality and the mirculous in the same way as leading Enlightenment intellectuals." In other words, they did not use a contextualized approach, and instead assumed that sainthood may be conceptualized in universal (and explicitly modern scientific) terms. Furthermore, it is important to note that while the difficulty of reconciling incredulous texts seems to arise more frequently in ancient and medieval texts, this problem still persists today; contemporary news corporations are notorious for elevating their "soft" stories about celebrity entertainment gossip into the realm of serious "hard" news.Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2, 7. Nicola Goc, ""Monstrous Mothers" and the Media," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 152.

[12] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 60-61.

[13] However, Kleinberg criticizes this assumption because "it introduces a semblance of consistancy where consistancy does not exist." His study of medieval sainthood recounts numerous examples of saints that do not adhere the traditional model; thus, those who claim that inauthentic texts reflect the authors' perceptions of ideal saints, rather than historical facts, actually are misrepresenting the texts. ibid., 61.

[14] In his discussion on the interpretive limitations imposed by early historiography on hagiographic texts, Ditchfield laments when "saints and sanctity are seen as having stood for something else, with the implicit and sometimes

reader might learn more about the ascribing community by focusing on what people said about the saint or monster in question.[16] There are many strategies scholars use to reconcile their personal disbelief in a text, and since context of the story mostly determines which strategies will work best, it is the responsibility of the scholar to state explicitly the criteria by which she evaluates the text's credulity.[17] However, when dealing with ambiguous texts and figures, it might be best not to seek objective truths, but rather to identify the cultural resources that the authors use to describe saintly and/or monstrous figures, and to focus especially on how these resources are used and what purposes they serve. When it comes to biographies written on Michael Jackson, each of these strategies prove useful at different times, and I indicate within my analysis which strategy I opt to use at that particular moment. Yet overall I am not concerned with the authenticity of the accounts that the authors provide. Because these texts often reference one another, the task of determining where a story comes from and whether it is true requires too much untangling for me to undertake right now. Instead, I am more interested in comparing the different ways biographers narrate his story and considering what purposes those narrations serve.

Therefore, rather than asking which text is "right," perhaps a better question to ask ourselves would be, "What does it mean when texts disagree as to whether an individual is a

explicit assumption that by explaining that something else one necessarily accounts for (and explains away) the phenomenon at issue. Or, to put it another way, their functions are seen as being simply instrumental." Ditchfield, "Thinking with Saints: Sanctity and Society in the Early Modern World," 583.

[15] A project that focuses exclusively on determining the historical accuracy of a text may prove problematic. For example, Heffernan thinks the task of figuring out whether St. Ignatius actually said what the Epistle of the Romans claims he said "suggests an inattention to the contextual meaning of the remark, ignores what the community believed about this individual, misunderstands the method through which these documents achieved their canonical status, and... misrepresents the true historic value of these documents as reflective of a collective mentality." Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages*, 59.

[16] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 168.

saint/monster?" Even if I cannot declare the authority of one text over another, I still need to

explain how and why these differences among them occur, as do scholars of hagiography.

Indeed, Kleinberg shows how medieval saints rarely enjoyed unanimous support, and their

stories often were subject to endless conflicts between their admirers and detractors.[18] We see

this in the story of Marcolinus of Forli, where local townspeople break into the saint's tomb at

the behest of Dominican friars.[19] Unlike the townspeople, the friars did not consider Marcolinus

to be a saint, and their parish remained in chaos until the friars finally accepted the community's

appeals for permission to venerate Marcolinus. Kleinberg also shows how some aspects of

medieval saints' lives did not carry the same weight in their cults.[20] For instance, some

supplicants might deem one miraculous performance of a saint more important than another,

while other followers might ignore the miracles altogether and focus instead on displays of piety.

With these observations in mind, I consider discourses of sainthood and monstrosity each

as a combination of apologia and polemic—that is, both a justification for a given ascription and

an anticipation of its contradiction and rejection.[21] Whereas the former employs certain rhetorical

and literary techniques to defend a particular position, the latter tries to anticipate potential

detractors and structure the apologia in a way that will render these opponents defenseless: here

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[17] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 68-69.

[18] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 137.

[19] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 31-36.

[20] Ibid., 12-13.

[21] Simon Coleman, "Transgressing the Self: Making Charismatic Saints," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 420. Although Coleman uses the terms "apologia" and "polemic" only to define discourses of sainthood, I would argue that the constructed and contested nature of teratology makes these terms applicable in both contexts. Moreover, Ingebretsen seems to imagine discourses of monstrosity in the same way that Coleman views discourse of sainthood, for he writes, "A social order reveals the limits of its imagination in two particular ways. The first is in the methods of fear by which it constructs the unspeakable (the 'monstrous' or the 'inhuman') as symbolic center of social energy. The second is in the means, legal and extralegal, then used to repudiate and silence that energy." Edward J. Ingebretsen,

we find a third moment where hagiography, teratology, and Michael Jackson biographies converge. Scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts have identified many of these apologetic techniques in their research, so much that one could make an entire project out of comparing these techniques alone. The individual techniques identified by scholars are not necessarily widespread in hagiography and teratology, nor are they universally employed by the texts' authors; like almost anything that has to do with saints and monsters, the story's context largely shapes its apologia. In order fully to explicate these debates, however, one would need situate each position within the context of the biography, compare positions both within and across biographies, and assess the rhetorical and literary techniques the authors employ to describe these various debates. Because of the diversity and complexity of these discourses, I must set aside for now any direct assessment of Michael Jackson biographies as ascribing him with sainthood and/or monstrosity. There is simply too much information from both primary and secondary texts for me to provide a coherent analysis here. Thus, although I will try to demonstrate the diversity amongst the biographies and to point out moments where their stories converge and contradict, I will not label a particular text or passage as apologia for sainthood and/or monstrosity.

I would like emphasize once again that I am *not* explaining how Michael Jackson is a saint and/or monster; rather, I am employing the same interpretative tools used by scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts to analyze biographies written on him. In doing so, I hope to explain the content of these biographies,[22] reveal the intimate relationship between sainthood and

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"Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretretation* 8, no. 1 (1998): 91. One might argue that the first method refers to apologetics and the second refers to polemics.

[22] However, I must note that the following analysis is in no way comprehensive. Since most of the books that I have selected were published before Michael's death, significant events that later biographies include (e.g., the birth of

monstrosity while acknowledging some important differences between them, provide insight into

contemporary American popular culture, and demonstrate how certain theories and methods that

are used in medieval and religious studies may prove useful in contemporary and secular

contexts as well.

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his children, the 2003 criminal charges of child molestation and subsequent trial in 2005, and the outpour of posthumous responses to his death) occurred after the publication of the earlier biographies. In a more expansive project, it might be interesting to trace public reactions to Michael's hybridity throughout his entire life, for example, especially since an overwhelming majority of the posthumous books do not condemn him, even though the case was the reverse only a decade earlier.

SECTION ONE: ON SAINTHOOD AND MONSTROSITY

Before I begin extracting interpretive categories from academic scholarship on

hagiographic and teratological texts, I must explain how I expect to develop a cohesive

hermeneutical framework from two seemingly dissimilar genres of literature. While it might

appear helpful to state what makes someone a saint or a monster, recent scholarship on sainthood

and monstrosity shows us why this is not a simple task. Etymologically speaking, scholars link

the word "monster" to numerous Latin terms with different meanings, indicating that the concept

of monstrosity is neither static nor absolute.[23] Similarly, a genealogical survey of Western

monsters reveals how the meaning of monstrosity has changed over time. Looking at texts

written in medieval Europe, it appears most people thought monsters were sent from God to

reveal the limits of human understanding.[24] Some scholars say medieval monsters were not

necessarily evil beings, but more like divine omens that carried particular messages about the

nature of God's creation.[25] However, monsters during the Enlightenment did not share the same

function as medieval monsters, for the influence of modern scientific inquiry and global

exploration in the sixteenth century changed the way people in the West thought about

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[23] Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6; Kevin Alexander Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 33; Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, "Monstrous/Cute. Notes on the Ambivalent Nature of Cuteness," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 214; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4; Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 2004), 63; Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6; Daniel Punday, "Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story," *The Modern Language Review* 97, no. 4 (2002): 804; Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5; Ingebretsen, "Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance," 94.
[24] Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63-122; David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exter: University of Exter Press, 1996). In the following sub-section, I will explain how medieval society viewed Behemoth and Leviathan, two monsters found in the book of Job, as divine portents.

monstrosity: instead of demonstrating the limits of human inquiry, the monster now indicated the limits of human domination.[26] Although they still demonstrated the limitless quality of God's creation, Michel Foucault says that monsters during the Enlightenment served primarily to reveal the physical, social, or moral limitations of humanity that had to be overcome by the laws of reason.[27] In other words, these monsters edified the dominion of man, whereas medieval monsters edified the dominion of God. These examples show how the function of monsters has changed over time, and so if historian Lisa Verner is correct in her assertion that "the definition of a monster is inexorably tied to its function,"[28] we can see why it might be problematic to provide an all-encompassing definition of monstrosity. While it is possible to define monstrosity in a way that includes certain examples and excludes others, in doing so I could not include everything that *other* people have described as monstrous; for this reason, I find it more useful to study why various people have defined monstrosity in different ways throughout history instead of trying to offer an overarching definition of my own.

Defining sainthood is similarly problematic. Although the origins of the term "saint" is not as etymologically diverse as the term "monster," the sheer number of saintly figures throughout Western history complicates our ability to extract the essential qualities of sainthood in order to formulate a universal definition. The problem with focusing on the common qualities of saints is that by doing so, one might assume these qualities share the same meaning and

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[25] Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*, 2-3; Punday, "Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story," 804.

[26] Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, 323-31. One of the most common examples of post-Enlightenment monstrosity are people with physical deformities, such as conjoined twins; because the scientific community could not explain the existence of these abnormalities, they revealed the limits of our knowledge about procreation and human development.

[27] Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975*, 55-79.

[28] Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*, 2.

ignore other forms of sainthood that lack these qualities.[29] In other words, an overarching

definition for sainthood would oversimplify highly-divergent and complex data; while

similarities provide useful starting points in a comparative analysis of sainthood, one cannot

neglect the differences that invariably remain. To be clear, this is not to say that similarities do

not exist, for as Kleinberg writes, "The shared cultural attitudes and behavioral patterns, and the

interplay between [saints] and local ways, are the basis for any valid generalization regarding

sainthood."[30] However, while it may be true that all saints are venerated by a cult of followers,

for instance, one must not assume that all saints are venerated in the same way and for the same

reasons. "Rather than try to determine arbitrarily what is representative," he continues, "we must

begin by acquiring an understanding of specific situations and communities." Like monstrosity,

sainthood is immensely dependent on socio-historical context, and so to study saints and

monsters properly, we must situate the stories written about them within their individual social,

cultural, and historical environments.

    If the task of defining sainthood and monstrosity is so problematic, how can any

similarity exist between stories about saints and monsters? Though stories about these figures

may share certain interpretive problems, does this also suggest that similarities may exist

between the figures themselves? By analogy, when we encounter someone who we secretly

admire and when we watch a scary movie, do we experience the same kind of excitement and

anticipation? Though our blood pressure rises and our palms sweat in both situations, is there

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[29] In an example provided by Kleinberg, "The canonization of St. Catherine of Siena—an immensely popular saint—is given the same weight as that of St. Sebald—a saint almost unknown outside of Nuremberg. Each is considered as an equivalent reflection of papal and popular attitudes," and which Kleinberg considers to be highly inaccurate. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 11-12.

[30] Ibid., 17.

nevertheless something distinct about our reactions? Recent scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts provide different answers to these questions. For one, Kearney identifies a solution to the problem of distinguishing sainthood from monstrosity in the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek. According to Kearney, these philosophers endorse what he calls "a postmodern teratology of the sublime" because they think that "the upwardly transcendent finds its mirror image in the downwardly monstrous."[31] In other words, these philosophers do not consider the "upwardly transcendent" and the "downwardly monstrous" to be distinct and unrelated, suggesting that the task of distinguishing sainthood from monstrosity is more complicated than it may seem. Other scholars also insist that the distinction between the demonic and the divine (or awful and awe-ful[32]) is not always bold. Timothy K. Beal, for instance, points out how we sometimes describe horrific experiences "in terms reminiscent of religious experience," examples of which include the whirlwind in the book of Job, Tiamat in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, and the vampire in F.W. Murnau's film *Nosferatu*.[33] Likewise, Aviad Kleinberg shows how the medieval author Antonios combines feelings of horror and compassion with those of terror and admiration in *Life of Simeon*. In sorrow for his sins, the Christian ascetic Simeon Stylites wraps a rope around his waist so tight that it eats into his flesh, causing it to rot and become infested with maggots. His stench alone disgusts the other monks, and once they learn Simeon donated his food rations from the monastery to the poor so

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[31] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 88.

[32] As Beal notes, "Both religious experience and horror are characterized as encounters with something simultaneously awesome and awful—a feeling captured by the older spelling, "aweful", which still retains its sense of awe. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7. Both Edward J. Ingebresten and (somewhat surprisingly) Richard Kearney have made a similar distinction between awful and awe-ful. Ingebretsen, "Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance." Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*.

[33] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7. Other examples of terrifying encounters with the sacred not mentioned by Beal include the visions of St. John that comprise the book of *Revelations*, as well as Lord Krishna's revelation to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a dynamic that interestingly contrasts with the one shared by Krishna and Radha, his consort

he could fast more often, one monk finally reports him to their abbot, saying, "I beseech your

holiness: this man wants to destroy the monastery and the rule which you have given us…You

must choose: either keep him here and we will leave, or send him back where he came from."[34]

Kleinberg thinks Simeon's extreme piety threatens those who refuse to match his asceticism, and

they fear him because he "is rotting before their eyes, becoming increasingly less human and

more divine, disincarnating."[35] Here it seems his analysis resembles the "teratology of the

sublime" as defined by Kearney: downwardly transcendent may be upward transcendence

inverted, but it is transcendent nonetheless. Like Beal, Kleinberg reminds us how the distinction

between divine horror and horrific divinity is not always obvious: though the monks at first

respond to Simeon with disgust, others must have revered him later on—otherwise, his tale

would not have been told within the context of medieval Christian sainthood.

In contrast to these scholars, Kearney argues that the "upwardly transcendent" and the

"downwardly monstrous" are not related, even if there are surface similarities (like sweaty palms

and high blood pressure). Although he seems to admit that both movements reflect some element

of "radical alterity," he is not convinced that these elements are mirror images of each other,

arguing that any suggestion that the divine and the monstrous are interchangeable invariably

"negates any ethical notion of the divine as unequivocally good."[36] Whereas Beal and Kleinberg

assume the task of mapping various representations of sainthood and monstrosity to point out

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in the *Bhagavatam Purana*; thus, encounters with Krishna especially exemplify the complexity of awesome experiences).

[34] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 169-70.

[35] Ibid., 173.

[36] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 88. To emphasize his point, Kearney recalls how Himmler and his fellows Nazis endorsed the Holocaust "as a sublime and sacred glory that could never be written, spoken or represented…According to this perverse claim, the exemption of the Holocaust from the experience of human historicity, and its absolution from all limits of human comprehension and context, make it a 'sacred'

moments when the boundaries that separate them are blurred, Kearney thinks scholars "must also be careful to discern, in some provisional fashion at least, between good and evil. Without such discernment, it seems nigh impossible to take considered ethical action."[37] It is not enough for Kearney to reflect upon the polemical debates that surround ascriptions of sainthood and monstrosity; he wants to take a stand in the arguments as well. The authors of hagiographic and teratological texts also seem invested in distinguishing their subjects from their inverted mirror image; through a complex arrangement of rhetorical and literary devices, these authors try to convince the reader that the main character in the story is either divine or demonic.

Finally, Caroline Walker Bynum complicates the task of distinguishing sainthood from monstrosity when she asserts that reactions to saints and monsters are not universal, focusing her study primarily on the context in which these reactions occur rather than on the reactions themselves. As she surveys the range of "wonder-responses" in medieval texts, Bynum carefully points out that we cannot study medieval emotions simply as they appear in texts, pictures, and artifacts because these are culturally-mediated representations. Just because a painting might depict people with open mouths and raised eyebrows, we cannot assume these are expressions of "universal emotion," just as we cannot "think that emotion-behavior is so culturally constructed as to exist only where we find words for it."[38] Because reactions to sainthood and monstrosity change over time and across cultures, we must be careful to situate these reactions within their specific historical contexts.

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event—an absolute secret whose very strangeness and uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) constitute its glorious monstrosity. One shudders at such logic." Ibid., 88-89.

[37] Ibid., 100.

[38] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 91-92. Bynum's methodological commentaries on the importance of context have proven particularly helpful throughout this project.

Throughout my project, I try to keep each of these methodological approaches in mind. Even though these approaches do not necessarily coalesce into a single theory, they will assist me in providing a balanced analysis of the biographies and explaining why certain differences occur among them. Clearly, significant differences in the representation of saints and monsters often occur throughout hagiographical and/or teratological texts, so the boundaries that divide a saint from a monster can be ambiguous and, therefore, subject to debate. For instance, one person's monster might be another person's saint; in these situations, the ascription of sainthood or monstrosity depends less on monster/saint in question, and more on whoever is ascribing these qualities.[39] Ambiguities also arise when a monster transforms into a saint after experiencing some sort of change, such as undergoing ritual purification.[40] Likewise, similar changes can transform a saint into a monster, although scholars say that these changes generally result from some sort of profanation, rather than ritual purification.[41] Finally, perhaps the most ambiguous figures are those deemed to be simultaneously saintly and monstrous.[42] Without a doubt, understanding these ambiguities requires a contextualized analysis of the changes by asking who, what, when, where, why, and how the changes occurred. By grounding my analysis within the

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[39] As Benedict noted in her survey of curosities in early modern England, the strangeness of sideshow freaks "existed through their impact on spectators, so that it is only in proximity to normality that a monster exists." Thus, the spectators' perceptions of normality determine their perceptions of others' monstrosity. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, 6. Beal also notes this occurrence in academic discourses on primitive religion. Beal says "official" or colonialist primitivism views primitive religion as a monstrous threat to modern western society and therefore should be banished, while "poetic" primitivism thinks modern western society should embrace monstrous primitive religion because it will open new social possibilities. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 120.

[40] Èmile Durkeim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 305. For examples of monsters transforming into saints, see: Anne G. Myles, "From Monster to Martyr: Re-Presenting Mary Dyer," *Early American Literature* 36, no. 1 (2001); Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 38.

[41] For examples of saints that transform into monsters, see: Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 124-26; Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 6-7.

[42] For a discussion on the deification of monstrosity, see: Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 42.

context of the individual biographies, I hope to demonstrate the variety and complexity of certain

biographical portrayals of Michael Jackson.

The Sublime: Mysterious Otherness

Both hagiographic and teratological texts consist of stories about extraordinary

individuals and their interactions with particular communities. Scholars of these texts often

emphasize the fact that these are not stories about average individuals; rather, the subjects of

these texts must demonstrate sublimity, the quality of mysterious, incomprehensible otherness

that solicits reactions of both awe and wonder.[43] Sublimity solicits these reactions because it

transcends the boundaries by which we order reality, thus surpassing normal comprehension.

Indeed, Beal thinks sublime figures resemble what Rudolph Otto refers to as *mysterium*

tremendum, beings "whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before

which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb."[44] By transcending normal

boundaries, saints and monsters reside in a world so unlike our own that we simply cannot

understand them.

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[43] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 186-87; Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 117; Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 37-75; Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 83-108; Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 294-97. Asma, Beal, and Kearney draw from Kant's discussions of sublimity; for more on this particular interpretation of mysterious otherness, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75-164.

[44] Although recent scholarship has revealed the limitations inherent in the idea of the *mysterium tremendum*, nevertheless Otto remains a helpful resource when trying to understand our responses to sainthood and monstrosity. As Beal notes, we need not accept Otto's presumption that there is a transcendent wholly-other which is irreducible to a cultural or psychological phenomenon; after all, just because monsters are sometimes represented as divine or sacred does not necessitate that we believe in them. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7-8. Similarly, by situating saints and monsters in their specific socio-historical, we do not render Otto's description of our responses to them irrelevant. For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical problems presented by an ahistorical representation of *mysterium tremendum*, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

To take one example, Thomas J. Heffernan correlates reverence for medieval Christian saints with their perceived ability to transcend the limitations of worldly existence. From a theological perspective, these saints are sublime because they have elevated the ontological status of their humanity by partaking in the sublimity of Christ through the performance of his miracles, identification with his suffering by means of ascetic practices, or exemplification of medieval Christian norms and values.[45] By elevating the ontological status of their humanity in this way, the existence of medieval saints is viewed separately from the ordinary existence of non-saints, hence rendering them incomprehensible sites of "mysterious otherness." Thinking back to *Life of Simeon*, the saint in this story embodies sublimity when he fasts, feeds the poor, and endures painful wounds to atone for his sins. Indeed, his fellow monks recognized the sublimity of his actions from the start, and only later changed their reactions to him from vilification to veneration.

Similarly, many scholars who study hagiographic texts from other traditions and historical contexts (both religious and secular) pay attention to the ways saints exemplify the norms and values that a particular community shares.[46] Although numerous members of the community may aspire to maintain these norms and values, only those who achieve exceptional

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[45] Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages*, 11, 14.

[46] Although it might seem problematic to talk about mysterious otherness in multiple cultural and historical contexts, as if it maintained a timeless and universal consistency, the problem only arises when we ignore the specificity of each particular context. According to Françoise Meltzer and Jas' Elsner, the scholars in the *Critical Inquiry* special issue on sainthood successfully describe sublimity in a multitude of contexts: "In all of these cases, modernity is interrogated by a dynamic of mysterious energy clothed in past forms or modeled on ancient paradigms but, in each instance, conspicuously contemporary and potentially challenging to the established order." These scholars are not arguing that all saints demonstrate sublimity in the same way. Rather, they argue that the mysterious otherness that saints demonstrate depends directly on their particular context. Françoise Meltzer and Jas' Elsner, "Introduction: Holy by Special Application," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 378. Thus, while I disagree with Edward J. Ingebrestsen's claim that "the category of the monster remains unchanging, almost Sacred," I agree with his admission that "actual monsters vary from age to age, depending on timeliness and political need." Ingebretsen, "Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance," 99.

levels of virtue (by fully exemplifying certain norms and values) are considered to be saints.[47]

For example, Marc Blanchard thinks Cubans revere Che Guevara as an international saint

because his commitment to impossible ideals encourages them to believe decolonialization of the

Third World is possible.[48] Even if few Cubans may share Che's commitment, it is likely many of

them hope for independence from imperial or capitalist domination—that is, they share Che's

value for independence.[49] Yet Che is sublime not simply because he shares certain values with

Cubans, just as medieval saints are not sublime simply because they imitate Christ. In both of

these situations, the sublimity of the saint derives from his or her ability to embody "mysterious

otherness" and transcends the boundaries of normal existence by exemplifying norms and values

in ways that the general population cannot. Likewise, June Macklin asserts that modern

celebrities have embodied "many counter-cultural values that circled the globe from the mid-

1950s forward" and therefore appear saint-like before audiences that share these values by

aspiring "to rethink conventional understandings of reality."[50] Thus, saints need not embody

conventional norms and values, but only those shared by the community that venerates them.

Some of the celebrity-saints and folk-saints[51] noted by Macklin include Princess Diana, Elvis

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[47] Indeed, as Simon Coleman writes, "the saint is a complex if paradigmatic figure; exemplification of religious ideals through self-transformation may ultimately lead to behavior so extreme that it becomes impossible for others to imitate." Coleman, "Transgressing the Self: Making Charismatic Saints," 417. Coleman's assessment of sainthood is particular interesting because he examines the topic within the context of contemporary Protestant evangelical traditions. Thus, his work also shows how analyses of sainthood might extend beyond medieval Roman Catholic contexts.

[48] Marc Blanchard, "From Cuba with Saints," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 405.

[49] According to Françoise Melzner, Joan of Arc plays a similar role in the eyes of the French: "Native virtue and individual liberty, which Joan represents for the French romantics, easily translate from romantic humanism into the larger rhetoric of nationalism." Françoise Meltzer, "Reviving the Fairy Tree: Tales of European Sanctity," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 504.

[50] June Macklin, "Saints and near-Saints in Transition: The Sacred, the Secular, and the Popular," in *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 17.

[51] As Hopgood points out in the introduction to this volume, "The qualities of a folk saint, such as the Mexican El Niño Fidencio, do not differ from those of a formally sanctioned, canonized saint except in certain culturally specific ways and in issues of official morality that are subject to change over time…This perspective also suggests that it is not necessary for devotees themselves to apply the term *saint*, or a linguistic equivalent, only that their activities,

Presley,[52] and El Niño Fidencio: each of these figures transgressed boundaries and limitations

(though in different ways, depending on their particular circumstances). Furthermore, their

audiences looked upon these "secular saints" with a sense of awe and wonder because they

achieved what their audience could not—royalty, fame, fortune, political independence, etc.[53]—

and so they defy comprehension.

Scholars also identify figures in teratological texts that transcend conventional limitations

and therefore exist beyond normal comprehension. For example, both Beal and Asma point out

the sublimity of Behemoth and Leviathan in the book of Job. Although Job is not widely

considered a teratological text, in that it is less commonly recognized for its monstrous

characters, Asma asserts that Behemoth and Leviathan "serve as evidence of God's power and

strength; they act as living billboards for God's sublime creativity and awe-inspiring

authority."[54] Like medieval saints, Behemoth and Leviathan do not simply reflect the sublimity

of God; they are also sublime by their own right because they possess "incomprehensible

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expressions, and devotions clearly mark the personage as sharing qualities with traditionally conceived saints." James F. Hopgood, "Introduction: Saints and Saints in the Making," in *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), xii. Likewise, the task of distinguishing between celebrity-saints and folk-saints can be equally problematic, and so this study aims to focus on the "activities, expressions, and devotions" of sainthood, as Hopgood suggests.

[52] Elvis Presley in particular has received considerable attention from academics, especially those interested in sainthood, pilgrimage, and iconography. For more, see Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Faith, Fans & Image* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Erika Doss, "Popular Culture Canonization: Elvis Presley as Saint and Savior," in *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005); N. J. Girardot, "Ecce Elvis: 'Elvis Studies' as a Postmodernist Paradigm for the Academic Study of Religions," *American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2000); Lawrence Jasud, "St. Elvis," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009); Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis after Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lynn Spigel, "Communicating with the Dead: Elvis as Medium," *Camera Obscura* 8(1990).

[53] Because these values differ in each cultural context, I cannot provide a list of "saintly values," nor can I provide a general definition of the "awe and wonder" that saints solicit from their supplicants, or *how* communities in general respond to sainthood. Instead, I can only identify *why* the saints solicit these reactions—because they demonstrate sublimity. Yet even here, demonstrations of sublimity are not universal, for saints do not necessarily transgress the same boundaries.

[54] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 64.

glory,"[55] which God describes to Job in the text. First, God says Behemoth is a beast with bones of bronze and limbs like irons, "the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword,"[56] meaning that no human power could possibly defeat it. Likewise, God describes Leviathan as a fire-breathing sea creature that is terrifying: "Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again! Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?"[57] No boundary can contain them, no weapon can defeat them: the force of both monsters is so powerful that no human could imagine how to overcome them.

Yet according to Asma, sublimity need not be tied to a theological entity or mystical, otherworldly force, for he thinks that "the inexorable laws of nature alone will do nicely to crush my own egotistical sense of power in the world, and I don't need to read the universal uncontrollable forces as being transcendental or wholly other."[58] Here Asma seems to argue a crossing of boundaries does not always indicate a supernatural presence. Imagined this way, we might begin to recognize sublimity in cultural spheres that are not directly affiliated with a religious tradition. For instance, while surveying the films of David Lynch, including *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Blue Velvet* (1986), Asma points out how these films "are filled with psychopaths, severed body parts, vomit, blood, and characters whose motives seem as mysterious to themselves as they are plainly to the audience."[59] These films solicit reactions of awe and wonder because they challenge our perceptions of reality and push

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[55] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 117.
[56] Job 40: 18-19, from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, et al., 3rd Revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[57] Job 41: 8-9, ibid.
[58] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 192.
[59] Ibid., 193.

the boundaries of our imaginations. Indeed, had anyone seen a severed head turn into an eraser before watching *Eraserhead*? Or, to take a more historical example, we might think differently about why serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer immensely disturb us when we see them as expressions of sublimity. We react to these murderers with a sense of awe and wonder not only because they threaten the safety of our lives, but also because they disregard social norms that prohibit rape, murder, cannibalism, and necrophilia. In other words, "the kind and character" of serial killers are incommensurable with our own because they disregard (and thus, transgress) the common boundaries that society shares.

Much like saints, Ingebretsen says that monsters serve as "civic *exemplum*" for the community that abhors them: "The monster's particular failure—whether it be of identity, gender, race, or other—demarcates the outer limit of the human."[60] Yet instead of demarcating a limit that we aspire to reach, monsters establish boundaries that we are not to cross.[61] Although the monster breaks different norms than the saint, it seems that both remain virtually incomprehensible to society at large. It is not just that one person (or even many) does not understand them, because if that was the case, somebody would be able to explain them for those who do not. No one can understand saints or monsters—and sometimes, saints and monsters do not seem to understand themselves. While they may not transgress the same social boundaries, and the reactions of awe and wonder that they solicit are often expressed in different ways, some scholars assert that saints and monsters both possess a quality of mysterious otherness that defies normal comprehension.

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[60] Ingebretsen, "Staking the Monster: A Politics of Remonstrance," 97. Emphasis provided in original text.
[61] As Ingebretsen writes, "Monsters articulate categories of deviance. Their status as failed social projects of one sort or another affirms categories of the polite and the politic; they shore up fissured walls of appropriateness and correctness." Ibid., 104.

The Uncanny: Sameness in Otherness

The uncanny, like the sublime, is a category that can help us interpret texts about saints and monsters. This category proves particularly useful as we try to understand what scholars mean when they say saints and monsters solicit reactions of "fear and desire, repulsion and attraction." [62] What is it about saints and monsters that simultaneously attracts and revolts us? More specifically, why did the other monks fear Simeon enough to bring him to the attention of the abbot, instead of just ignoring him? Or, in a modern example, how can we explain the prevalence of zombie apocalypses in popular culture over other global catastrophes?[63] Perhaps the distinction between a saint and a monk (or a zombie apocalypse and the bubonic plague) is a matter of quality, not quantity: one is not simply more [*x*] than the other.

Scholars employ Freud's notion of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) to denote qualitative differences between ordinary and extraordinary individuals. Freud uses the term "uncanny" to describe emotional and cognitive dissonance that we feel when we encounter **"otherness within sameness."**[64] Uncanny figures attract and repulse us because they are our double, "that is, someone who looks like us and yet is not, someone who is totally familiar and totally alien."[65] Freud thinks encounters with our double (*doppelgänger*) uncover our repressed desire to live

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[62] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7; Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 17. Moreover, Cohen continues, "This simultaneous attraction and repulsion at the core of the monster's composition accounts for its continued cultural popularity…we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.

[63] Especially within the past decade, zombie apocalypse enthusiasts have developed numerous outlets for their survivalist fantasies and gun fetishes. In these doomsday scenarios, "post-apocalyptic zombie worlds are fantasies of liberation: the intrepid pioneers of a new world trek through the shattered remnants of the old." Peter Dendle, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007). One might argue that these scenarios echo visions of Judgment Day that foretell Christ's return, when he will liberate his followers from the shackles of wickedness and instill a new world order. For more on the role of zombies in American popular culture, see Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture."

[64] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 188; Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4. See: Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1976).

forever, and so they are experienced as uncanny rather than sublime because they simultaneously stimulate our older repressed desire to live forever *and* the newer negative feelings of terror.[66] Moreover, encounters with our double challenge the way we conceptualize our world and distort our egos, so we document these encounters to learn not only about the uncanny figures, but also about ourselves.[67] We are drawn to them because they are like us, and we recoil from them because they are not.

More specifically, Beal thinks monsters personify uncanniness because "they are figures of chaos and disorientation *within* order and orientation, revealing deep insecurities in one's faith in oneself, one's society, and one's world."[68] We see this tension between chaos and order in a scene from AMC's television series *The Walking Dead*, when a man recounts the horrific transformation of his wife into a zombie. Later, when he begins to snipe the crowd of "walkers" gathering outside, he cannot bring himself to kill the mother of his child because his orientation to her as his wife has been disturbed by the chaos of the zombie apocalypse. He cannot accept the fact that nothing remains of the woman he loves except her flesh-eating corpse, and the tension between attraction and repulsion becomes so overwhelming that he suffers an emotional breakdown and fails to shoot her. This sense of chaos-within-order extends to the television viewers, forcing them imagine how they would react in the same situation.

Similarly, Kleinberg employs Freud's notion of *das Unheimliche* to describe medieval saints. Although he rejects Freud's association of uncanny feeling with repressed childhood sexuality, Kleinberg is interested in Freud's explanation for the immediate cause of that feeling:

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[65] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 134.
[66] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 190.
[67] Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages*, 43.

the mingling of the familiar with the alien.[69] He asserts that non-saints must be set apart from their communities in order to become saints, and this fosters a tension between the familiar communities and the alien saints.[70] Furthermore, as in Beal's assessment of monsters, Kleinberg discerns how medieval saints displace and destabilize the ordinary distinctions of reality and undermine the rules of society. The *Life of Simeon* illustrates how figures that invoke awe and wonder are also forces of attraction and repulsion, rousing fear precisely because they blur the line between sacred and profane, culture and nature, reason and madness.[71] Because the other monks cannot make sense of Simeon's unconventional behavior, they bring him to the attention of the abbot, who then banishes Simeon from the monastery for stepping outside the boundaries of appropriate piety. Later, the abbot searches for Simeon after a dream reveals he is a true servant of God. Simeon is accepted only after a higher authority validates his extreme asceticism and redefines the rules. Like the mother-turned-zombie, Simeon challenges the prevailing social norms and conceptions of reality because he embodies otherness within sameness.

On the contrary, Asma embraces the correlation between the uncanny and repressed desires when he examines the cathartic effect of "sameness within otherness." Although he does not deny that the uncanny creates a sense of chaos within order, as Kleinberg and Beal both agree, he also considers how the uncanny might serve the reverse function of exorcising our troubling emotions that we otherwise dare not express. To illustrate this point, Asma cites how *Hostel* director Eli Roth explained the popularity of his film amongst soldiers in Iraq: on the

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[68] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 5.

[69] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 134.

[70] Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 105.

[71] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 134-35. Simon Coleman also observes this tension across multiple religious traditions and in more contemporary examples of sainthood: Coleman, "Transgressing the Self: Making Charismatic Saints."

battlefield, the soldiers have to operate like a machine and respond tactically to life-threatening situations where "they're not allowed to be scared. But it gets all stored up, and it's got to come out. And then they watch *Hostel*, it's basically saying, for the next 90 minutes, not only are you allowed to be scared, you're encouraged to be scared because it's okay to be terrified."[72] For these soldiers, the experience of sameness within otherness creates emotional continuity amidst social discontinuity by allowing them to express the same feelings that other social situations require them to repress.

Hybridity and Metamorphosis

Because ascriptions of sainthood or monstrosity are neither fixed nor absolute, it can be difficult to differentiate between the two, especially when it comes to highly-contested figures like Simeon Stylites. Academics try to unpack such complex figures focusing on the ways their stories express hybridity. The hybrid, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, is "a double being, an entity of parts, two or more…Its contraries are simultaneous, hence dialogic."[73] We have seen an example of hybridity when we defined *das Unheimliche,* which simultaneously expresses the contradictory qualities of sameness and otherness.[74] When something is uncanny, it appears all the more alien when juxtaposed with that which appears familiar. Yet Bynum insists hybrids are not simply two-in-one; they also serve to destabilize and reveal the world. In our struggle to understand reality, we organize and compartmentalize existence in ways that define gender roles,

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[72] Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, 197.
[73] She continues, "Forever in the present, the one plus one that we find together in the hybrid must be in conversation with each other; each is a comment on the other." Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 30.
[74] Specifically, Simon Coleman suggests that both Roman Catholic and Quaker saints "express the same problem of achieving iconicity that is remarkable yet familiar enough to allow intimate interaction between divine and human spheres of action." Coleman, "Transgressing the Self: Making Charismatic Saints," 425.

sexuality, race, and social class, to name a few. By forcing "contradictory or incompatible categories to coexist and serve as commentary on each other," hybrids destabilize our assumptions about the structure of the world, and remind us of the complex and multiplicitous nature of reality that we easily tend to forget.[75] Conversely, Kearney thinks we tell stories about hybrids because they "provide symbolic resolutions to the enigmas—our origins, time, birth, and death—which cannot be solved at the level of our everyday historical experience."[76] In other words, hybrids personify the sublime blending familiar categories to create something wholly other, and they personify the uncanny by imbuing the enigmas of human existence with a sense of familiarity—they bring a sense of sameness to otherness.

Some scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts concentrate on somatic expressions of hybridity, such as those found in stories about werewolves (man-wolf hybrids) and bearded female saints (female-male hybrids), through looking at the rhetorical functions of such figures' physical descriptions.[77] Others explore representations of hybrids by analyzing a plurality of psychological dispositions that a hybrid may express. For example, Ruth Waterhouse investigates the implications of psychological hybridity in one of the most well-known stories about multiple personalities, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. According to Waterhouse, "Jekyll and Hyde are mutually exclusive; they cannot coexist, but engage in a perpetual power struggle in

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[75] Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 31. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen makes a similar assertion when thinking specifically about monsters. He writes, "Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes—as 'that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis.'" He continues, "A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion and attraction), and resistance to integration…the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world." Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 6-7.

[76] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 233n1.

[77] Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 6; Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 77-111; Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, 309-22.

which Hyde progressively gains strength and Jekyll is only just successful through his suicide."[78]

Even if Jekyll and Hyde are not present at the same time, the conflict between these dual

personalities reflects the kind of dialogic relationship that Bynum mentions when she describes

the nature of hybridity. Similarly, other scholars interpret hybrid forms that manifest in a

plurality of social dynamics. According to Kleinberg, medieval ascetics had to adopt two

contradictory modes of behavior before a community could ascribe sainthood to them: on the one

hand, they were expected to detach themselves from the community and its values, but on the

other, they needed to be close enough "to edify and serve the community and its often rather

worldly needs."[79] The hybridity described here clearly exhibits the quality of *das Unheimliche*

mentioned earlier, for the saint concomitantly is alienated from and intimately connected to his

or her community.

Though hybridity helps us to understand both hagiographic and teratological texts,

monstrous hybrids are not identical to saintly hybrids. Bynum alludes to their distinction when

she writes, "The implication is clear: crossing of role boundaries, like crossing of species

boundaries, is dangerous and invariably involves loss, except in the realm of the marvelous

hybrids of God."[80] That is to say, the distinction between sainthood and monstrosity stems not so

much from the hybrids themselves, but rather from the ascribing community: everything depends

on who tells the story. Indeed, Jas' Elsner illustrates how a pagan saint can also be a Christian

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[78] Ruth Waterhouse, "*Beowulf* as Palimpsest," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffery Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 29.

[79] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 119. Bynum notices a similar internal hybridity in religious roles of medieval abbots and notice masters. According to Bynum, these figures "felt especially torn between conflicting ideals both because they had responsibility for other souls in addition to their own and because such responsibility offered special temptations to violation of the withdrawal that was one of the poles of their desire." In fact, Bernard of Clairvaux even self-identifies with monstrosity, fearing that he himself was only a chimera. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 148-49.

[80] Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 119.

monster in his study of different Christian commentaries on Apollonius of Tyana. Elsner points out that the term "divine impulse (*daimonia kinesis* in Greek)," which carries a positive connotation in Greek antiquarian stories about Apollonius, "reads negatively (as 'demonic impulse') to a Christian ear like that of Eusebius or Newman."[81] He also compares Eusebius and Newman's commentaries on Apollonius, which are separated by 1500 years, to explore the different changes and consistencies in Christian thought that occurred over time. Clearly, context plays a crucial role in shaping the images of saints and monsters: time, place, and the author's relationship to his or her story (i.e. the author's polemical stance) all influence the way saints and monsters appear in texts.

According to some academics, metamorphosis is another way saints and monsters personify the uncanny and sublime. Metamorphosis, which refers to a change from one form to another, plays a significant role in Harvey Roy Greenberg's study of sequels to horror films. Greenberg, who thinks the monsters in these sequels are mellow in comparison to the originals, "interrogates an intriguing reversal of the trope, a metamorphosis of 'unheimlich' (Freud's 'uncanny') into 'heimlich' (the intimate, comfortable, or, closest to 'heimlich,' homely)."[82] To be clear, this is not to say that metamorphosis functions in the same way as hybridity, for unlike the horror movie sequels that Greenberg reviews, hybrids lose their uncanny qualities only if they stop being hybrids. In fact, Bynum identifies an important difference between these forms: while hybrids embody diverse paradoxes found in "the world of natures, essences, or substances," figures of metamorphosis express "a labile world of flux and transformation,

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[81] Jas' Elsner, "Beyond Compare: Pagan Saint and Christian God in Late Antiquity," *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 677.
[82] Harvey Roy Greenberg, "Heimlich Maneuvers: On a Certain Tendency of Horror and Speculative Cinema," *PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* (2001), http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/articles/psyart/2001_greenberg04.shtml.

encountered through story."[83] Put another way, hybridity is more fixed and metamorphosis is more fluid. By shifting between foreign and familiar, metamorphosis reminds us of the narrative and mutable qualities of life, while hybridity reveals the multiplicity of reality through the combination of various forms. However, while insisting that hybridity and metamorphosis are not mutually interchangeable, Bynum also admits that "a certain two-ness in metamorphosis" occurs when "the transformation goes from one being to another." [84] Here metamorphosis seems to be in a perpetual state of hybridity. However, Bynum also argues, "the relative weight or presence of the two entities suggests where we are in the story," so metamorphosis is in a perpetual state of change as well.[85] Bynum identifies how sublime and uncanny qualities overlap in hybridity and metamorphosis: while the hybrid transforms the familiar world by recombining categories to fit new configurations, metamorphosis unites multiple parts by transforming one being into another. Though they function in different ways (namely, either spatially or temporally), both hybridity and metamorphosis destabilize and reveal the world by transgressing boundaries and recombining categories to fit new configurations. Needless to say, Bynum thinks it can be difficult to discuss one without mentioning the other.

Interpreters of hagiographic and teratological texts often detect this transformative quality in figures who straddle the line that separates saints from monsters. For instance, Kleinberg notes an important shift in the *Life of Simeon* when the monks accept Simeon after their abbot returns him to the monastery. Although they previously rejected his grotesque and unconventional behavior, now they venerate Simeon as an ideal model for their community.[86] Here we see a

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[83] Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 29-30.
[84] Ibid., 30.
[85] Ibid., 30.
[86] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 175.

transformation in the narrative's social context, which in turn transforms Simeon from a monster into a saint. Other scholars also explore the transformative effect of the historical context in which a story is told. Susan Tyler Hitchcock, for example, traces numerous transformations in the teratology of Frankenstein. Not only does she observe important differences between the monster in Mary Shelley's novel and the monster in the film *Young Frankenstein*, but she also shows how new social contexts can rewrite the originally story: "Mary Shelley conjured up the character, and, as in a culturally driven game of telephone in which each new utterance contains new meaning, we make it into the story we need at the moment."[87] Like the metamorphosis Greenberg observes in movie-sequel monsters, Hitchcock identifies metamorphosis in the mythology of Frankenstein, who was characterized first as a horrific abomination but over time evolved into a favorite children's Halloween costume. In a similar project, Arnold I. Davidson explores the metamorphosis of legends associated with St. Francis of Assisi. While recounting the history of the textual and pictorial representations of the saint's stigmata, Davidson shows how the hagiography and iconography of St. Francis built upon one another over time to provide a persuasive—though inconsistent—representation of the miracle.[88] In essence, these scholars recognize how different social situations and developing historical contexts can transform saints and monsters, providing us another reason why we must analyze the texts within their specific

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[87] Susan Tyler Hitchcock, *Frankenstein: A Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 9. For more on the evolution of Frankenstein's mythology, see also Fred Botting, *Making Monstrous: Frankenstein, Criticism, Theory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1991).

[88] Arnold I. Davidson, "Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata," *Critical Inquiry* 25(2009): 454-55. In his view, these representations of St. Francis served to "persuade thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers and viewers of its reality. A detailed examination of the techniques and modalities of persuasion employed by these writers and artists can help us gain access to a set of profound and wide-ranging stakes that were at issue in these representations and were located at every level of culture. Thus, studying the strategic intervention of discourse and painting in this historical context allows us to understand why the battles fought over Francis's stigmatization were so intense and long-lasting, and why so many different resources of the rhetorical and pictorial persuasion were deployed around the miracle." In other words, Davidson aims to explore the rhetorical, literary, and visual devices that hagiographers and iconographers used to defend their individual

contexts.[89] As a rule, if we want to understand how and why others tell various stories about saints and monsters, we must pay attention to changes in context.

While these examples of metamorphosis might seem to focus on metamorphosis between texts, scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts also identify expressions of metamorphosis within a single text. In his discussion of medieval shape-shifters, David Williams mentions several descriptions of figures that transformed externally by adopting the forms of other beings.[90] By his interpretation, the shape-shifter denotes how "the boundaries of natural form are insecure, that it is somehow possible for a self to slip out of the protective clothing that declares its identity and become trapped in a shape that misidentifies and misrepresents it."[91] Because their internal being remains the same—even though it has been trapped inside a new external body—the shape-shifter in medieval texts "declares the independence of life from the material body."[92] Here Williams focuses on the physical transformation of shape-shifters rather than the

interpretations of St. Francis and his stigmata. In a future project, I hope to explore similar polemical techniques in biographies written on Michael Jackson.

[89] Bynum notes the importance of a contextual analysis when she writes, "As students of folklore and comparative religion tell us, there are profound differences between cultures in stories of metamorphosis or shape-shifting; nor are all such stories in the Western tradition the same." Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 178. Arnold I. Davidson provides a pointed analysis of the development of St. Francis of Assisi's story, focusing on how contextual changes have influenced the way his story has been told. Davidson, "Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata."

[90] Some of these figures Williams mentions include human shape-shifters (such as werewolves) and divine shape-shifters (such as demons that take on human forms in order to procreate, Lucifer's appearance in the Garden of Eden as a serpent, and Zeus's transformation into various beasts). In all of these examples, the physical appearance of the shape-shifter transforms, while the mental/inward disposition remains the same. Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, 121-26.

[91] Ibid., 123-24. Interestingly, Williams refers to werewolf mythology to support his claims, which seems to support the claim that hybridity and metamorphosis often occur simultaneously within a single figure, although they function in entirely different ways. Bynum's discussion of the werewolf emphasizes its two-ness, whereas Williams underscores the act of transformation. Furthermore, recalling the difficulties indicated earlier in delineating the demonic from the divine, David Williams notes how the shape-shifter in medieval texts "generally seems to be a monstrosity particularly favored by the holy and the divine." Ibid., 122.

[92] Ibid., 124. It must be noted, however, that the text's audience determines the importance and significance of this declaration. The medieval perception of identity differs dramatically from modern perceptions, which tend to emphasize individuality and autonomy over the spiritual-material concerns of the Middle Ages. For more on the

abstract metamorphosis resulting from changes in social context. Alternatively, Kleinberg traces both types of metamorphosis in the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi, who experiences a series of personal transformations while he works to overcome his disgust for lepers. Kleinberg thinks the stigmatization of St. Francis provides a visual expression of the saint's spiritual metamorphosis, for the wounds that appear on his hands and feet "allowed everyone to see what only God had seen until then: Francis's transformation into a Christ-like figure, from an imitator to a model of imitation."[93] That is to say, the stigmata are external reflections of his inner transformation.

As the scholars discussed above have shown, we are not merely drawn to saints and monsters because they fascinate us. According to some scholars of hagiographic and teratological texts, saints and monsters elicit intense reactions of awe and embody mysterious otherness. Furthermore, we are attracted to and repulsed by saints and monster because they embody *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny sense of sameness within otherness. While hybridity and metamorphosis are two distinct forms by which saints and monsters personify these qualities, the task of distinguishing monstrosity from sainthood is not always easy. Like kaleidoscopes, saints and monsters combine different parts to form complex images, and by simply turning the tubes or repositioning the lenses, these figures can morph into new images and blur the boundaries that separate them. Yet by paying attention to the parts' configurations—which categories are transgressed and how borders are crossed—we can better understand the communities that hold kaleidoscopes: that revere saints and vilify monsters.

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difference between modern and medieval perceptions of identity, see Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*; Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*.
[93] Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, 215-16.

Keeping in mind the theoretical discussion outlined above, I would now like to transition to an assessment of selected biographies written on Michael Jackson. In the sections that follow, I will provide an example of a figure that straddles the boundary between saintly and monstrous, map the diversity of responses to Michael, and suggest why he captivated the minds of millions of fans and critics around the world. In other words, I want to point out the different ways biographers turn the kaleidoscope that is Michael Jackson and reconfigure his image.

SECTION TWO: "BLACK OR WHITE"

But, if

You're thinking

About my Baby

It don't matter if you're

Black or white

In this section, my analysis of the biographies focuses on issues surrounding racial identity. For the most part, my analysis will proceed chronologically, starting with earliest moments of Michael's life and concluding with the latter years of his career. I have divided this section into three sub-sections in order to indicate moments where my analytical focus shifts from one topic to another: the first sub-section will explore how biographers portray Michael as transgressing racial boundaries through his music, the second will look at how they say Michael transgresses racial boundaries with his physical body, and the third section considers how they characterize Michael as someone who transcends racial categories altogether.

The Crossover from "Straight-Ahead Black" into "All-White Environment"

Although biographers open their stories of Michael's life in different ways, most begin by recounting the years he lived in his hometown of Gary, Indiana. According to Nelson George, Gary was a center of great racial pride for black America, "a place where our people were enjoying some of the fruits of postsegregation America…. [and] still believed that by legally

pulling themselves up by the bootstraps, they could, if not clean up the ghetto, at least drag

themselves free of its downward tug." [94] Other biographies that begin in Gary paint a similar

picture of socio-economic struggle, noting how Michael's father Joe worked double shifts at the

local steel mill to support his wife and nine children in a crowded one-bedroom house. In setting

up the story this way, the biographers characterize the Jacksons as a typical 1960s working-class

black[95] family who wanted to escape the hardships of their financial situation by making it big in

show business. As the story goes, Joe initially tried to achieve stardom with his own band The

Falcons, though they never achieved much success. Yet once Joe realized his sons possessed

musical talent, he encouraged them to practice their routines every night with him after he

returned home from work. Soon thereafter, Michael and his brothers began to perform in local

talent competitions, many of which took place in theaters and nightclubs that were patronized

almost exclusively by blacks.[96] In these venues (known collectively as "the chitlin' circuit"), the

Jackson 5 reportedly opened for some of the biggest black musical acts at that time, including

James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Etta James, Otis Clay, Jerry Butler, Joe Simon, Sam & Dave,

Maurice & Mac, Bobby Taylor and the Vancouvers, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the

Temptations, the Chi-Lites, the Emotions, the O'Jays, the Five Stairsteps, the Fantastic Four, the

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[94] Nelson George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 15-16.
[95] I will use the terms "black" and "white" throughout this chapter to denote racial differences, although admittedly with some hesitation. While I do not wish to perpetuate racism of any form, these are the terms used by the sources I am analyzing to describe African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans (presumably of European origin). For the sake of consistency, I will label these particular groups as either "black" or "white," even though such labels may seem inappropriate or even offensive in our present socio-historical context.
[96] Dave Marsh incorporates the history of 20th century black popular music throughout his biography. Marsh provides this history for two reasons: first, to contextualize the cultural landscape out of which the Jackson 5 arose, and to support his claim that Michael was out of touch with his past. According to Marsh, this history grew out the cultural (if not legal) segregation of black and white America, which in turn created an environment where black musicians and entertainers came together and forged "a significant cultural style" out of their "unique and uniquely negative American experience." Dave Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1985), 34.

Vibrations, and the Esquires.[97] Multiple texts recall how Michael often watched backstage after he finished performing, where he carefully observed "the principles of stagecraft" that he in turn incorporated into his own routine.

Although Michael's biographers describe the socio-historical context of Michael's early career in similar ways, they explain the impact of this context on his career in different ways. For instance, George suggests the "the chitlin' circuit" cultivated Michael into an emblem of black style. One way George makes this argument is through quotations from music industry professionals as they reflect upon Michael's early career. As Bobby Taylor recalls, he "never thought about pop" when the Jackson 5 began recording with Motown: "This boy, this little Michael Jackson, could blow. He had the goods. As a singer, he was so straight-ahead black that I knew he'd take this place alongside Ray Charles. In Michael, I had me a soul singer."[98] With this quotation, George suggests that the socio-historical context of the late 1960s was so engrained within Michael that his producers could not imagine him singing anything but black music. Similarly, George includes a quotation from former Jackson 5 publicist Steve Manning, who stated that Michael and his brothers "were a very timely group for black Americans. It was the time of the Afro and black pride. Never before had black teen-agers had someone to idolize

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[97] Christopher Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995), 26-28; Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story* (New York: New English Library, 1984), 28-31; Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 33-34; J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009), 27-30. Marsh in particular identifies what he thinks were the key points for any up-and-coming black group on the circuit: the Apollo in New York, the Howard Theatre in Washington D.C., the Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia, the Greystone Ballroom or Fox Theatre in Detroit, and the Regal in Chicago. I would argue that these lists memorialize those who contributed to Michael's sainthood, and they document the sites made sacred by his presence (many of which were turned into shrines for him soon after he died). For more on the function of biographies in ascribing sainthood, see the conclusion.

[98] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 31. Because he was "so straight-ahead black," Taylor did not consider crossing the Jackson 5 over to pop (i.e. white) music, perhaps because the hybridization of black and white style remained controversial in segregated America, or because he wanted to avoid "lightening up" Michael with a less-black style. Either way, in this quotation Taylor seems to resist the reconfiguration of racial categories

like that….The kids identified with them not as stars, but as contemporaries fulfilling their fantasies of stardom."[99] Here George suggests that black America embraced the Jackson 5 because they maintained their black identities—their sameness with other blacks—while they escaped disenfranchisement. Yet George also includes his own observations to explain the influence of black America on Michael's early career. The author mentions how *Right On!* and *Soul*, two new black fan magazines, "seized upon the Jackson 5 as symbols of what young blacks could accomplish through hard work."[100] George suggests that the popularity of Jackson 5 stemmed from the group's ability to appear uncanny in the eyes of black teen-agers who at once identified with the group and aspired to become more like them—in other words, the Jackson 5 appeared familiar because they shared the same cultural heritage, yet simultaneously unfamiliar because they were famous and successful black teen superstars, something the American public had never seen before.

Somewhat differently than George, Marsh emphasizes that Michael was one of the circuit's final pupils—at least when it came to observing live performances. "The Jackson 5 was one of the last groups to participate in the circuit while it was still pretty much in full swing," Marsh writes, "and like everyone else involved, they were deeply affected by it." [101] Like George, Marsh's assertion implies that Michael and his brothers would have appeared completely familiar to black Americans at this time because the Jackson 5 internalized the styles of other black artists who performed at the same soul and R&B venues. Yet at the same time, Marsh suggests the Jackson 5 was somewhat different than black artists who preceded them, for

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that would later typify Michael's career in the 1980s; here we see an example of someone recoiling from the prospect of hybridity.
[99] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 52-53.
[100] Ibid., 46.

they were one of the last groups to participate in these venues before "more and more of the surface of black style was assimilated and expropriated by 'mainstream' white America."[102] By emphasizing a dualism between familiarity and unfamiliarity, Marsh characterizes Michael and his brothers as an uncanny musical group, though he situates this uncanniness specifically within the context of 1960s black America: while the Jackson 5 appeared familiar to black Americans, this familiarity would change once white listeners began to join what was formerly an all-black audience.

Thus, Marsh and George provide slightly different characterizations of the Jackson 5: Marsh emphasizes the fact that they were "one of the last," whereas George describes them as "one of the most." We might explain these differences by considering the goals and interests that motivated each author. Marsh criticizes Michael later in his book for alienating himself from the black community and neglecting his roots in black culture; by emphasizing the fact that Michael was one of the last to participate in the chitlin' circuit before white audiences began appropriating black music, Marsh underscores his perception of Michael as someone who abandoned his racial identity. On the other hand, George tries in his books to demonstrate how closely-tied to the black community Michael remained throughout his life. Especially in his later publication, George seems to argue against Marsh's claim that Michael lost touch with his cultural heritage, at least when it came to the music: because his second book focuses entirely on the musical history of Michael Jackson, George does not delve Michael's personal life the way that Marsh does. Whereas Marsh explains the influence of the social context on Michael's career in terms of loss and distance, George explains the same influence in terms of continuity.

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[101]Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 34.
[102]Ibid., 34.

Considering the descriptions of Michael's early years that George and Marsh provide, it may come as no surprise that that the first biography written on the Jackson 5 describes the group as the "first black teen act to make it big on the Motown soul circuit" and the "first family group to make it big in the nation's pop music business."[103] Somewhat like Marsh, Motoviloff suggests a significant aspect of the Jackson 5's success was their ability to transcend America's cultural segregation by receiving attention from both black *and* white audiences. However, Motoviloff does not share Marsh's pessimism over this transcendence, most likely because she wrote her book long before the public began to criticize Michael's career choices; the fact that her book was intended for teens (who are presumably less interested in the social ramifications of Michael's music) might explain the difference in tone as well. Interestingly, other authors who published their books after Marsh seem to corroborate Motoviloff's assessment of the Jackson 5. According to Taraborrelli, "The Jackson 5 sound presented a wholesome, non-threatening soul music, easily digested and readily accepted by all races of record buyers."[104] Likewise, Andersen writes that nearly ten thousand fans flocked to London's Heathrow Airport when the boys arrived in 1972 to launch their first European tour. According to Andersen, the frenzied mob "ripped their shirts, yanked handfuls of hair out of their heads, and even stole their shoes," with similar episodes occurring in Paris, Munich, Frankfurt, and Brussels.[105] When taken together out of context, the accounts offered by Taraborrelli and Andersen portray the Jackson 5 as a group that transgressed racial boundaries in America and national boundaries overseas; thus,

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[103] Ellen Motoviloff, *The Jackson 5* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1972), 7.

[104] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 62.

[105] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 52. He continues, "The most horrifying moment came when fans yanked at both ends of the scarf that was wrapped around Michael's neck. He was nearly strangled before a fast-thinking chauffer shoved the girls out of the way and literally tossed Michael headfirst into the car." Taraborrelli retells the same story in his biography. Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 100.

these authors seem to illustrate two different expressions of sublimity: otherness in terms of race, and otherness in terms of nationality. However, when we situate Andersen's observations within the broader context of his book (which repeatedly criticizes the fanaticism of Michael's audience) it becomes clearer that Andersen is less interested in demonstrating how the Jackson 5 transcended national boundaries, and more interested in pointing out the dangers of over-zealous fans.

Interestingly, some of these same biographers suggest that the clearest indication of the Jackson 5's "crossover"[106] success might not be their music, as Motoviloff suggests. Although Taraborrelli describes their music as "readily accepted by all races of record buyers," he also insists that despite their success and good looks, "The Jackson 5 could never be perceived as teen idols in those [white teen] magazines," and even though "the Jacksons would make the occasional appearances in magazines like *16* and *Fave*, the Osmonds and other white stars like them dominated the pages of such publications."[107] To explain these differences, we might presume an ideological chasm separated teen magazine publishers from their audience: just because the publishers discriminated against black teen stars does not mean white teens did as well. Or, we might turn to another biography in order to make sense of Taraborrelli's claims, for George makes an observation that may explain how the Jackson 5 was both accepted and rejected by white audiences.

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[106] According to Marsh, the term "crossover" in the record business refers to one who tries "to take a record and cross it over from the black market, radio, and charts to the pop ones. But (though I'm sure nobody realizes it) 'crossover' has gospel roots as surely as rock & roll does. It evokes the whole idea of getting over the River Jordan into the Promised Land. (Gospel singer Sallie Martin even has a song called 'Crossing Over')." In the context of the 1980s music industry, Marsh thinks crossover "implied that there was a boundary that needed to be breached," and "hinted that maybe there was no easy way back once you'd made the move to the other side." Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 203.

[107] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 87.

According to George, *The Jackson 5ive*, a cartoon series that aired on Saturday mornings from 1971-1973, "just as much as the songs, helped invest my generation in Michael, so that when he went solo, many white folks, as well as black, had spent part of their childhood connected to him."[108] In his view, the cartoon series introduced Michael to white as well as black viewers, neither of which had ever encountered such a talented and sublimely successful black youth, rendering Michael more familiar to these audiences. While the Jackson 5 may have been prohibited from the covers of white teen magazines, George claims they nevertheless reached a white audience through television. Moreover, George suggests that the cartoon transformed Michael in the mind of white America into an uncanny figure who was both familiar (because white audiences had grown up knowing his music) and unfamiliar (because he was not white). In fact, George portrays the Jackson 5 (and perhaps more specifically, the *The Jackson 5ive*) as a group that groomed white audiences for the total crossover explosion[109] that Michael's solo career later inaugurated so that by the time Michael began his solo career in the 1980s, he was not simply an unprecedented black talent in the pop music world—in other words, he was not simply sublime.

According to various biographers, Michael repeated the crossover-via-television that resulted from *The Jackson 5ive* with his music videos, though they explain this crossover somewhat differently. For instance, while describing the significance of his popularity in the 1980s, Taraborrelli insists that during the release of *Thriller*, the American music industry

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[108]George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 43-44.

[109]Ibid., 165. This might seem like a bold statement, but as George points out, "It's worth taking a step back to look at the pop culture landscape Michael now ruled. Today we accept as given that black performers can easily become global pop figures. But Michael was the harbinger." Therefore, to understand more completely his impact on American popular culture, the social environment out of which Michael's solo career developed must be contextualized by sources outside of his biographies.

remained as culturally segregated as it was decades earlier, even after the development of new artistic media, like music videos.[110] George, however, thinks this cultural segregation and discrimination went both ways. As he writes in his 2010 biography, "the casual music segregation was cemented by radio programmers and consultants in the 1970s. The idea that black bands didn't play rock became a self-fulfilling prophecy because record labels were reluctant to sign black rockers."[111] George says a similar discrimination occurred on black radio station playlists because they included few black rock tracks, and absolutely none by white artists. Still, George asserts that the Music Television (MTV) cable network catered primarily to a white audience, and although it did not outright refuse to air black videos, MTV thought its audience was only interested in rock or new music videos, and almost no black performers fit that category.[112] The author then tells a story about how Michael and his managers approached MTV with the videos for *Beat It* and *Billie Jean,* and how MTV refused to air them at first, even though the songs were already number-one hits. Here George employs the language of sublimity to suggest why MTV rejected the videos at first: *Beat It* and *Billie Jean* transgressed MTV's categories—or rather, they did not fit into any category.

In comparison, Marsh also focuses on race when he tells the same story, though his version goes somewhat differently. Though he mentions the racial prejudice of MTV executives as well, quoting MTV's president Robert Pittman as saying, "Black and white music has always been separate,"[113] he does not indicate that the executives were repulsed by the thought of airing *Beat It*. Instead, Marsh says they refused to play *Billie Jean*, which he describes as "beautifully

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[110] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 247-48.
[111] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 117-18.
[112] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 114.
[113] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 215.

photographed… perfectly paced, surprisingly rare among music videos, and narratively coherent, more uncommon among both videos and Michael Jackson creations than it ought to be."[114] Marsh also says *Billie Jean* presented Michael, "for the first time, as a creature with personal magic—in no way are his powers ascribed to an outside force."[115] In other words, Marsh thinks *Billie Jean* presented Michael as sublime, a force of mysterious otherness. Perhaps to underscore the importance of this video, Marsh then notes how *Billie Jean* opened MTV's doors for other black artists—"about 10 percent of the clips the channel aired were by black artists"—though the author also points out that the clips were shown infrequently and often "in the dead of night."[116] However, while *Billie Jean* might have been the first video Michael released that exposed the racial prejudice of MTV, Marsh suggests that *Beat It* also had "an explosive effect" on television viewers after it aired on "a segregated cable channel."[117] Much like George, Marsh suggests that both videos worked to desegregated MTV; the similarity in this aspect of their accounts might have to do with the fact that the books cited here were published only one year apart from each other, and the social responses to these videos did not change dramatically during this time period. It might be interesting to compare these texts with other biographies—especially those published after Michael's death—to see if they characterize these videos in the same way, or if perceptions of racial inequality in the 1980s have changed over time.

Looking at Marsh's description of *Beat It*, we see him using the language of sublimity to emphasize racial differences once again. As he narrates the plot of the video, he specifically points out how Michael "cools the war" between racially-divided rival street gangs—"One gang

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[114] Ibid., 216.
[115] Ibid., 217.
[116] Ibid., 218.
[117] Ibid., 220.

is white. The other is black."[118] According to Marsh, viewers did not know what to think of black

man stopping a knife-fight between racially-divided street gangs with song and dance: "Michael

might have seemed exotic in any context, but in this all-white environment, he was practically

coming from another planet."[119] Marsh's description of Michael as "practically coming from

another planet" becomes particularly intriguing when we consider Michael's *Black or White*

video, during which he travels the world and dances in different cultural settings. Instead of

"coming from another planet," Michael appears to come from the entire planet as he performs

traditional dances from different parts of the world, a theme which his biographers repeat in their

texts as well.

In comparison to Marsh, Andersen claims that MTV first objected to playing *Beat It*

because of "its menacing theme of black urban violence and gang warfare".[120] Like Marsh,

Andersen suggests that *Beat It* evoked the sense of mysterious otherness, though in a much

different way: the descriptions that Andersen provides for the video and its reactions are

undeniably more negative than the way Marsh describes them. Whereas Andersen suggests the

theme of *Beat It* threatened the norms and values of the cable network, Marsh claims the video

baffled audiences because Michael appeared to come "from another planet," one that was black

instead of white. Yet if we also consider Marsh's earlier characterization of Michael as one of

the last black artists to participate in the "chitlin' circuit" before black style was assimilated into

white popular culture, it is possible Marsh meant that Michael seemed alien to black audiences as

well. Indeed, Marsh portrays Michael as one who transgressed socio-economic boundaries and

inspired others to believe that "you can come out of the ghetto and if you have the energy, you

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[118] Ibid., 219.
[119]Ibid., 220.

can do anything. It's the American dream."[121] By this account, it seems Michael finally achieved

what he and his family had aspired for back in Gary: the ability to surpass the limitations of their

black working-class existence. However, this is not to say that the American public universally

praised Michael's crossover success; there are both positive and negative examples of the

polemical responses to Michael's racial hybridity which will be presented later.

Marsh's version of the story corroborates the views of other biographers who portray

Michael as inaugurating the racial metamorphosis of MTV (and pop music more broadly) into a

hybrid of black and white music videos. Indeed, Taraborrelli makes this very suggestion when he

asserts that black artists receive more airtime today "mostly as a result of the Michael Jackson

breakthrough so many years ago."[122] George makes a similar assertion, and some of the artists he

mentions as specifically benefiting from this breakthrough include Price, Nile Rodgers,

Sylvester, and Bob Marley.[123] However, in his later publication, George concedes that while the

music video for "Beat It" might have challenged the cultural segregation of white and black

audiences, "the song did not open the floodgates for black rock," although he admits "the

acceptance of 'Beat It' in particular, and *Thriller* overall, made it easier for America to accept

Prince, an androgynous cult figure, as a pop star."[124] George's concession provides a prime

example of change in social context influencing the story: whereas earlier biographers portray

Michael as someone who dramatically de-segregated the music industry, his influence is more

subtle in later biographies.

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[120] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 117.
[121] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 225.
[122]Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 248.
[123] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 114.
[124] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 122. Interestingly, George says nothing about Michael familiarizing America with Prince's race, claiming instead that his gender (or lack thereof) appeared more familiar.

Although these biographies characterize Michael in terms of racial hybridity, they narrate how others responded to this hybridity in different ways. Taraborrelli writes that "to many listeners—whites, blacks, highbrows, heavy metal fans, teenyboppers, parents—*Thriller* was the perfect album.… This achievement made Michael more than a hero; the music industry promoted him to higher ground, almost sainthood."[125] Here Taraborrelli clearly wants the reader to think that the public embraced Michael's racial hybridity and admired him for transcending racial boundaries. Yet the author also includes comments from those who reproached Michael's racial hybridity. For example, Taraborrelli writes that Don King chided Michael in 1984 by saying, "What Michael's got to realize is that Michael's a nigger. It doesn't matter how great he can sing and dance.… He's one of the megastars of the world, but he's still going to be a nigger megastar. He must accept that. Not only must he understand that, he's got to accept it and demonstrate that he wants to be a nigger. Why? To show that a nigger can do it."[126] Although Taraborrelli does not indicate why King considered Michael to be a "nigger," nor does King explain why he believed Michael had failed to identify himself as such; instead, the reader is forced to presume that King thought Michael wanted to distance himself from the black community in favor of his new white audience. According to Andersen, this is exactly what the Soviet government thought about Michael: "The Kremlin denounced him as 'a singer who sold his black soul for white profit and is serving the Reagan administration by keeping the American public's mind off the country's problems.' Michael's music, was, of course, banned in the Soviet Union."[127] Like Taraborrelli, Andersen does not substantiate his quotation with background

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[125] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 227.
[126]Ibid., 320.
[127]Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 165.

information as to what compelled the Kremlin to release these statements; more research would

be required before any accurate assessment of the statements could be made.

Perhaps most interesting is the way Marsh describes responses to Michael's racial

hybridity. On the one hand, Marsh reports that some people praised Michael, such as former

program director of New York's WNEW-FM Charlie Kendall, who described Michael as "mass

culture, not pop culture—he appeals to everybody. No one can deny that he's got a tremendous

voice and plenty of style and that he can dance like a demon. He appeals to all ages and he

appeals to every kind of pop listener. This kind of performer comes once in a generation."[128] In

this sense, Michael is a hybrid because he combines the interests of everybody into a single form

of entertainment. Marsh describes Michael in a similar way when he writes, "His appeal crossed

lines and smashed barriers…. In early 1984, then, Michael Jackson was more than a star—he

looked like a certified pop culture hero."[129] Here Marsh portrays Michael as someone who was

admired for eliminating racial boundaries and unifying different cultural styles into a single

product.

Yet on the other hand, the author provides a more thorough justification for his own

condemnation of Michael's racial hybridity than the individuals quoted by Andersen and

Taraborrelli. In a letter-chapter of his book, Marsh tries to explain the negative response to

Michael's racial hybridity by discussing an article written by James Baldwin, who said, "The

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[128]Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 225.
[129]Ibid., 2. The entire paragraph deserves repeating: "His appeal crossed lines and smashed barriers. 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 the other pioneers of rock & roll. Michael Jackson's music brought black sounds and 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. His triumph over apartheid broadcasting was personal and transitory, but it left a lasting residual effect. In early 1984, then, Michael Jackson was more than a star—he looked like a certified pop culture hero."

Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all."[130] Marsh situates

this statement within Baldwin's broader discussion of "freaks," a category which Marsh uses to

describe "a person who is black, poor, gay, or who in any other way fails to fulfill the strict

demographic definition of the ideal consumer of corporate products [who] is now constantly

bombarded with messages that say he has no place in America."[131] In other words, a freak is

someone who makes "an attempt to fit in, despite rules that say that a person who lacks certain

equipment, or bears certain burdens, does not fit." With this definition in mind, Marsh suggests

that "the Michael Jackson cacophony" is actually about everyone who "does not fit," which

explains why Michael achieved such mass appeal: "One key to your fame is that you fit the

model of the outcast well enough to make other 'freaks' identify and want to help you along."[132]

Notice here how Marsh identifies different responses to Michael's racial hybridity: there are

those who ostracize him by labeling him a "freak," and there are those who personally identify

with his freakishness. Yet as stated before, a proper analysis of this polemical debate exceeds the

aims of this paper, and so the most important thing to remember is that those who cross

boundaries are not always well-received; while hybrids sometimes are embraced as harbingers of

righteousness, other times they are seen as abominations. Although Marsh acknowledges that

Michael "united an audience of almost unprecedented diversity and forced blacks and whites,

rich and poor, young and old, boys and girls, and all the rest, to recognize each other for an

instant," the author seems to recant his observation when he suggests, "But maybe that was just

wishful thinking. Maybe *Thriller* just let everyone go on about their business, reinforcing their

opinion of themselves as open and liberal good guys because they'd bought some black dude's

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[130] Ibid., 201.
[131] Ibid., 201.
[132] Ibid., 201-02.

record while walking right by a dozen daily instances of racism that should have touched their lives."[133] For the remainder of the chapter, Marsh explains why he thinks *Thriller* actually had a negative impact on history, and why Michael's triumph over "broadcasting apartheid" was really just a triumph of economic profit.

Reactions to "Reconstructed Signatures" and Racial Hybridity

Especially in later publications, Michael's biographers write that around the same time he began to transcend racial boundaries in the music industry, his physical features started to undergo a dramatic metamorphosis. According to George, Michael's visual image significantly changed shortly after the release of *Off the Wall*; at this time, "the young man of Negroid features now appears with a slicker, almost European visage. His nose has become long and sleek; his eyes appear as trim ovals that seem wider than before."[134] Like George, Marsh also depicts changes to Michael's face in terms of race, even though his biography was published before Michael's skin noticeably lightened in the late 1980s. Marsh concludes that "Michael had cosmetic surgery to give himself a thinner, less Negro nose (He continued to make statements about his pride in black culture, however)."[135] Marsh's parenthetical comment alludes to the controversies over Michael's cosmetic changes that would continue throughout his lifetime, as both his fans and critics constantly speculated about possible motives he had for changing his facial features. In fact, George and Andersen provide a clear example of the kind of speculation that also portrays Michael asserting his pride in black culture. Moreover, the example that follows might also demonstrate how texts build off each other to construct their stories as well—

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[133] Ibid., 205.
[134] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 96.

though it should be clear that the story told by George was published *after* Andersen's

biography.

George recounts Michael's first experience in Africa that occurred in 1974 while he was

touring with the Jackson 5. George writes that Michael "felt a swelling sense of racial pride"

while he was there, and quotes Michael as saying, "I always thought that blacks, as far as

artistry, were the most talented race on earth. But when I went to Africa, I was even more

convinced…I don't want the blacks to ever forget that this is where we come from and where our

music comes from. I want us to remember."[136] By including this quotation from Michael in his

book, George emphasizes Michael's identity with black culture while he notes elsewhere in his

book how many people started to question Michael's racial identity in the latter years of his life.

In turn, Andersen claims that Michael wanted to recreate and document this exact experience for

a planned *Return to Africa* video. In the story told by Andersen, which is not prefaced with a

detailed account of Michael's visit almost twenty years earlier, Michael traveled to Africa in

1992 for his *Dangerous* concert world tour. While he was there, Andersen says the trip "might

have been one of the biggest public relations coups in Michael's career,"[137] if not for the way

Michael consistently held his nose throughout the trip, which outraged many locals who assumed

that Michael was offended by smells of Africa and its people. Andersen includes a quotation

from an editorial in Gabon's leading newspaper, which offered a scathing response to Michael's

behavior: "The American sacred beast took it upon himself to remind us that we are

underdeveloped and impure… And this re-created, bleached being who is neither white nor

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[135]Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 186.
[136] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 91-92.
[137] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 305.

black, neither a man nor a woman—is too delicate, too frail, to inhale."[138] The editorial cited by

Andersen characterizes Michael as a hybrid who evoked a sense of mysterious otherness by

combining racial and gender categories that normally are separate. They also touch on a tension

between the Original Michael and the Other Michael who has been "re-created," a tension which

will be discussed in greater detail throughout Section Four. Interestingly, Andersen offers an

alternative hypothesis for Michael's habit: "Plastic surgeons theorized that his nose had been

packed to keep it from sagging and that stitches inside may have been causing his nose to

itch."[139] As we can see, questions surrounding Michael's racial identity also fueled speculations

about his physical metamorphosis (via cosmetic surgery).

Of all the biographers analyzed here, Andersen is one of the authors most interested in

Michael's physical metamorphosis. Later in his book, Andersen reports that Michael underwent

cosmetic surgery in 1986 to put "a masculine-looking Kirk Douglas cleft" in his chin and apply

permanent eyeliner.[140] By claiming Michael underwent two procedures—one to look more

masculine and the other to look more feminine—Andersen underscores his opinion that Michael

appeared increasingly androgynous over time, which he points out frequently throughout his

book. Later Andersen documents the full range of surgeries Michael allegedly underwent by

1995. In addition to the procedures already mentioned, Andersen claims that he had "several

face-lifts, fat suctioned from his cheeks, his upper lip thinned, bone grafts on his cheeks and jaw

to add definition to the contours of his face, a 'forehead lift' to smooth his skin and raise his

eyebrows, and several jobs to remove the bags and crow's-feet."[141] He also speculates that

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[138] Ibid., 305.
[139] Ibid., 305.
[140] Ibid., 206.
[141] Ibid., 306-07.

Michael never wore pants that exposed his legs because he did not lighten them and thus "was

not eager for the public to see the startling contrast between his pale face and his original skin

color."[142] Here Andersen suggests that Michael physically was a literal hybrid, half-black and

half-white.

While other biographers also speculate the extent of Michael's cosmetic surgery,

Taraborrelli thinks that "trying to actually detail the work Michael had had done is simply not

possible; only he and his surgeons can fully document the extent of it—and it also seems, at least

to people who know him well, that he truly doesn't remember it all."[143] However, Taraborrelli

recalls noticing in 1986 that Michael's skin "seemed to be getting lighter with each passing

day.… In truth, Michael Jackson had begun looking more than a little unusual. It was difficult to

be in the same room with him and not stare in disbelief, especially if you had known him since

he was a child."[144] Taraborelli's recollection is especially revealing for a number of reasons.

First, his comments suggest a tension had developed in his perception of Michael, whose

"original" appearance looked dramatically different from his new "other" visage.[145] Tatiana Y.

Thumbtzen makes use of similar tropes when she writes, "Through the years, the more Michael's

face 'changed,' the more people compared him to me…. How do you compare the face someone

was born with to someone who has chosen to reconstruct their 'signature' to the world; their

face?"[146] Considering her own struggles with racial ambiguity, Thumbtzen's comment is

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[142] Ibid., 301.

[143] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 437. The author continues, "If one truly contemplates and reviews the challenges he has faced with his appearance, the fact that Michael Jackson is ever able to muster the self-confidence to make well-scrutinized, public appearances seems almost a miracle."

[144] Ibid., 351.

[145] In the final section of this chapter, I will explore how the tension between "original" and "other" plays out in other aspects of Michael's life, not just in regards to his physical features.

[146] Tatiana Y. Thumbtzen and Tonia Ryan, *The Way He Made Me Feel* (United States: WII Books, 2005), 19.

especially compelling. She describes her heritage as "a melting pot of cultures that include Irish, Black, and Native American," and recalls various moments throughout her life when others discriminated against her ethnic hybridity.[147] Regardless, Both Thumbtzen and Tarraborrelli profess difficulty in accepting the physical metamorphosis of Michael into something "other" than his "original" appearance.

Second, Taraborrelli includes the language of the sublime and the uncanny in his description of Michael's physical metamorphosis. Besides struggling to accept Michael's physical metamorphosis, Taraborrelli indicates he also experienced a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to Michael's image when the author recalls how his fixation on Michael's face also compelled the author to leave the room. Moreover, his description of Michael's appearance in 1986 portrays Michael as a figure that Taraborrelli considered to be increasingly sublime. According to the author, it had become difficult to understand the changes in Michael's appearance—not so much the motives, but rather the reality of these changes. Indeed, his comparison to Michael as a child suggests that Taraborrelli struggled primarily to recognize anything familiar in Michael's appearance. The biographer's disbelief stems not from an inability to understand how the physical changes could occur, but rather from an inability to believe Michael remained the same when he looked so different. By altering his facial features and lightening his skin, Michael transgressed the physical boundaries that confined his appearance to "Negroid" features.

At the same time Michael's physical appearance grew "less black" (if not "more white"), Taraborrelli says the public started to view Michael's music the same way, especially when it

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[147] Ibid., 23.

came to the title track and accompanying video for his 1987 *Bad* album. Curiously, Taraborrelli

says nothing to indicate that Michael's physical appearance influenced the negative reactions to

Bad. Instead, Taraborrelli suggests that of most criticism *Bad* received resulted from the failure

of the song and video to reflect black style. As Taraborrelli writes, Michael's fans felt the song

"was a lightweight attempt at a serious, black music," and this was especially disappointing

because many thought Michael had a musical background that was deeply steeped in soul and

R&B.[148] Even though it was inspired by the true story of Edmund Perry, Taraborrelli writes that

many black viewers felt the concept behind the video for "Bad" was remarkably out of touch.

The video opens with a neighborhood thug (played by Wesley Snipes) harassing Michael for

choosing school over the streets; after Snipes challenges Michael to prove his toughness,

Michael transforms out of a humble grey hoodie and into "black boots with silver heels and

buckles; a leather jacket with zippers, zippers, and more zippers; a metal-studded wristband and

a wide belt with silver studs and chains." [149] In this "ridiculous-looking outfit," Taraborrelli dryly

points out, "Michael was slightly overdressed for the ghetto."[150] Taraborrelli then presents

himself as a speaker for the black community when he asks, "Is 'Bad' the funkiest—the

blackest—he could get?" [151] Though it is unclear whether black Americans actually asked

themselves this question, Tarborrelli seems to think he has verbalized their concerns. According

to Taraborrelli's account, *Bad* indicated that, to many, Michael no longer identified with the

black urban experience from which he came, and so he appeared less familiar to those who

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[148] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 370.
[149] Ibid., 371.
[150] Ibid., 371.
[151] Ibid., 370.

previously celebrated his black style.[152] In other words, Taraborrelli claims that the black

community shared his perception of Michael as someone who was less uncanny (because he was

less familiar) and more sublime (because he was more unfamiliar). Even if we accept

Taraborrelli's claim, however, we must not assume these reactions stem from the same reasons.

Because the black community does not share the same cultural context as Taraborrelli (who is

not black), the changes in their reactions to Michael cannot be the same: whereas the loss of

Michael's "original" appearance solicits awe from Taraborrelli, the loss of Michael's "black"

identity solicits awe from certain members of the black community.

Nelson George also mentions polemical debates over Michael's physical appearance. "In

his early videos," George writes, "Michael's touch, his very presence, could transform reality

and bring order to chaos. Now his body itself would be transformed. Though after his death the

African American community closed ranks around his memory, back in the late 1980s Michael's

skin tone changes made him a lightning rod for criticism from pulpits to barbershops."[153] There

are a couple of important observations to be made here. First, notice how George explicitly uses

the language of metamorphosis when he says that Michael "could transform reality and bring

order to chaos" in his early videos. Notice his use of this language again when he says Michael's

body was "transformed" in the late 1980s. Second, and somewhat related to the previous

observation, consider the way George describes the African American community's response to

Michael's physical transformation. George suggests that in the late 1980s, many African

Americans did not view Michael and the changes in his appearance favorably and yet after his

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[152] While it may come as no surprise that Michael received considerable criticism from members of the black community at this time, other fans embraced his transformation out of an explicitly black style. For more on the polemics that surround Michael's racial metamorphosis, see the conclusion.
[153] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 184.

death members of this same community "closed ranks around his memory." Thus, George characterizes the reactions of the African American community in terms of transformation as well, and in doing so he demonstrates for us how a community might change its polemical position over time.

In comparison, George also states, "There's a strong argument to be made that without these cosmetic changes, Michael would not have been the global star he became, that the consistent lightening of his face throughout the 1980s was a huge part of what made him most palatable to non-Americans."[154] It appears that the same aspect of Michael's life (i.e., his physical appearance) functions differently in certain communities, a point that is underscored by the author when he writes:

> Although Americans, white as well as black, were obsessed with the radical
> changes in his appearance, the international audiences that passionately supported
> him, and continue to do so to this day, accepted Michael's white face in a way
> that Americans never have. Many African Americans saw his changing color as a
> sign of betrayal, of self-hate. White American detractors viewed him as a freak
> (e.g. 'Wacko Jacko') whose skin lightening was another example of his
> weirdness. The rest of the world was both less judgmental and more open-
> minded…Unaffected by America's tortured racial history, global ticket buyers
> would come to view the post-*Thriller* Michael as the one who truly mattered.[155]

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[154] Ibid., 163.
[155] Ibid., 163.

George identifies three communities in this quotation: "African Americans," "White Americans," and "the rest of the world." Each of these communities responded quite differently to the changes in Michael's skin tone, and George even posits why these differences exist when he notes how Michael's fans overseas do not share "America's tortured racial history"—that is, they live in a completely different socio-historical context.

George emphasizes the significance of context once again when he compares his own reaction to Michael's appearance with that of his nine-year-old son, Zuri. Whereas Zuri wanted to emulate "two Michael Jacksons, one black, one white, and Zuri, himself dark brown, loved them both," George admits that he grew up knowing Michael "only as a black child and later was disturbed by his transformations."[156] Much like Michael's fans overseas, George thinks his son can embrace the fluidity of Michael's racial identity because Zuri is "unburdened by America's nasty racial history."[157] As is the case with stories about saints and monsters, "Context changes meaning, sometimes elevating certain elements of a tale and, just as often, rendering others moot," and so the meaning of Michael Jackson "can be as fluid as the dance moves he made famous."[158] Finally, George concludes the paragraph by identifying additional polemical factions that contest the significance of the star: "Despite the legal claims of his estate, the fanatical devotion of his most fervent fans, and those who think race doesn't matter (and others who know it does), the 'meaning' of Michael Jackson isn't owned by anyone."[159] It seems that according to this author, there is something at stake for almost everyone when it comes to defining Michael Jackson, whether they know it or not.

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[156]Ibid., 12.
[157]Ibid., 12.
[158] Ibid., 12-13.
[159] Ibid., 13.

"I'm Not Gonna Spend My Life Being a Color": Transcending Racial Categories

According to his biographers, the ambiguities surrounding Michael's racial identity grew

increasingly complex in the 1990s. For instance, Andersen reports that Michael hired a

presumably white Australian boy to play the child version of Michael in a 1993 Pepsi

commercial. "To play the part," Andersen writes, "the light-skinned [Wade] Robson put on an

Afro wig, his skin color was darkened using computerized colorization, and a top artist was hired

to superimpose the real Michael's childhood features over Robson's for the close-ups. The result:

a younger Michael whose features seemed to correspond with the more delicate-boned, Kabuki-

white Michael of 1993."[160] Bob Jones claims a similar situation almost occurred during the

filming of Michael's _They Don't Really Care About Us_ video when "Michael wanted to paint

some middle class Italian kids and use them in the video. Director Spike Lee had to talk him out

of it, telling the King that he'd be run out of Rio if he did such a thing."[161] In both accounts,

Michael outright transgresses racial boundaries by altering the physical features of others, just as

he did with his own appearance.[162] Similarly, Silke Milpauer, a German fan who met Michael in

1993, depicts Michael as sublime when she recalls her experience of Michael's physical features:

"I was too mesmerized by his incredibly dark eyes which formed such a strong contrast to his

fine, pale features. His complexion didn't seem to be that of a white person, but lighter than that.

I have never seen anything comparable to this. His face was symmetric and smooth like

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[160]Andersen, _Michael Jackson Unauthorized_, 316.
[161]Bob Jones and Stacy Brown, _Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask_ (New York: Select Books, 2009), 54-55.
[162] In a slightly similar situation, Shaun Redfern recalls that his local newspaper wrote a front page, full-color feature on his experience of attending Michael's 1988 _Bad_ tour. According to Redfern, the newspaper asked him to darken his skin "even though at the time everybody was going mad about Michael's skin going lighter. I enjoyed doing it as I hoped Michael Jackson would see it!" Redfern's experience provides another example of Michael inspiring others to transgress racial boundaries, though he does so less directly in this situation. Brigitte Bloemen, et al, _It's All About_

porcelain."[163] By her account, Michael not only transcended racial boundaries, he exterminated them, and this struck her with a sense of awe and wonder. First the embodiment of blackness, then a hybrid of black and white, Michael now metamorphosed beyond any racial categorization whatsoever.

Because racial categories are so deeply ingrained in our social consciousness, a world of total racial ambiguity might seem downright incomprehensible. Yet according to George, Michael endeavored to live in such a world throughout most of his adult life. Consider how George explains the philosophy behind the peacock image that is featured on the back of cover of The Jacksons' 1978 *Destiny* album. Based on a direct quote from Michael, George asserts that Michael personally selected this image because "the peacock is the only bird that integrates all the colors into one. It can only produce this radiance of fire when it is in love. And that is what we are trying to represent through our music. To bring all races together through love."[164] Thus, long before he began to change his physical appearance, George characterizes Michael as someone who envisioned his work to be a hybridizing force that united all the world's races in harmony. The author includes a similar quotation that Michael supposedly gave years later after his father admitted to hiring Ron Weinsner and Freddy DeMann to manage The Jacksons because he believed at the time that he "needed white input in dealing with the corporate structure at CBS and thought they'd be able to help." [165] In response, Michael released the following prepared statement: "I happen to be color-blind. I don't hire color; I hire competence. The individual can be of my organization, and I have the final word on every decision. Racism is

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L.O.V.E.: Michael Jackson Stories You Were Never Meant to Hear (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH, 2010), 94.
[163]Ibid., 422.
[164]George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 75-76.

not my motto. One day I strongly expect every color to live as one family."[166] By including these quotations from Michael, George presents his account as if it were direct fact; instead of relying on the perceptions of others, George provides the reader with a self-perception that comes directly from the source.

Although Bob Jones seems to corroborate these portrayals of Michael as colorblind when he writes, "Any time he hired someone or agreed to work with someone, his excuse for not going with a black candidate for the job would always be that he was only seeking the best qualified—regardless of skin color," Jones quickly clarifies that he did not know Michael to be colorblind at all.[167] Instead, these authors describe Michael as "the weirdest and most inexplicable of racists" who not only wanted to "*look* different, but also *be* different from every black man in the universe. He wanted to return to his childhood and relive it as a white boy. What set him apart from your ordinary delusional character was that Michael Jackson did just that."[168] Here Jones portrays Michael as someone who wants to transcend racial boundaries, though in a much different sense than George. George imagines Michael as someone who not only transcends racial boundaries; according to George, Michael outright rejects them because he is "color-blind." In other words, George constructs an image of Michael where racial boundaries no longer exist. Jones, on the other hand, imagines Michael as someone who transcends the boundary of his particular race and replaces them with the boundaries of another, effectively trading his black identity for a white one. As these examples show, authors who employ the language of sublimity

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[165]Ibid., 115.
[166]Ibid., 115.
[167] Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*, 45.
[168] Ibid., 46-47.

do not necessarily use it in the same way, which might explain why it is difficult to distinguish the differences between some saints and monsters and not others.

Perhaps in contradiction to Jones's assertion that Michael was racist, Rabbi Shmuley provides transcripts from conversations he shared with Michael in which they discuss racism, religion, and anti-Semitism. Rabbi Shmuley prefaces the transcript excerpt by acknowledging the heavy criticism Michael that received for his use "kike" in his song, "They Don't Really Care about Us." He insists, however, that Michael "always demonstrated the highest respect for Jews and Judaism in his presence," and includes the portion of their conversation where Michael directly explains why he included the derogatory term in his lyrics: to give a voice to those who "had been bastardized" and "treated unjustly."[169] Note how Rabbi Shmuley uses the same approach as George by relying on what he alleges are direct quotations. Furthermore, Michael purportedly characterized himself once again in hybrid terms during these conversations, saying:

> I love the Jewish babies and the German babies and the Asian and the Russians. We are all the same and I have the perfect hypothesis to prove it. I play to all those countries and they cry in all the same places in my show. They laugh in the same places. They become hysterical in the same places. They faint in the same places and that's the perfect hypothesis. There is a commonality that we are all the same…. They are wonderful. I feel like a person of the world. I can't take sides. That's why I hate saying, "I am an American." For that reason.[170]

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[169] Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation* (New York: Vanguard Press, 2009), 121.
[170] Ibid., 122-23.

Though it is not clear whether Rabbi Shmuley agrees with this "hypothesis," in the broader

context of his book these quotations serve to explain why the author did not believe that Michael

was racist or anti-Semitic. By including this quotation, Rabbi Shmuley depicts Michael's

concerts as arenas of hybridity, uniting races and nationalities in a common bond based on their

love for him and his music. In fact, it appears Michael perceived his own body as the site of this

hybridity when he says, "I feel like a person of the world. I can't take sides." According to these

transcripts, Michael thought he united different parts of the world without favoring one over the

other. He also extends this hybridity to his fans, for they too "are all the same,"[171] and he admits

responding to their hybridity with a sense of awe and wonder. Thus, Michael also defines the

world in explicitly uncanny terms: though his fans are different (otherwise he would not make

distinctions between Jewish and German babies), there is nevertheless "a commonality" that

unites them in the single body of the human race.

So far Jones seems to have questioned the honesty of the statements that George includes

in his text, and in turn Rabbi Shmuley seems to challenge the claims made by Jones. Andersen

complicates their portrayals even further when he discusses the release of Michael's *Black or*

White music video. [172] The song is an anthem for racial equality, and the video reinforces this

message with various visual effects. According to Andersen, *The New York Times* said that *Black*

or White had been "longer awaited, it seemed, than anything without theological

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[171] Sandra Mojas seems to endorse this idea when she writes, "Of varied ages, races, nations…backgrounds, sensibilities, and forms of expression…his supporters represent different elements of Michael Jackson. They are diverse and multi-faceted, but at the same time, one, in the light that testifies on his behalf." Bloemen, *It's All About L.O.V.E.: Michael Jackson Stories You Were Never Meant to Hear*, 350.

[172] Curiously, Taraborrelli says in his book that the title of the song is "Black *and* White" (emphasis added). Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 531. Either way, Michael makes his "colorblind" self-perception abundantly clear in the lyric, "I'm not going to spend my life being a color." For the complete lyrics to this song, see Appendix B.

implications."[173] The video opens with a plot line somewhat reminiscent of *Beat It*: Michael

interrupts an African nomadic tribe as they hunt a lion by engaging them in dance. Perhaps to

emphasize the theme of cultural unity, Michael blends his trademark poses with their traditional

steps before changing sets and joining Balinese dancers. As he travels the world in a similar

fashion, dancing with groups from various cultures, one can see almost no remaining traces of

Michael's darker complexion: his metamorphosis from black to white appears complete, a

suggestion that Andersen underscores by quoting the lyrics to a song entitled "Word to the

Badd," which was released by Michael's brother Jermaine the same week that *Black or White*

aired on television: "In 'Word to the Badd!' Jermain tells Michael to 'get a grip' and slams his

attempts to alter his appearance with plastic surgery and bleaching creams."[174] Returning to

video, Andersen points out how a theme of transformation continues at the end of the video,

when a sequence of ethnically-diverse models, each morphing to the one that follows, and so the

message here is clear: we all come from the same source. Finally, Andersen in particular uses the

language of metamorphosis to describe the video's epilogue, where "a black panther prowling a

deserted street suddenly 'morphs' into Jackson."[175] Michael dances aggressively on top of a car,

with numerous camera shots focusing closely on Michael as he moves his hand from his chest

down to his crotch. Once he finishes dancing, Michael smashes out the windows of the car with a

crowbar and returns to the form of the panther.[176] Interestingly, when Andersen describes the

public's response to the video, he only mentions the outrage of parents who felt the overtly-

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[173] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 298.

[174] Ibid., 300. The lyrics Andersen quotes are as follows: "Reconstructed / Been abducted / Don't know who you are … Once you were made / You changed your shade / Was your color wrong? / Could not turn back / It's a known fact / You were too far gone."

[175] Ibid., 297.

[176] A psychological interpretation of the symbolism in *Black or White* might suggest that although Michael connects externally with all races and ethnicities, internally he sometimes identifies with the black struggle for empowerment if we associate the panther in the video with the Black Panthers of the 1970s.

sexual tone of Michael's dance routine in the final scene was inappropriate for young viewers. [177] Although Andersen does not mention any positive reactions to the video, however, that does not mean the response was unanimous; all it means is that Andersen focused exclusively on one type of reaction to the video.

Without a doubt, the portrayals of Michael's racial identity have undergone a profound metamorphosis over the years; like the models in his *Black or White* video, Michael transformed his physical image and social presence from black to white. Looking at the responses to these transformations, we can see how the Michael's audience (that is, anyone who talked or wrote about him, both fan and critic alike) remained divided in their responses to Michael's racial hybridity and metamorphosis: while some people felt the "crossover" that he inaugurated was long overdue, others recoiled at the thought of blending racial categories, especially with regards to his physical body. Thus, Michael's racial identity marks one moment where his biographers contest the boundaries that divide sainthood and monstrosity. Moreover, by analyzing different portrayals of his racial hybridity and metamorphosis, I have pointed out how Michael's audience categorizes existence in terms of race and racial identity. Thinking about these categorizations not only helps to understand why Michael's biographies focus on certain aspects of his life more than others, but it also encourages us to consider how and why racial identity plays such an important role in the social imagination of Michael's audience, especially in America.

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[177] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 298-99.

SECTION THREE: "CHILDHOOD"

People say I'm not okay

'Cause I love such elementary things…

It's been my fate to compensate, for the

Childhood

I've never known…

In this section, my interpretation of the selected biographies focuses on issues surrounding the categorization of age and maturity. As in the previous section, my analysis proceeds chronologically and is divided into three sub-sections: the first will explore how Michael is portrayed in his youth as a hybrid blend of child and adult, the second will consider how depictions of this hybridity inverted once Michael reached adulthood, and the third focuses specifically on public reactions to his adult-child hybridity. However, because this particular theme is so complex and rich with information, the second and third sub-sections focus almost exclusively on the biographies written by Taraborrelli and Andersen; by narrowing my analysis in this way, I am able to provide a more nuanced analysis of the generational categories by which biographers portray Michael.

The Morphing Age: Traversing Generational Categories

As they recount Michael's youth, biographers often mention individuals who have described him as a blend of child and adult. On the one hand, they say, Michael looked like a normal child, and his performances resembled the stylized talent of famous adult performers who preceded him; yet on the other, those who saw his childhood performances had witnessed never

before a child who possessed such an "unearthly ability for capturing adult nuances."[178] For

instance, Taraborrelli recalls the astonishment of Motown staffers after watching Michael

perform Smokey Robinson's "Who's Loving You?" The writer claims that "as a singer and a

dancer, young Michael exuded a presence that was simply uncanny," and none of the staff

understood how the young boy could express the complex, adult emotions of that song so

convincingly.[179] Taraborrelli explicitly uses the language of the uncanny to suggest Michael's

physical form and artistic talent appeared familiar when considered independently; yet when

combined, Michael seemed utterly alien and thus embodied sameness-within-otherness.

Similarly, George describes Michael's ability to transcend the limitations of his age in uncanny

terms. For example, George claims that Bobby Taylor recalled thinking it "was weird and

wonderful to see this little kid singing like a sexy man,"[180] indicating that Michael solicited

reactions of awe and wonder from Taylor. George suggests that *Soul Train* host Don Cornelius

received a similar impression when he remarks, "At that time Michael was the closest thing to

James Brown you could find. Now, they were all fine performers, but to see a seven-year-old

with that kind of command was most impressive.'"[181] Later in the same text, George directly

associates others' attraction to Michael with his uncanniness when he claims that Michael's

"sweet, child's voice and dancing—that mix of James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and his own

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[178]Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 70.

[179]Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 65-66. Taraborelli also describes how Michael's performance of "Never Can Say Goodbye" elicited a similar reaction from the song's writer, Clifton Davis. Ibid., 81.

[180] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 30.

[181] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 30. As a child, Michael frequently was compared to James Brown and other black R&B stars; it might be interesting to trace these comparisons and understand why exactly others found these entertainers so alluring. After all, saints and monsters rarely stand alone: they are often compared to other saints and monsters, generally in an attempt to defend particular characterizations of them. I do not see why the case should be any different for entertainers, especially since his biographers associate some of his popularity with his talent, rather than his ability to imitate others.

original twists and turns—were what drew the crowds."[182] Through each of these examples,

George constructs an image of Michael as a hybrid; like Taraborrelli, George suggests that

Michael's hybridity results not only from a blend of childhood and adulthood, but also from a

complex blend of familiarity and unfamiliarity. The physical appearance of Michael matched

their expectations for a child, and his singing ability reminded them of singers like James Brown:

when Michael combined these qualities, he transformed into something they had never seen

before. By comparing texts, we will notice a variety of perceptions and reactions to this sort of

hybridity, some negative and others positive. We can also see how these reactions reinforce the

biographers' interpretations of Michael's behavior and personality as both a child and an adult.

Some reactions are characterized as a struggle to make sense of his hybridity, like when

Taraborrelli notes how R&B singer Joseph Simon thought at first that a "midget" was onstage

when he saw Michael perform on the chitlin' circuit.[183] In this example, Taraborrelli portrays

Michael as an alien in the eyes of Simon, presumably because Simon had never seen such a

young child perform on the circuit. Taraborrelli says other performers shared Simon's suspicion,

and once Michael found this out he reportedly burst into tears, to which his father Joseph

responded gently, "You need to be proud that you're being talked about by the competition….

that means you're on your way. This is a good thing."[184] Andersen includes a similar version of

this story in his biography, although he does not associate this perception with a particular

individual nor does include Joseph's gentle response. Instead, Andersen says that Michael, "who

often felt lost in this world of adults," cried after his father and brothers laughed at him upon

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[182] Ibid., 46-47.
[183] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 37.
[184] Ibid., 28.

hearing that "other acts began sniggering about the 'midget.'" [185] Andersen follows immediately

with a quotation from Michael, though it is not clear whether Michael was talking specifically

about this situation: "I could never stand it when people made fun of me." Both accounts include

this story to explain why Michael in adulthood reacted to rumors in a particular way, though

their explanations are not the same: whereas Taraborrelli suggests that Michael learned to

associate speculation with popularity (which is why he instigated many of the rumors the

tabloids published about him), Andersen insinuates that from an early age Michael failed to

understand how he was perceived by others, and why they perceived him in that way.

To show another example, George recounts one perception of this hybridity by using the

language of metamorphosis. Through a quotation from former president of Mercury Records Ed

Eckstine, George evokes images of transformation when Eckstine describes his encounters with

young Michael:

> He ran around, played with animals, and loved to draw with watercolors. But as
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> soon as he stepped onstage he went form a kid to an adult—just like that. It was
>
> an amazing transformation. But just to show you how much of a kid he was, he
>
> said, "If they come after me I'll just hide under my bed and they'll never find
>
> me."[186]

With this quotation, George characterizes the offstage behavior of Michael as typical; yet while

on stage, Michael appears to exceed Eckstine's expectations by transforming into a performer

with skills more akin to an adult. Thus, it seems that at times Michael surpassed Eckstine's

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[185] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 27.
[186] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 51.

comprehension, and other times he did not. Unlike the accounts provided by Taraborrelli and Andersen, George does portray Michael as simultaneously adult-like and childlike; rather, he presents Michael as one who dynamically fluctuates between maturity and immaturity. Nevertheless, the language employed by Taraborrelli, Andersen, and George serves to emphasize the uncanny duality of adulthood and childhood in young Michael's performances, and to portray Michael as an extremely complex and extraordinary youth.

Conversely, Marsh suggests that Michael attracted attention for quite different reasons when he quotes R&B music critic Vince Aletti, who supposedly reviewed the Jackson 5's Madison Square Garden 1970 debut. During their performance of "Who's Loving You," which Aletti says Michael punctuated "with a graduated series of forward crotch-thrusts—a standard R&B crowd-pleasing gesture," Aletti recalls feeling struck "not so much by his precocity as his perfection, his professionalism."[187] In other words, Aletti was more impressed by Michael's showmanship and talent, rather than his ability to imitate adult performances. By including this quotation, Marsh also illustrates the complexity of responses that people felt towards Michael. Motoviloff draws a similar distinction between talent and novelty when she writes, "What people see is someone way ahead of his years, singing lyrics that older guys usually handle. But Michael fills the words with meaning and expression—and that's because of his imagination, not his experience."[188] By this assessment, we might associate the sublimity of Michael's childhood talent with his ability to express mature emotions without any direct, experiential knowledge of them.

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[187]Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 94. Note how the quotation from Aletti also supports Marsh's depiction of Michael as an exceptional performer of black style (see chapter 2).
[188]Motoviloff, *The Jackson 5*, 86.

Taraborrelli, however, seems to disagree with Motoviloff. After recalling the way

Michael once introduced a performance of "Who's Loving You" by saying "I may be

young…but I do know what the blues are all about," Taraborrelli writes, "Though the line was

just a part of the group's stage patter, the truth of it was more accurate, and more painful, than

anyone in the audience ever could have guessed."[189] This anecdote concludes an entire section

the author devoted to claims that Michael witnessed his father's extra-marital affairs while they

were on tour; throughout his biography, Taraborrelli mentions additional instances when Michael

suffered as a result of his father's indiscretions. By challenging the perception that Michael did

not directly experience the emotions he sang about, Taraborrelli reveals his hesitation to

trivialize the emotional trauma Michael experienced throughout his childhood. However, it

appears that few biographers share this opinion with Taraborrelli. For the most part, Michael's

biographers express a desire to identify the source of his talent, which they try to explain in their

own words or by quoting someone else. For example, Marsh says Michael's mother Katherine

described her son's talent as "sort of frightening" and did not know where he got it: "He just

knew."[190] Previously, Marsh emphasizes the unique quality of Michael's talent; now he quotes

Katherine to explore its mysterious origins. Katherine's use of the word "frightening" is

especially interesting. It seems that while Michael's hybridity impressed Don Cornelius and

amazed Ed Eckstine, it frightened his mother. Instead of thinking it was "weird and wonderful,"

Katherine thought Michael's talent was fearsome. Likewise, George includes a different

quotation from Vince Aletti that uses similar language:

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[189] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 33.
[190] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 25.

His stylized show-biz posing… is becoming a little disturbing, at moments even grotesque for a boy who's still a very skinny sixteen… he's supreme and so controlled it's almost frightening. In his motel room, when he tells you he's in the eleventh grade, it might seem strange, but it's believable. Seeing him onstage, dancing, striding confidently out to the edge… you just know he had to be lying.[191]

We can clearly identify the language of sublimity in this quotation. Through Aletti's words George characterizes Michael as someone who exceeds comprehension while onstage and appears "supreme and so controlled it's almost frightening." By utilizing the words of someone else, both Marsh and George illustrate how a figure might appear saintly to some and monstrous to others—or, how the distinction between sainthood and monstrosity is not always distinct.

In contrast with Marsh, Taraborrelli seems to contradict any claim that Michael "just knew" by quoting the star himself. "I never knew what I was doing in the early days," Michael reportedly said, "I just did it. I never knew how to sing, really. I don't control it. It just formed itself. I don't know where it came from… it just came. Half the time, I didn't even know what I was singing about, but I still felt the emotion behind it."[192] Here, Taraborrelli claims that even Michael did not understand his talent, so the source remains an incomprehensible mystery. Portraying Michael in this way does not necessarily contradict Taraborrelli's earlier assertion that Michael knew "what the blues are all about," for the author does not indicate that Michael admitted his father's affairs were fueling the emotion behind his performances; this, he simply hypothesizes. Regardless, even though Michael and his mother (and in turn, Marsh and

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[191] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 61-62.

Taraborrelli) seem to disagree about whether Michael "knew" what he was singing, the fact

remains that they both describe his talent as unfathomable.

From our observations thus far, it seems that while some biographers report that many

individuals found it "weird and wonderful" to watch young Michael perform because he

challenged their preconceptions of children, others were amazed because he seemed to surpassed

the limits of human expression in ways they could not understand. Perhaps not surprisingly, then,

some biographers also mention doubts regarding the longevity of Michael and his brothers'

success. For example, Taraborrelli claims that Motown vice-president Ralph Seltzer once

admitted, "Creative considerations aside, I had concerns about their age and the way they would

change when they grew older, in terms of their appearance and their voices."[193] Here the

biographer emphasizes the limited nature of this form of hybridity: as the childishness of

Michael fades away upon adulthood, his hybridity disappears as well. Likewise, other

biographers also mention how the metamorphosis from adolescence to adulthood can be

particularly problematic for child stars, such as Michael, if their audience refuses to embrace

changes in their physical features, personal interests, or creative talents. Here the biographers'

perceptions shift away from imagining hybridity as awe-inspiring or even frightening, and

instead they characterize the blend of childhood and adulthood as a special burden that Michael

was forced to bear. According to Andersen, Michael struggled throughout his adolescence to find

his place in a world that wanted him to remain a child: "Suddenly he had to contend with the

look of disappointment on the faces of people who came primed to see that adorable, chipmunk-

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[192] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 66.
[193] Ibid., 39.

cheeked little boy who sang 'ABC' and 'Ben.'"[194] In this same biography, Michael says that his

fans would walk right past him when he was a teen, and after he revealed his true identity, "they

would look doubtful. I was not the person they expected or even wanted to see."[195] In this

quotation, Michael is presented as so unfamiliar that his fans no longer recognize him, and so he

undergoes a transformation from uncanny to sublime. The indifference of his fans derives from

their inability to recognize the "original" child Michael, and so this "other" adult version seems

no different from any other stranger. By transforming into an adolescent, Michael loses his

familiar childish features, which causes him to lose his sense of mysterious otherness: now, he is

nothing but ordinary. Thus, for those who are portrayed as uncanny, the qualities otherness and

sameness are intrinsically related; one cannot be shed without losing the other.

Michael also discusses the struggles associated with childhood stardom in his taped

conversations with Rabbi Shmuley. According to transcripts, Michael explained that he and other

child stars (Shirley Temple, Bobby Driscoll) are forced to endure severe social pressure because

their audience wants them "to stay young and little forever."[196] Not only must they sacrifice their

childhood to work in an industry run by adults, he says they also must accept that "they were so

loved and liked and they reached an age when studios don't want them anymore. The public

[doesn't] want them anymore. They are a has-been."[197] By including this particular conversation

in his book, Rabbi Shmuley suggests that child stars are static creatures in the eyes of the public,

and so their appeal is partially contingent upon the maintenance of hybridity: not fully a child nor

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[194]Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 56.
[195]Ibid., 57.
[196] Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 225.
[197] Ibid., 225. Taraborrelli also examines the pressures and struggles of child stardom. Besides losing the opportunity to act like children, he also says that child stars often lack proper education and social skills because their fame prevents them from safely interacting with "ordinary" children. Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 88-92.

an adult, but only a strange blend of the two. Either Michael must prevent his metamorphosis by perpetually remaining a child-adult hybrid, or his audience must allow the star to undergo the natural transformation from adolescence into adulthood. Of course, this is not to say that all child stars must remain childlike forever in order to be successful. It is likely that those who admired Michael's sublime talent over his hybridity (such as Vince Aletti) adjusted to changes in his persona because their attraction to him was not contingent upon his hybrid status. George describes the development of Michael's coordination, tone, and rhythm in quite glowing terms.[198]

Once again, we see where tension developed between the "original" and "other" Michael. If he maintains his "original" identity, Michael must always transcend generational boundaries, confine himself to incomprehensible sublimity, and live a lonely existence. Conversely, if he becomes "other" (assuming this "otherness" lacks the same hybrid qualities as the "original" Michael), he risks sacrificing his uncanny features that fascinate his audience. Marsh observes this same dilemma, though he interprets the risks somewhat differently. He explains, "Discarding his identity as a child star was risky for a lot of reasons—not least because adults have duties kids don't. So Michael talked almost incessantly about his love for children and the need to be childlike." [199] For Marsh, it seems the issue has more to do with avoiding adult responsibility than protecting child stardom. Nonetheless, as Michael breached the age of adulthood, various biographers portray him as rejecting (or accepting) both options by inverting the hybridity of his childhood: instead of a child who acted like an adult, Michael metamorphosed into an adult who acted like a child.

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[198] George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, 94-95. George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 27, 189-90,

Hybridity Inverted: Metamorphosis of Michael from Child-Adult to Adult-Child

Numerous biographies depict that shortly after the release of *Thriller*, Michael's audience began to notice his preoccupation with all things childlike. "Instead of growing up," writes Taraborrelli, "Michael actually seemed to be regressing—buying toys, playing childlike games and, for the first time, actually surrounding himself with children."[200] Perhaps in an attempt to explain Michael's adult fixation on childhood, various biographers state that Michael seldom associated with peers his own age as child. For example, Motoviloff notes how "Michael's at ease with adults. The kids from school don't come over because the Jacksons' house is quite a distance away. And being around his older brothers all the time, he identifies with them. But no girls yet. Michael's too young to be really interested."[201] More than anything else, his biographers associate this isolation with his celebrity, and they provide countless stories about crazed fans attacking Michael to illustrate why he could not interact with "ordinary" people. Biographers who also say Michael spent little time with the neighborhood children in Gary, Indiana indicate that the Jackson family's affiliation with the Jehovah's Witnesses discouraged them from fraternizing with non-Witnesses.[202] However, while this might explain why Michael lacked childhood peers, it does not clarify why he seemed so fixated on children throughout his adulthood.

For one, Taraborrelli confesses that he struggled to make sense of Michael's odd behavior. The author characterizes Michael as an "extraordinary Man-Child," referencing a

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[199] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 187..

[200] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 212.

[201] Motoviloff, *The Jackson 5*, 91.

[202] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 43. Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 21-22.

nickname that Jackie purportedly gave to his brother to indicate he is "a man, but still a kid, a wonderful combination." [203] Here Taraborrelli explicitly incorporates the language of hybridity and sublimity into his description of Michael: two parts—man and child—combine into one in an extraordinary way that solicits reactions of awe and wonder. Marsh presents Michael as a similar type of hybrid, though he describes it somewhat differently: "He acquired an odd image as a boy-man, but not in the teenage sense. If he was horny, he kept it well concealed. Yet his other emotions were worn on the narrow edge of his sleeve, ready to be knocked loose at a moment's notice."[204] Even though Michael was twenty-seven years old when Marsh published his book, the author still saw the need to distinguish Michael's "boy-man" image from the liminal state of adolescence. It appears Marsh thinks that by normal standards, a teenage "boy-man" should be horny and his emotions undetectable, and neither condition applies to Michael. Thus, Marsh's description emphasizes the unconventional aspects of Michael's hybridity more so than Taraborrelli, whose uses Jackie's words to suggest that Michael embodies the best aspects of both childhood and adulthood. Marsh, on the other hand, imagines Michael's "boy-man" hybridity in terms of loss or inadequacy, specifically in regards to his sexuality, maturity, and ability to maintain the status quo. In comparison, Andersen quotes an anonymous colleague of Michael's who describes his adult-child hybridity as if it were the *worst* of both worlds: "Michael likes that sort of thing—food fights, practical jokes, horsing around. In some ways—not all—he's got the mind of a twelve-year-old. No, make that a nine-year-old. But there's also that fifty-year-old businessman inside who's thinking: Don't forget who makes the money. You work for *me*." [205] Each of these biographers provides characterizations with a specific goal in

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[203] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 212.
[204] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 187.
[205] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 249.

mind: to support their interpretation of Michael's adult-child hybridity. Some view it as commendable, others see it as reprehensible, and some perceive elements of both.

As we can see, Michael's adulthood is a highly-contested subject in his biographies. Because his biographers provide a voluminous array of oft-conflicting reports on this subject, I would like to focus my analysis specifically on the texts written by Taraborrelli and Andersen. Both authors are professional biographers who have written books on other celebrities, and their biographies share similar formats.[206] Although Andersen only traces Michael's life up to 1995, while Taraborrelli released the updated third edition of his book shortly after Michael died, together they provide the two most comprehensive accounts of his life out of the texts that I selected to analyze. Eventually I hope to compare the dozens of texts written on Michael that I have collected since his death; yet for right now, I will focus primarily on Taraborrelli and Andersen's account of his metamorphosis into adulthood and the subsequent transformation of the adult-child hybridity that others attributed to Michael in his youth. I hesitate to label these biographies as examples of either hagiography or teratology, since they both praise and condemn Michael at different times. However, the reflections on Michael's adulthood that Taraborrelli offers are undeniably more sympathetic than the assessments Andersen provides.[207] Thus, by looking at these texts in particular, we can glimpse at the variety of accounts we will find in the spectrum of texts written on Michael.

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[206] For example, both Taraborrelli and Andersen provide source notes at the end of their book, though they do not indicate the specific source of each piece of information that they obtain; rather, their source notes function more like an extended bibliography. Nonetheless, none of the other biographies that I examine indicate where they obtained their information.

[207] One reason for this difference might be the fact that Taraborrelli knew Michael personally for many years before writing a book about him.

Already we have seen how two biographers classify Michael as an adult-child hybrid.

Andersen also describes Michael in these terms, though somewhat less explicitly. Instead of

outright labeling Michael as a hybrid, he describes various manifestations of childishness and

maturity that occurred throughout Michael's adult life. Andersen cites the recording of the 1982

children's album *The E.T. Storybook* as one of the earliest displays of Michael's inverted adult-

child hybridity. Andersen says that Steven Spielberg, director of the film *E.T.: The Extra-

Terrestrial*, "could think of no one better suited" to narrate the storybook version of his film

because "Michael is one of the last living innocents who is in complete control of his life… I've

never seen *anybody* like Michael. He's an emotional star child."[208] Somewhat like Taraborrelli,

who quotes Jackie's use of hybrid terms to describe Michael (rather than employing them

directly himself, as Marsh does), Andersen uses Spielberg's statement to establish Michael as a

sublime and uncanny blend of a child and an adult. The sublimity of this "emotional star child"

derives from the fact that Spielberg has never encountered anyone like Michael; for Spielberg,

Michael embodies absolute otherness. Yet the director contradicts this assessment somewhat

when he says, "Michael is one of the last living innocents who is in complete control of his life,"

for here Spielberg associates Michael with others who preceded him, which must indicate that

Michael appears familiar to Spielberg on some level. Once again, we see a tension between

Michael's "original" and "other" identities in Spielberg's assertion that Michael was both the last

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[208] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 104. The author also claims that when Spielberg approached Michael with the project, the director said, "If E.T. hadn't come to Elliott…he would have come to your house." Here Spielberg directly compares Michael to a child, for in the movie E.T. befriends a young boy struggling to fit in with his older brother and his friends. Whether Spielberg places emphasis on Elliott's age or on his dysfunctional relationship with his older brother remains unclear (without a doubt, the latter circumstance pertains to Michael as well, since he and his brothers grew increasingly estranged as Michael gained success as a solo artist). Taraborrelli includes this statement from Spielberg as well, though he employs it within different context: in reference to the pyrotechnical malfunction that occurred in 1984 while he filmed a Pepsi commercial. Michael suffered from severe burn wounds on his scalp as a result of the accident. "Now," Taraborrelli continues, "Michael *was* E.T., an odd little

and first of his kind.[209] Even more importantly, Andersen provides this statement to illustrate

how others perceived Michael as simultaneously adult and child. Andersen also reports that

Michael struggled not to cry while recording the album, especially during the part of the story

when E.T. begins to die. The album's producer, Quincy Jones, and Spielberg decided to leave

Michael's tears on the track.[210] Although never stated explicitly, the biographer posits Michael's

tears are an indication of immaturity by situating other examples of childish behavior around this

account. For instance, Andersen points out how Michael's strong imagination made the singer

feel like he was actually in the story, as if he were "behind a tree or something, watching

everything that happened."[211] Also, immediately prior to mentioning Michael's emotional

recording session, Andersen describes Michael's fascination with the animatronic robot that

played the role of "E.T." in the film. Michael agreed to narrate the story only after meeting the

robot, which he described "with a straight face" as "so wonderful…. He was so real that I was

talking with him. I kissed him before I left."[212] Although these examples, when considered

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creature hurt by grown-ups who had been playing with fire." Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 282.

[209] Recall how George described the Jackson 5 as the "the first" popular black teen group in America, whereas Marsh described them as "the last" black group to participate in the "chitlin' circuit." Yet in Spielberg's remarks, we see the first/last tension reflected in a single account, and not between two separate accounts—a noteworthy example of how people demonstrate complex and multifaceted reactions to Michael in his biographies.

[210] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 104. This is not the only occasion where Michael reportedly became so overwhelmed by emotion that he could not prevent himself from crying during a recording session. Andersen, Marsh, and Taraborrelli mention how Michael repeatedly cried during the recording of "She's Out of My Life" in 1979. Ibid., 92; Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 122; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 186.

[211] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 104.

[212] Ibid., 104. Note how Andersen says Michael had "a straight face" when he described his meeting with E.T. This might be interpreted in two different ways: either as a statement coming from an adult who displayed a calm reserve when recounting his professional experiences, or as a comment given by a child who does not recognize the distinction between fantasy and reality, and so he describes imaginative situations as if they were real. Taraborrelli also describes the meeting between Michael and E.T., though his interpretation of the event becomes quite clear when he says Michael's face "filled with child-like wonder" when he met the robot. Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 209.

independently, do not necessarily indicate childish behavior, together they implicate Michael as an overly-emotional and imaginative man living in a fantasy world.

According to Andersen and Taraborrelli, Michael befriended actress Jane Fonda around the same time he was recording *The E.T. Storybook.* [213] Interestingly, neither author describes this as a mature, adult relationship; rather, their accounts perpetuate characterizations of Michael in terms of adult-child hybridity. For example, both biographers allege that during an afternoon drive, Fonda suggested "Peter Pan" as the ideal movie role for Michael. Michael tearfully replied to Fonda's suggestion, "You know all over the walls of my room are pictures of Peter Pan. I totally identify with Peter Pan, the lost boy of Never-Never Land."[214] Here we see an example of Michael embracing an identity that others associate with him. Later, when Andersen writes that *Newsweek* officially dubbed Michael "the Peter Pan of pop," Andersen says that "Michael reveled in the comparison. He still dreamed about flying nearly every night—dreams that Freudians would quickly interpret as having a sexual connotation but that Michael chalked up to his childlike quest for 'magic.'"[215] Moreover, the lyrics to Michael's songs—especially "Childhood"—suggest on some level that he embraced the way others characterized him.

The most obvious similarity between Michael and Peter Pan is their stunted metamorphosis into adulthood: both of them live with their friends in a magical space of eternal childhood. Thus, both biographers recount this conversation between Fonda and Michael to characterize him as a child living in an adult's body. However, the similarities between these accounts do not extend further. Andersen quickly concludes his discussion of their friendship by

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[213] Andersen mentions this friendship immediately after finishing his account of the *E.T. Storybook* recording sessions, while Taraborelli introduces the topic almost ten pages before the same story.

recalling how Fonda pushed Francis Ford Coppola to cast Michael in his upcoming big-budget version of *Peter Pan*; the actress allegedly gushed to Coppola, "Oh, I can see him leading lost children into a world of fantasy and magic."[216] Conversely, Taraborrelli does not include these claims in his book, but continues instead by recounting Michael's friendship with Fonda in greater detail—as told by her friend and personal assistant, Bernice Littman.[217] He writes that Michael and Fonda were talking in her library when Littman (who was in the outer-office) overheard Fonda say to Michael, "You have to stop trying to find strength in other people. Your mother has flaws, Michael, just as we all do. But you're an adult, now. Why not let your mother be who she is, and find your own strength, within?" As Littman recalls, "I don't think Michael could understand what she was saying." After Michael and Fonda embraced, Littman says, "Michael sobbed like a baby…. So did I. I stood outside of the library and just cried. It was so sad. He was so sad. It was as if he was an alien, just visiting from another world." Littman's story is important for two reasons. First, Littman uses language associated with *das Unheimliche* when she describes Michael as an alien that is struggling to find his place in the world. Second, by claiming Michael "sobbed like a baby" while he talked about his mother, Littman reinforces pre-existing characterizations of Michael as an adult-child hybrid and a real-life Peter Pan. Although Andersen does not include Littman's story in his book, he nevertheless illustrates Michael's hybrid qualities by noting how others associated him with Peter Pan.

While the examples mentioned thus far focus on psychological expressions of Michael's adult-child hybridity, Andersen and Taraborrelli point out more physical expressions as well, like

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[214] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 201; Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 104-05.
[215] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 123.
[216] Ibid., 105.

when Michael remodeled his childhood home (known as Hayvenhurst) in Encino, California. Somewhat as a precursor to the amusement park he would one day build at Neverland Valley Ranch, the 2700-acre fantasyland where Michael lived throughout the 1990s, Michael constructed a stable for numerous exotic animals, a mini-version of Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A that included a candy store, and a thirty-two seat theatre with plush red-velvet seats, where it is said Michael spent countless hours watching films by Fred Astaire and the Three Stooges.[218] Furthermore, Michael reportedly kept life-sized mannequins in his bedroom and dressed them in expensive clothing.[219] According to both biographers, Michael has admitted that he wanted to bring them to life and he liked to imagine himself talking with them, explaining, "I think I'm accompanying myself with friends I never had."[220] By physically recreating the childhood that he sacrificed in order to be a pop star, Michael familiarizes himself with experiences that he claims never to have known. So long as he resides in an isolated fantasy world and surrounds himself with inanimate human replicates, Michael thinks he can render uncanny that which appears sublime to him.

It might come to no surprise, then, when Andersen suggests that the first person allowed to have total access to this world was Emmanuel Lewis, the twelve-year-old star of the hit sitcom

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[217] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 201-02.

[218] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 122-25; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 230-31.

[219] Taraborrelli and Andersen disagree, however, over the number and "ethnicity" of the mannequins. According to Taraborrelli, Michael had "five female mannequins of different ethnic groups—Caucasian, Oriental, Indian and two blacks." Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 231. Andersen, on the other hand, says he had "six mannequins—one Asian, one black, one Hispanic, a redhead, and two blonds." Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 124.

[220] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 124; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 232. Trying to make sense of Michael's behavior, Taraborrelli consulted Dr. Paul Gabriel, a professor of clinical psychiatry at New York's University Medical Center. Gabriel thinks Michael's collection is unique case of narcissism: "Children are very narcissistic. They see themselves in their dolls, and that's what this is about for Michael Jackson. After age five or six, they begin to give some of that up, but he apparently never did that." Ibid., 232.

Webster who shared with Michael the isolation of black child stardom.[221] United by a common bond, Andersen says that on any given weekend during the early 1980s, "the two could be seen at Hayvenhurst, darting in and out of bushes as they played hide-and-seek, wrestling on the grass, pretending to be Peter Pan's lost boys or cops and robbers, zipping around the courtyard in Michael's electric cars."[222] Likewise, Taraborrelli recalls how Michael demonstrated "unusual behavior" as he and Lewis "became fast friends," so much so that Michael nearly reached the point of obsession.[223] Taraborrelli illustrates what he means with statements from someone who allegedly witnessed their interactions while visiting the Encino estate. After Michael read the story of Peter Pan to Emanuel, the eyewitness said that "twenty-five-year-old Michael and twelve-year-old Emmanuel sat on the floor with their eyes closed and fantasized that they were flying over Never-Never Land."[224] Once again, we see how Michael's biographers employ the Peter Pan motif to describe Michael's childlike behavior. Taraborrelli did not have to specify *which* story Michael read to Emanuel, yet in doing so he underscores his characterization of Michael as an adult-child hybrid.

Both Taraborrelli and Andersen say that Michael's friendship with Lewis finally started to raise concern after they checked into the Four Seasons hotel in Los Angeles together as father and son; shortly thereafter, they stopped seeing as much of each other. Yet prior to disclosing how the same hotel visit ended the friendship between Michael and Lewis, Andersen enriches his version of the story with "documented evidence" and an eyewitness statement. First, he claims

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[221] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 125. However, Andersen carefully points out on multiple occasions that Lewis was not the first child to befriend Michael in adulthood. He writes, "As early as late 1982 there was usually a young boy in tow whenever Michael ventured forth in public." Ibid., 127.

[222] Ibid., 125.

[223] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 264.

[224] Ibid., 264.

Michael's official "videographer," Steve Howell, filmed the two cuddling and hugging as

Michael tried to teach Lewis part of the choreography to *Beat It*, which is "full of hip swivels

and pelvic thrusts." In the same home movie, Andersen says we can see Michael and Lewis

"giggling and whispering as they acted out their fantasy games." Second, Andersen quotes

LaToya Jackson when he recalls her growing concern over her brother's friendship with Lewis:

"If any of us suggested to Michael that he'd have a better time somebody his own age,' she said,

'his eyes filled with tears. He obviously didn't like to talk about it.'"[225] Yet Andersen also

includes details that he does not attribute to any specific information source. For example, he

recounts how Lewis spent hours alone with Michael in his "darkened, cluttered room," where

they watched horror movies, acted out Disney classics, and had pillow fights. During one of

these sleepovers, Michael supposedly showed the boy a secret corridor that was lined with

children's books, and also a passageway that led directly from Michael's bedroom out of the

house. All this leads up the visit at the Four Seasons hotel, which resulted in Margaret Lewis

severing her son's friendship with Michael, Andersen writes.

The stories these authors tell about Michael's friendship with Emmanuel Lewis also

demonstrate how biographies can tell the same story in completely different ways.[226] Here

specifically the authors are talking about the same event or situation, though in completely

different ways: although both texts claim that Lewis was the first of many boys to share an

intimate relationship with Michael, the authors use different examples to describe their

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[225] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 126.

[226] This diversity persists in books besides those that were written by Andersen and Taraborrelli. For example, Bob Jones claims that the tabloid magazine *In Touch Weekly* published photos in March 2005 (presumably from the mid-1980s) that showed the two "lying in bed and sucking on baby bottles." Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*, 68. I have yet to access the March 2005 issue that allegedly published these photos, so for now Jones's claim remains unconfirmed.

relationship. Specifically, only Taraborrelli mentions an unnamed eyewitness whose comments invoke images of Peter Pan, whereas Andersen incorporates statements from a verifiable eyewitness, "material evidence," and some details from unknown sources into a slightly longer account. One also might consider how these authors situate whatever they write about Lewis within the broader narrative. Emmanuel Lewis is the first child Taraborrelli writes about having an intimate relationship with Michael, and he does not write about similar relationships with other children until several pages later when he describes Michael's friendships with Jimmy Safechuck and Jonathan Spence.[227] In comparison, several pages before he recounts Michael's friendship with Lewis, Andersen reports that Michael engaged in sexually-explicit telephone conversations with Terry George in 1979.[228] Moreover, Andersen makes it a point to note that Lewis was neither first nor last "in a long parade of young boys recruited by Michael for the express purpose of recapturing his childhood—or, more accurately, creating the childhood he never knew."[229] Unlike Taraborrelli, whose account concentrates on events Michael's musical career and describing Jackson family dynamics, Andersen's discussion of Lewis reflects the way Andersen focuses more on recounting Michael's friendships with children. Therefore, both authors describe Michael's friendship with Emanuel Lewis, though in different ways, within different contexts, and for different purposes.

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[227] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 401-02.
[228] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 82-86.
[229] Ibid., 127.

Act Your Age, Not Your Shoe Size: Responses to Michael's Relationships with Children

Although both authors name various children whom Michael befriended while he was an adult, a relationship that both authors discuss in expansive detail is the one Michael shared with Jordie Chandler, a thirteen-year-old boy who later accused Michael of sexual abuse. One could devote an entire paper to teasing out the various subtleties and contradictions that are present in the extensive accounts of the Chandler case provided by Taraborrelli and Andersen. Another reason why I hesitate to analyze this part of the biographies is because other texts exclusively recount the events that lead up to the child molestation allegations, providing even greater detail than Taraborrelli and Andersen. Because child molestation can be a highly controversial and sensitive subject matter, a cursory analysis of the biographies would invariably result in distorted interpretations that do not reflect the depth and complexity of the issue. Instead, I would like to conclude with a few remarks on how these authors narrate the public responses to the child molestation allegations, keeping in mind the expressions of adult-child hybridity and metamorphosis that we have seen in the texts thus far.

Taraborrelli indicates that news of these allegations reached the public on August 23, 1993 after a Los Angeles television station reported that police raided Neverland Valley Ranch for evidence in an ongoing child molestation investigation; police confirmed Michael was suspected of criminal activity. The story quickly dominated headlines and broadcasts around the globe.[230] Overall, Taraborrelli thinks the media responded to the allegations with instant vilification: "Rarely had a show-business story taken flight like the Michael Jackson molestation scandal, with the world's press running blazing headlines that strongly implied that Michael was

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[230] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 501.

guilty, even if not yet charged."[231] Moreover, he suggests that by classifying Michael as a

pedophile, the public felt that his anomalous qualities finally had been explained. As Taraborrelli

writes, "The pop star who was regularly seen in the company of youngsters, and who was known

for his interest in children and in charities devoted to them, might actually be a pedophile?...He

had always been so secretive, so strange. Now, it was assumed, the questions about him had been

answered." [232] Thus, for those who struggled to understand Michael's hybridity, the allegations

resolved certain contradictions by placing Michael into a new category: the pedophile.

Taraborrelli illustrates this point when he writes, "The *New York Post* ran with a dreadful photo

of Michael looking his worst, and the blazing headline: 'Peter Pan or Pervert?'"[233] By

juxtaposing "Peter Pan" with "Pervert," the *New York Post* article associates the sainthood of the

Disney character with the monstrosity of sexual deviant.

Curiously, Andersen focuses on journalists who took the inverse approach by defending

and praising Michael. Although he mentions the "Peter Pan or Pervert" article, he also points out

how the *New York Post* "hedged" this sensational headline with an accompanying piece entitled

"Don't Believe the Dirt! This Is a Guy Who Doesn't Even Swear."[234] In fact, Andersen says

many publications supported Michael by telling the story strictly from his perspective instead of

considering the issue from the child's point of view. As he writes, "In its first story on the

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[231] Ibid., 503.

[232]Ibid., 502.The authors of both texts include statements from others who claimed that Michael fit the profile of a pedophile, noting especially his obsession with children and desire to participate in juvenile activities. However, Bob Jones seems to challenge assessments of Michael as a "textbook pedophile" when he writes, "Michael was becoming an outcast, but at this time Bob Jones couldn't say whether he thought Jackson was pedophile. Comparing the known characteristics of pedophiles and holding them next to Jackson still didn't yield a clear-cut answer. Pedophiles generally don't have criminal records. Well, that fit the King. Some are professionals. Well the King is a professional pop star. Some prefer girls. So, not the King. Some prefer boys. Definitely one of the King's traits. But experts say pedophiles don't discriminate by race, class, or age. The King discriminated." Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*, 67-68.

[233] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 501-02.

Jackson affair—which ran in the paper's 'Style' section—*The Washington Post* stressed the

'extortion' angle over the police investigation." Likewise, "*Newday*'s first headline—Jackson:

No!—also gave the story a decided pro-Michael spin."[235] What is even more interesting is that

Taraborrelli seems to self-identify with this perspective (rather than the more antagonistic

journalism that he depicts) when he claims Michael thanked him personally for comments the

author made on CNN about the allegations.[236] Although Taraborrelli does not restate these exact

comments in his book, later he offers his opinion of the allegations when he writes:

> The bottom line is that Michael has done whatever he has wanted for most of his life,
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> living in a world of privilege and entitlement simply because he is who he is. He has
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> never understood the notion of 'appropriate behavior' because, in truth, he's never had
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> any reason to live appropriately. It's a strange commentary on celebrity and fame that the
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> public's perception of Michael as being bizarre had its advantages. After all, how can he
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> be judged by normal, common-sense standards when he's "Wacko-Jacko"?[237]

Here Taraborrelli explicitly employs the language of sublimity. Because of his celebrity, Michael

is capable of transgressing social boundaries of "normal, common-sense standards" that delineate

"appropriate behavior," and so his audience branded him with the title "Wacko-Jacko." Existing

beyond normal comprehension, Michael embodies sublimity because he lives in "a world of

privilege and entitlement" in which very few human beings can participate. The author also

suggests that for some, Michael's exceptional status places him beyond judgment, like a

sovereign king who is not expected to uphold the same laws that he decrees his subjects must

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[234] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 346.
[235] Ibid., 345.

obey. Andersen's account of the sweeping response of public support Michael received

following the allegations[238] suggests that some fans held him to different standards than other

people. Why, however, did the public allow Michael this exemption? *Newsweek* journalist

Jonathan Alter offers one explanation when he says Michael conveyed a sense of vulnerability

and "ineffable sadness" that caused most people to think the Chandlers were trying to frame

him.[239] Alter then compares Michael to other "really big ones" who shared a similar

vulnerability—specifically, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley (ironically,

journalists would compare Michael to these same stars years later, though for a different reason:

each of them died a tragic and unexpected death).[240] Both Taraborrelli and Alter suggest that

celebrities operate on a different moral plane than everyone else by either liberating themselves

from conventional standards or enduring the melancholic burden of fame.

While on the topic of "celebrity culture," let us conclude by looking at some celebrity

responses to the allegations that the biographers chose to include in their texts, for these

comments seem to reflect the wider variety of public opinions that the texts present. To begin,

Andersen says actress Sharon Stone "clearly spoke for most celebrities in attendance" when she

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[236] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 503-04. These comments supposedly aired on August 26, 1993.

[237] Ibid., 533-34.

[238] Andersen says many of Michael's supporters responded to news journalists' condemnation with profound indignation, flooding networks and editorial offices with letters and threats to cancel subscriptions. Furthermore, some of his fans "were so overwrought that they placed flowers, lit votive candles, and held prayer vigils at Michael Jackson's gold star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame." Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 346. This is not the only occasion in Michael's career where fans rallied around the star in ways reminiscent of religious veneration.

[239] Ibid., 346.

[240] As with Taraborrelli, it is not clear whether Alter endorses the explanation he provides, or simply wants to restate the views of others. In *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, the way Andersen summarizes the *Newsweek* article suggests that Alter neither supported Michael's actions, nor the exceptions allotted to him and other celebrities (a view undeniably shared by Andersen, who criticizes indulgences to celebrity throughout his book). According to Andersen, Alter "added wryly" the comment that Michael's vulnerability "even makes credible the idea that there's nothing wrong with having slumber parties with twelve-year-olds." One would need to consult the original text to

commented on the allegations during 1993 MTV Awards. Stone criticized the parents for

"making deals" instead of pursuing a criminal investigation and expected more allegations of

sexual abuse "would have surfaced by now" if Michael was truly a pedophile.[241] Another famous

starlet who supported Michael was Elizabeth Taylor, who often made public appearances with

Michael at charity fundraisers or entertainment award ceremonies. Taylor reportedly told one

journalist that she believed in "Michael's integrity, his love and trust in children."[242] Indeed, both

Taraborrelli and Andersen recount how Michael frequently donated his time and money to

charity organizations, schools, and hospitals that served children.[243] Taylor lamented the

circumstances that befell her friend, admitting that she "can't think of anything worse that a

human being could go through than what he's going through right now."[244] Furthermore, Taylor

reportedly counter-accuses Chandler's parents of making false allegations in an attempt to extort

money from Michael.[245] In a more extreme version of the comments made by Sharon Stone,

Taraborrelli claims that Taylor vehemently tried to redirect negative attention away from

Michael and onto the child's parents, demanding at one point that the interviewer agree with her

(it is not clear whether this writer was Taraborrelli or someone else). In Taraborrelli's view, "It

speaks well of Elizabeth that she was so vociferous in her defense of Michael, especially since it

wasn't a popular stance; such public support was certainly not forthcoming in the same degree

from his other high-profile friends, such as Diana Ross, Jackie Onassis or Liza Minnelli."[246]

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determine whether Alter was genuinely critical, or whether Andersen shaped the journalist's comments to match his own opinion.

[241] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 350.

[242] Ibid., 348.

[243] For more biographies that mention Michael's charitable contributions to children, see: ibid; Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*; Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*.

[244] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 348.

[245] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 512-13.

[246] Ibid., 512.

Thus, we see varying degrees of support for Michael in the statements offered by Taylor and Stone; when it came to the allegations, the opinions of celebrities were by no means unanimous.

Indeed, Andersen seems to contradict his earlier assessment of celebrities' responses to the allegations, or at least those Sharon Stone spoke for at the MTV Awards. For instance, he claims the musician k. d. lang offered "the only reasoned assessment" when she admitted that, while she believed Michael to be innocent, she would support Chandler if the allegations proved true.[247] Furthermore, Andersen also identifies the comedienne Roseanne Arnold as one of Michael's celebrity detractors. According to Andersen, the comedienne stated in a *Vanity Fair* cover story that she too was the victim of childhood sexual abuse and wanted her opinion to go on the record:

> He is the perfect picture of a child molester. He had the perfect circumstances. Everything. But you know what? People don't know anything, so these stupid fucking assholes go, "Well, we let our kids sleep with him and share his bed, 'cause he took 'em to Toys 'R' Us. He's a nice, nice boy." He's thirty-five fucking years old, and I think he got all this facial surgery done to obscure his age…. He don't really look like a thirty-five-year-old man, so maybe he really *is* Peter Pan. Yeah: "He's Peter Pan, so we can let our little boys sleep with him!" But there are a lot of people—most people, according to those awful polls—who don't believe the kid is accusing him. Nobody believes any kid…[248]

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[247] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 351.
[248] Ibid., 381-82.

Here Arnold offers a number of comments that either employ the language of sublimity and uncanny or discuss themes and motifs that other people used to describe Michael as well. Perhaps what is most significant is Arnold's assessment of Michael as "the perfect picture of a child molester." In her view, Michael neatly fits within the category of "pedophile." If he appeared sublime before because he blended the categories of "adult" and "child," Michael now assumes a more uncanny quality—he still retains his otherness, but now he also seems familiar once she categorizes him into more familiar terms as a pedophile. Although she does not clarify specifically what these terms are or what "the perfect picture of a child molester" looks like, she clearly thinks Michael seduced the child and his family with monetary gifts.[249] If monstrosity is associated with prohibitions, one might argue that Arnold's comments also criticize the materialism and/or consumerism of Chandler's parents. Secondly, Arnold suggests that Michael underwent plastic surgery to appear *younger* and not *whiter*, as so many others suggested. It is not clear how this observation might indicate the picture of a child molester, since a substantial percentage of individuals who undergo plastic surgery in order to look younger. Third, Arnold characterizes Michael as a Peter Pan figure, though she gives it a more sinister spin than Jane Fonda. This is a clear example of how people respond to certain aspects of an individual's sainthood/monstrosity in different ways: whereas Fonda revered Michael's Peter Pan-like nature, Rosanne Arnold vilifies it. Therefore, the task of analyzing sainthood/monstrosity is not simply a matter of identifying negative or positive characteristics, since others can respond to these characteristics in a multitude of ways. It is the scholar's task to explore the various ways others

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[249] Indeed, Taraborrelli and Andersen frequently comment on Michael's financial generosity towards boys and their family members. Both biographers claim Michael spend thousands of dollars on numerous children throughout his career. These authors do not, however, indicate that every gift was a gesture of seduction. It might be interesting to compare which boys they say Michael seduced with gifts, and which ones he simply treated without the expectation of anything in return.

portray certain aspects of a saint/monster. Finally, one might wonder why Andersen felt the need to include the fact that Arnold herself was the victim of child molestation; one might wonder further how much her past informs the way she responded to the allegations, if she too suffered because no one believed her own allegations. I point this out not to suggest that this is the case, but more so to show how personal perspective and intention can inform the way someone responds to a saint/monster. There is no universal checklist that determines sainthood and monstrosity, and individual backgrounds may compel some to respond more passionately than others.

Once again, we can see how reactions to a particular categorization of Michael Jackson are not always unanimous; throughout his life, people responded to how he blended childhood and adulthood in very different ways. Yet unlike his racial identity, to which others responded with either a sense of admiration or condemnation, public responses to Michael's generational hybridity are less clearly divided; as Michael morphed from child to adult, the public's reactions to him changed as well, and people often responded with a simultaneous sense of attraction and repulsion. One reason for the difference in public reactions to his racial and generational hybridity is that America has been overtly preoccupied with race problems for many years now; while issues surrounding age and maturity have occurred in the past, they have not received anywhere near the same amount of attention as racial concerns. In other words, the public is more familiar with boundaries that divide racial identities than they are with those that divide age and maturity. Even though many of his strongest critics condemn Michael for refusing to live by rules of society, the variety of responses to his adult-child hybridity suggest that those rules are not so obvious. By looking at how his biographers describe Michael's generational identity and

the public's reaction to him, we can begin to map out the different ways that people imagine

these types of boundaries.

SECTION FOUR: "*HIS*TORY"

Every day create your history

Every path you take you're leaving your legacy

Every soldier dies in his glory

Every legend tells of conquest and liberty

Every day create your history

Every page you turn you're writing your legacy

Every hero dreams of chivalry

Every child should sing together in harmony

So far we have relied on concepts derived from hagiographic and teratological scholarship to interpret Michael Jackson biographies in two specific ways. First, we looked at how the texts characterize him as a hybrid of black and white who morphs in various ways from one racial category to the next, and eventually exceeds the boundaries of these categories altogether by assuming a quasi-global status. Next, we examined the ways Michael blended generational categories throughout his life, first by performing adult behaviors in his youth, and later by morphing into an inverted version of this same hybridity by demonstrating childlike features as an adult. Both discussions intend to characterize Michael as sublime and uncanny by portraying his physical, psychological, and social hybridity and metamorphosis.

At this point, I would like to incorporate a more abstract way of interpreting these biographies by looking at the categories "Original" and "Other." I chose these terms specifically because we find them in the second chapter of *Trapped*, which is a letter addressed to Michael.

The letter begins, "Dear Michael, What happened?" and then explains why "the very name Michael Jackson became a totem" in those months of his rise:

> The bond between you and your fans seemed so powerful that it would overwhelm all barriers, cross over all boundaries. That bond was a version of a dream, its expression essentially American but truly worldwide, in which all opposites are reconciled, sexual and racial and political contradictions extinguished, or rather, fused one unto the other, through sheer goodwill. For the shimmering moment in which you peaked, the message was transmitted through your relentless beat and shy, smiling face, encompassing all innocence yet knowing for certain where the secret heart of the matter—the key to taking in life itself—was hidden. [250]

Notice how Marsh explicitly employs the language of sublimity when he says the bond Michael shared with his fans "seemed so powerful that it would overwhelm all barriers, cross over all boundaries." He also uses the language of hybridity when he describes that same bond as a version of the (American) dream "in which all opposites are reconciled, sexual and racial and political contradictions extinguished, or rather, fused one unto the other, through sheer goodwill." When Marsh imagines Michael transmitting the sublime message of that dream ("where the secret heart of the matter—the key to taking joy in life itself—was hidden"), the author seems to offer an apologetic for Michael's sainthood, though this interpretation becomes problematized after Marsh admits, "Of course it couldn't last. The dream of which I speak is too utopian to be realized, whether right here and now or in an afterlife." Marsh thinks the message of this dream is so sublime, Michael could never embody it. He also says the dream is "only

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[250] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 6-7.

something to which we aspire, not something we're really ever going to possess"—in other words, he says the dream is transcendent and divine. Thus, when the public began to sense that Michael might not embody the dream, "when the bond that wed us to you and your sense of joy was fractured—given even so much as a hairline wound," Marsh explains, "it felt as though the whole structure had collapsed and dragged us down with it,"[251] and for the rest of the letter Marsh proposes various events and situations in Michael's life that may have caused this fracture. At the end of the letter, Marsh reaches the ultimate conclusion that "there are undeniably two Michael Jacksons: the guy who lives your daily life and the one that the rest of us (with much cooperation from the original) have invented…. and so much has been invested in that Other by everybody else (myself included) that to talk about just one version of Michael Jackson is impossible."[252] The rest of the book, Marsh alternates the chapters between letters addressed to Michael and a biographical account of his life. Marsh asks Michael in the letters to explain the ambiguous and anomalous parts of his biography because he thinks these explanations will reveal the "Original" Michael.

Given the fact that we analyzed examples of otherness when we considered how some biographers describe Michael in terms of sublimity, we can imagine some additional ways that they might describe "Other" Michael. Consider, for example, how different biographies examined the ways that Michael appeared socially and culturally dissimilar to white audiences; when he began to change his original physical appearance; when music industry professionals wondered whether the child star was actually a "midget"; when celebrities and journalists tried to make sense of his childlike behavior in adulthood; and finally, Michael's self-identification with

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[251] Ibid., 7.
[252] Ibid., 13.

E.T. and Peter Pan as he struggles to find his place in the world. These examples show how people responded to different displays of otherness. We must not forget, however, that sublimity is not simply a matter of difference; another important aspect is incomprehensibility. Likewise, Michael appeared incomprehensible to his biographers in various ways. Recall how Michael's mother admitted that she could not explain where his talent came from. Nor could Michael, whom Marsh quotes in an interview with Stephen Demorest as saying, "I never knew how I sang. I didn't really control it, it just formed itself… My dancing just comes about spontaneously."[253] Of course, Michael's incomprehensibility is not limited to his self-perception. More significantly, Marsh thinks Michael appears incomprehensible to the public because he has distanced himself so much from the public that he now appears alien. For example, Marsh quotes disc jockey Frankie Crocker as saying, "There's a mystique about Michael that is also a feeling. The public doesn't know exactly anything about Michael."[254] He also suggests that as Michael became increasingly famous, he also became "that much more obtuse."[255] Yet when Taraborrelli quotes Michael from his own interview, Michael seems to indicate his incomprehensibility somewhat differently. While explaining why he enjoys his role as the Scarecrow in *The Wiz*, Michael says to Taraborrelli:

> "What I like about my character is his confusion. He knows that he has problems,
> I guess you could call them. But he doesn't know why he has them or how he got
> that way. And he understands that he sees things differently from the way
> everyone else does, but he can't put his finger on why. He's not like other people.

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[253] Ibid., 187.
[254] Ibid., 188.
[255] Ibid., 5.

No one understands him. So he goes through his whole life with this, uh…" he
paused, "confusion."[256]

Although Michael never explicitly indicates that he personally identifies with his character, it is interesting nevertheless to consider the reasons why the role appealed to him, and to compare these reasons with the ways other people describe Michael in his biographies. Immediately we see once again the notion of incomprehensibility. In Michael's view, the Scarecrow does not understand himself because he does not know his origins, or "why he has [problems] or how he got that way." Although neither Michael nor his biographers say his talent is a problem, they do say that he did not know where it came from; thus, Michael is also haunted by the mystery of his origins. Furthermore, Michael says the Scarecrow's "problems" and "confusion" set the character apart from other characters in the film (such as the gang of blackbirds that taunt him because he has no brain—hence his "confusion"). If we substitute "problems" and "confusion" with "talent," the correlation between his biographical role and his film role becomes more obvious: "no one understands him" because his problems/talent set him too far apart from others.

Taraborrelli seems to agree with the assessment of Michael as "much more obtuse" when he writes, "It had become increasingly difficult in [the 1980s] to relate to Michael as he stood onstage in his military outfit, accepting his many awards, whispering his thanks in an odd, highly

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[256] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 178. The rest of the quote deserves mentioning. "Michael looked off in the distance, now seeming lost in his thought process. 'Everybody thinks he's very special, but really, he's very sad. He's so, so sad. Do you understand?' He fixed his thoughtful gaze on me and asked, 'Do you understand his sadness?'" According to Michael, the Scarecrow is grossly misunderstood, and one might wonder whether Michael was talking about himself. Indeed, his biographies recall frequent bouts of melancholy and loneliness that Michael experienced because his "special" status set him apart from others (especially his family). Michael also admitted to Taraborrelli that he hated to take off the stage makeup he wore during the film and that sometimes he would even go home at night still wearing it. Taraborrelli says that Michael loved the costume because he could walk around and not be recognized when he wore it. Ibid., 168.

pitched tone… It was as if he was from another planet, not earth."[257] Again, we see Taraborrelli

uses the language of sublimity and uncanniness to describe Michael as a foreigner from

someplace unfamiliar who appeared somewhat relatable. As it became more difficult for his

audience to relate to him, he also became less uncanny and hence, more "other". Yet why did

Michael appear to be so alien? Perhaps anticipating the answer that all celebrities are "other"

than ordinary people, Taraborrelli makes it clear that he thinks Michael's "otherness" is of a

completely different order. While Taraborrelli concedes that Michael's artistic talent arguably

makes him "the quintessential entertainer," what really sets him apart from other extremely

talented entertainers is the public's inability to identify with him. For Taraborrelli, this is not

simply a matter of fame,[258] since "the public could identify with many other rock stars whose

humanity and accessibility supersede their stardom."[259] No, the sublimity of Michael is so

profound because no one can relate to him at all. "After all," Taraborrelli asks, "who knows

anyone like Michael Jackson?"

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[257] Ibid., 374-75.

[258] Interestingly, Rabbi Shmuley asserts the exact opposite view and suggests that fame *is* the heart of the matter: "That Michael became stranger than almost any celebrity who preceded him was directly linked to him having become more famous than almost anyone who preceded him. The damage was more extensive and more intense." Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 282. Still, considering how much he encourages Michael to abandon the celebrity lifestyle and become more "ordinary" and relatable to others, I imagine Shmuley might agree with Taraborrelli somewhat.

[259] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 375. It seems like Taraborrelli wants to disassociate Michael's otherness from his celebrity status when the author includes the following comment, given by someone who supposedly associated Michael for over twenty years: "He has had a difficult life, always been a loner, a misfit. If he hadn't become a star, he would be the guy living in Gary, Indiana, alone in a one-bedroom apartment with no friends and a job developing film at a photo lab." Ibid., 458. However, since Taraborrelli directly correlates the emotional under-development of Michael with the effects of child stardom, I doubt the biographer would agree with the associate.

The Metamorphosis of "Wacko-Jacko"

According to some of his biographers, Michael did not start his career with the same sense of profound "otherness" that surrounded him later in life; instead, his talent and eccentric behavior developed over time. For instance, Taraborrelli illustrates how rigorous phonetic training at Motown Records formatively transformed Michael into a more sophisticated vocalist. In this biography, songwriter Deke Richards specifically recalls teaching Michael how to pronounce difficult words without slurring the notes (although his tone was terrific, Richards clarifies). Richards admits that the songwriters, record producers, and Joseph Jackson put a lot of pressure on Michael as a child because they reasoned "if he could be that good in the raw, imagine how amazing he could be if you really polished him up."[260] These comments imply that Michael transformed from something original and "in the raw" to something different and "polished up," that his innate talent underwent a metamorphosis at the start of his career into more refined form.

Taraborrelli also mentions others who recall being impressed by the outgoing and courteous attitude of the Jackson 5 early in their career. When *Soul* reporter Judy Spiegelman describes members of the Jackson 5 as "just kids but not yet at all affected by the attention,"[261] she hints at an expectation that fame would transform their original selves into something different. Through the words of both Richards and Spiegelman, Taraborrelli suggests that a difference exists between the "Original" Michael who debuted in 1970 and the "Other" version that followed as his career progressed, though this does not mean they characterize these versions of him in the same way. When Spiegelman describes Michael as a kid "not yet at all

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[260] Ibid., 58.

affected by the attention," she suggests that the "Original" and "Other" Michael at one point were separate and distinct because fame did not instantly transform him into someone different. Conversely, Richards claims Motown had to cultivate a more polished version of Michael from the raw talent that he inherently possessed. In his view, fame did not create the "Other" Michael; rather, Motown Records groomed "Original" Michael into an advanced, more sophisticated "Other" version. Taraborrelli also claims that Motown cultivated the "Other" version of Michael by encouraging him and his brothers to lie about their age and the way their act was "discovered."[262] According to Taraborrelli's sources, Michael embraced the "Other" version of himself with far less hesitation than his brothers. For example, independent promoter Stan Sherman claims that Michael "was into this image thing at a pretty early age," so much so that once a lie was explained to Michael in terms of public relations, "he not only agreed with it but, I think, he even started to believe it. To me, that was frightening. He seemed willing and even eager to adjust to the fantasy of it all."[263] Michael confirms Sherman's suspicions in an interview with Taraborrelli in 1977 when he said, "It's all just fantasy, really. I like to make my fans happy so I might pose or dance in a way that makes them think I'm romantic. But really I guess I'm not that way."[264] Here Taraborrelli portrays Michael as taking a step beyond merely accepting the "Other" version that Motown Records provided him and forsaking his "Original" identity; more than just an act, Michael now began to embody his new image both onstage and offstage.

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[261] Ibid., 55.

[262] There is a discrepancy among the biographies as to how the Jackson 5 was discovered. Some texts say Diana Ross discovered them (which is also the account authorized by Motown), others say it was Gladys Knight, and still others say it was Bobby Taylor. For more on the mythology surrounding the discovery of the Jackson 5, see: Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*; George, *The Michael Jackson Story*; George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*; Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*; Motoviloff, *The Jackson 5*; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*.

[263] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 74.

[264] Ibid., 153.

To explain how Michael embodied his otherness onstage, Taraborrelli employs the language of metamorphosis. "Whatever it took to please his fans," writes Taraborrelli, "that's what Michael did, transforming, as always, personal frustrations into sheer energy."[265] Michael describes the effects of this "sheer energy" in another text, saying that he becomes one with the music and the audience during these transformative moments onstage, "like being in a trance, it just takes over."[266] Morphing into whatever shape he thought his fans wanted him to be, Michael synthesizes the music, the audience, and the "Other" all into one (later we will explore more ways that his metamorphosis created instances of hybridity). In another example, Taraborrelli notes how the film crew for *The Wiz* reportedly described Michael as performer who faded into the background during rehearsal, but "the moment the music would start, the lights would go on and the costume would come on, this creature would come to life and just overpower everything. It was the most amazing transformation any of them had ever seen."[267] He appeared to be more alive onstage, performing and transforming into the "Other" Michael before thousands of fans—in their eyes, there was no distinction between the "Original" and the "Other" Michaels, both were one in the same. Yet according to Taraborrelli, Michael remained painfully aware of the difference between the two. During a two-hour interview in 1978, Michael told the author, "When I'm not onstage, I'm not the same. I'm different… When I can't get on stage for a long time, I have fits and get crazy. I start crying, and I act weird and freaked out…. It's like a part of me is missin' and I gotta get it back, 'cause if I don't, I won't be complete."[268] Michael then

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[265] Ibid., 136.

[266] Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 109-10. Oddly enough, Andersen includes an alternate version of this same quotation in his biography. Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 81. I am not sure why there is any difference between the two, since Michael's statements supposedly come from an interview with Taraborrelli.

[267] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 187.

[268] Ibid., 177-78.

confesses that the only place he feels comfortable and happy is onstage, and that he's not comfortable around "*normal* people."[269] It seems like the "Other" version of Michael—his talented, performative, constructed form—now dominates his identity because he feels incomplete, different, and weird when he embodies his any other form. In other words, he feels his otherness most profoundly when he is not "Other."

Taraborrelli and Marsh use similar language to describe how Michael embodied his otherness offstage. For instance, Taraborrelli closes his account of Michael's 1982 performance of "Billie Jean" during the televised broadcast of *Motown 25* by saying that "his life—both personally and professionally—would never be the same again."[270] Here Taraborrelli indicates that the "Other" Michael had a transformative effect on his life offstage as well. Likewise, Marsh says that after Michael released the *Billie Jean* video, his image shifted in some important ways. Unlike the "sheer energy" that Taraborrelli mentioned or the "trance" described by Michael, both of which are clearly linked to his interactions with his audience, Marsh thinks that Michael's *Billie Jean* video provided him with "personal magic" that was not ascribed to an outside force (perhaps because there was no "live" audience to reciprocate the "magic").

Marsh extends this magical image beyond the boundaries of musical performances when he says that Michael "had cast himself as his own E.T., a benign, enigmatically endowed alien with a sense of fun and, by implication, some vague mission that other powers wanted to stop."[271] Thus, Marsh sees Michael undergoing a metamorphosis on the Stage of Life as he embodies (metaphorically) the form of E.T., whose character signifies otherness, alienation, and

[269] Ibid., 178. Emphasis added by Taraborrelli.
[270] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 240.
[271] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 217.

unfamiliarity. Taraborrelli takes this comparison a step further when he recounts the accident that

occurred in 1984 while Michael filmed a Pepsi commercial. Michael's hair caught on fire after

some pyrotechnical devices malfunctioned, causing him to suffer severe burn wounds on his

scalp. Taraborrelli says that as paramedics loaded Michael into the ambulance, who was

"strapped in a stretcher, covered up to his nose, his bandaged and taped head resting on a pillow,

one sequined-gloved hand protruding weakly from the blankets," it appeared like "Michael *was*

E.T., an odd little creature hurt by grown-ups who had been playing with fire, being carted away

to who-knows-where, by who-knows-whom, and for who-knows-what purpose."[272] Here

Taraborrelli constructs an image of otherness, then directly correlates that image with the image

of E.T. He does not say that Michael resembled E.T. or cast himself in the same metaphorical

role at the alien creature, as Marsh asserted—instead, "Michael *was* E.T." In other words, the

Pepsi commercial accident transformed Michael into the embodiment of otherness.

　　All of these examples use the language of metamorphosis to describe the "Other"

Michael, both onstage and offstage. We might classify the descriptions provided thus far into two

categories: those provided by Michael and those provided by others. I would like to examine the

former type of descriptions more closely, for his biographers recount numerous situations in

which Michael redefines his otherness. Perhaps the most commonly cited examples of how

Michael actively reshaped his "Other" form are the two tabloid rumors that he supposedly started

in the late 1980s. The first rumor began shortly before the opening of the Disney World 3-D

movie attraction *Captain EO* in September 1986, in which Michael played the starring role.

Taraborrelli says that Michael felt like he needed to create a dazzling gimmick to promote the

attraction, so he convinced his staff to help him concoct a rumor that he slept in a hyperbaric

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[272] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 282.

chamber.[273] Taraborrelli says Michael became interested in oxygen chambers while he recovered

from his burn injuries, and even requested to have a photograph taken of him lying down in one.

When Michael found out someone had tipped off the tabloid *National Enquirer*, he decided to

promote the story that he was sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber in order to prolong his life to the

age of 150. Andersen says Michael specifically chose to pitch the story to the *Enquirer* "because

it had the largest readership in the country and because it offered instant deniability."[274]

However, Taraborrelli insists that Michael "wasn't certain that the public would believe his

story—at this time, such wacky stories were not as associated to Michael as they are today—but

he was eager to see how much of a buzz he could start."[275] To confirm the story, Michael called

Charles Montgomery, a reporter who worked for the *Enquirer* at that time, as did Michael's

manager, Frank Dileo.[276] Montgomery claims the *Enquirer* knew that Michael was trying to

garner publicity, especially since "they wanted us to use words like 'wacky' and 'bizarre'…

[We] figured he was probably trying to promote some kind of sci-fi image" to promote *Captain

EO*.[277] The plan worked flawlessly: soon thereafter, the rumor received coverage by the United

Press International, *Newsweek*, and practically every major newspaper in the country, as well as

television and radio news programs.[278] Thinking back on the story, Montgomery said he realized

then that Michael liked to be portrayed in an absurd, bizarre way, calling him "one of the

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[273] Ibid., 356.

[274] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 209.

[275] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 357.

[276] Conversely, it is said that Michael's parents and his sister Janet openly denied the rumors. Ibid., 359-60.

[277] Ibid., 357. Andersen recounts the same story in his book, adding, "The *Enquirer* was given exclusive rights to the photo and the accompanying story under one condition—that it use the word *bizarre* three times in the piece. No problem." Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 207.

[278] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 359.

smartest entertainers in the business."[279] Clearly, Michael impressed Montgomery with his

ability to manipulate the media to his own advantage.

Taraborrelli and Andersen say that Michael started a similar rumor in May 1987, right

before the release of his third solo album, *Bad*. Andersen claims that Michael authorized his

manager to give a press release announcing Michael's intentions to purchase the skeleton of

Joseph Merrick, a hideously deformed Victorian sideshow-freak known popularly as "The

Elephant Man."[280] Taraborrelli explains the inspiration of this rumor by recalling Michael's

fascination with the 1980 film about Merrick, *The Elephant Man*, who "was an outsider in a

seemingly endless search for love and acceptance—just like, in his own view, Michael."[281] As

with the hyperbaric chamber story, the Associated Press and United Press International picked up

the story, and soon the British media began referring to Michael as "Wacko-Jacko."[282] One of his

associates, Bob Michaelson, reportedly said that Michael was "thrilled" by the success of the

rumor: "Everyone was talking about how weird and mysterious he was just before the new

album was about to come out—he could not have been happier."[283] However, things turned sour

when the media contacted the London Hospital Medical College to verify that they received an

offer from Michael to purchase the bones.[284] Of course, the rumor was denied. After Dileo

telephoned the hospital and offered one million dollars for the skeleton, the hospital officials said

they were insulted and a spokeswoman told the press, "Indeed, he offered to buy it, but it would

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[279] Ibid., 360.
[280] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 219.
[281] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 361.
[282] Ibid., 362.
[283] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 219.
[284] While it may be hard to believe that the AP and UPI did not checked this before going to press, the timeline in Taraborrelli's book does not indicate whether "the media" contacted the medical college before or after AP and UPI "picked up the story." In order to confirm whether the author bended the facts to fit his agenda (to portray the media in a particular way), I would need to compare the stories published by AP and UPI to the Taraborrelli's timeline.

be for publicity and I find it very unlikely that the medical college would be willing to sell it for cheap publicity reasons."[285] According to Taraborrelli, the consequences of this phony story would prove more harmful than the last by creating "a domino effect" in the media, "one from which his image would never truly recover."[286] Unscrupulous journalists began to concoct their own rumors about Michael, claiming that he created a shrine for Elizabeth Taylor and asked her to marry him, or that he refused to bathe in anything but Evian water, as well as endless stories about Bubbles, Michael's pet chimpanzee.[287] These rumors, combined with his plastic surgery and obsession for all things childlike, helped to construct the "Other" version of Michael, one who bewildered audiences by continually transgressing societal expectations. For those who grew up with Michael throughout the 1970s, the "Original" Michael they remembered from the Jackson 5 seemed to exist no longer.

The Multiplicity of Michael Jackson

According to Taraborrelli and Marsh, the "Wacko-Jacko" persona associated with Michael Jackson developed over time. Both biographers seem to imagine the "Original" Michael as someone approachable, relatable, and unaffected by fame—and ascribe the opposite of these qualities to the "Other" Michael that populated the tabloid magazines. Other biographers ascribe Michael with the same duality, but use different terms to indicate his conflicting personas. Rabbi Shmuley says that during his interviews with Michael, he quickly noticed that "there are two

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[285] Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*, 362.

[286] Ibid., 364. Indeed, Michael complained about being haunted by the media in the songs "Leave Me Alone" (1987), "Tabloid Junkie" (1995), "Privacy" (2001), and "Breaking News" (2010). Michael reportedly addressed the issue in May 2003 when he told *People* magazine, "I want people to see the real me. I don't have sex with little kids. I don't sleep in hyperbaric chambers, and don't have elephant bones in my body. So many things are said about me, and I have no idea where they came from." Ibid., 365.

Michael Jacksons: the shy, soft-spoken humble child from Gary, Indiana, whose only desire in

life was to be loved and cherished and the raunchy, bizarre, aggressive, and aloof King of Pop

whose principle desire was to retain the adoration of the masses at any cost."[288] The qualities

Rabbi Shmuley correlate with the "child from Gary, Indiana" closely resemble the way

Taraborrelli describes Michael in his youth, and the terms used to describe the "King of Pop"

almost perfectly match Marsh's description of the "Other" Michael.

Interestingly, Stacy Brown assesses Michael in a way similar to Rabbi Shmuley when he

writes, "Gone was the naïve, bright-spirited young man who had once captivated Jones and the

world at large. Instead, here was a man of nearly unrelenting cynicism and dark intentions…"[289]

Much like Rabbi Shmuley, Brown distinguishes between Michael in his youth and Michael in his

later years, and describes the former in undeniably more favorable terms than the latter. Yet

when we look at another quotation from *The Man Behind the Mask*, Brown does not suggest that

Michael embodies these versions simultaneously:

> Michael morphed from a supremely talented, ground-breaking young artist of
>
> unparalleled devotion to his craft into a hollow shell of eroding skills, immorality
>
> and isolated self-delusion. Michael's passion for music had been transformed into

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[287] Curiously, Michael includes visual representations of these rumors in his *Leave Me Alone* video, which takes place on a fantasy amusement park ride built on top Michael's giant body (think *Gulliver's Travels*).

[288] Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 26.

[289] Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*, 9. Brown describes Michael's duality in even greater detail several pages later by saying, "With an ego as large as anyone in popular entertainment has ever seen, Michael went from an immensely talented, black icon to a perpetually childlike, wan, genderless, delusional person." Ibid., 32. Here, instead of distinguishing versions of Michael by his age, Brown categorizes the star's personas by other categories: gender, race, level of achievement, mental state. These distinguishing features vary significantly from those demarcated by Rabbi Shmuley. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that other biographers use these same categories to examine Michael's life, especially the categories of gender and race. Michael's biographies appear to maintain a certain level of consistency by focusing on similar issues; indeed, quite rarely have I seen them venture beyond these categories.

an obsession with his image, celebrity and diminishing fortune, and a reckless and

bottomless self-indulgence.[290]

Instead of describing Michael in terms hybridity, here Brown imagines Michael strictly in terms

of metamorphosis, making it clear that he thinks the "Original" Michael no longer exists.

While Brown, Rabbi Shmuley, Taraborrelli, and Marsh may employ similar categories to

describe Michael, they do so for quite different reasons; though they share the same means, their

ends are not alike. Even though a thorough analysis of their motives goes beyond the scope of

this paper, some general observations may still be made. Marsh, whose book was published

almost twenty-five years earlier than the rest, is interested in separating Michael's constructed

image from his "true" identity. Taraborrelli, one the other hand, shows less interest in

distinguishing Michael from his constructed image, perhaps because who knew Michael

personally; instead, Taraborrelli spends time tracing the development of Michael from one

persona into another, without really privileging one persona over the other. Like Marsh, Rabbi

Shmuley wants to distinguish the constructed persona from the true identity and hoped that

Michael would choose the latter over the former. Yet because almost twenty-five years separate

the publications of their books, their understanding of Michael's duality invariably will look

quite different: after all, Michael had not yet been accused of child molestation by the time

Marsh wrote his book, nor had his physical appearance changed so drastically. Furthermore,

since Rabbi Shmuley published his book shortly after Michael's death, it carries a tone of

exasperated hopelessness that is not present in Marsh's text—although a more thorough

comparison of these texts would need to happen in order to confirm this assessment. Finally,

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[290]Ibid., 4.

Brown categorizes Michael in order to show that the present-day version of Michael was dramatically different from the version Bob Jones first worked with at Motown Records. Perhaps the strongest force motivating Brown and Jones to portray Michael in this way is the fact that the first edition of *The Man Behind the Mask* was released in 2005, while Michael's trial was still underway. If Brown and Jones expected Michael to receive a guilty verdict at the time the wrote their book, it makes sense why they chose to ally themselves with the positive portrayals of Michael, but still acknowledge the negative version that they expected to receive a jail sentence.

Before I close, there are three additional ways that Michael's biographers characterize his hybridity that relate to the characterizations mentioned above. First, Tatiana Thumbtzen seems to employ the categories "Original" and "Other" as well, though she imagines them in an entirely different sense than the authors mentioned above, for her book explores a tension between Michael Jackson the individual and "the Michael Jackson camp," as other biographers sometimes call his team of associates.[291] As she recounts her experience working with Michael on the set of his *The Way You Make Me Feel* video and onstage during his *Bad* concert tour, Thumbtzen claims she was fired after kissing Michael onstage during a concert performance. Thumbtzen also claims Michael's production company, MJJ Productions, started to "blackball" her from other entertainment gigs by telling prospective employers that she was booked already by MJJ Productions when actually she was not. Thumbtzen recalls asking herself, "To think my idol would do something so cruel was impossible to believe. Could he really be responsible? Would he do something that could damage my life and career forever? Could it have been people

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[291] For other biographies that discuss Michael's relationship with his business associates, see: Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*; Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*; Ryan, *The Way He Made Me Feel*; Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story, 1958-2009*.

from his own camp? Was he aware of what they were doing?"[292] In her mind, the "Original" Michael would never harm her like this, and she speculated instead that those who worked for him were making decisions on his behalf—they were the "Other" Michael. Thumbtzen later says that members of Michael's family, such as his mother Katherine and sister Rebbie, confided to her that they believed Michael's manager in particular felt threatened by her: "If Michael falls in love and wants to marry you, then Dileo fears the person Michael is close to, could have more value and credibility than he does with Michael."[293] Thumbtzen writes, "The more I would hear of the family's complaints and stories about his own family not being able to reach him, it all made me think about who was really in control… I did not like thinking negative thoughts about my idol."[294] Unfortunately for Thumbtzen, she never received answers to her questions, and admits the she still cannot blame Michael: "Until this day, it is hard for me to believe such a thing. That is why I welcome the idea of speaking to him."[295] Much like Marsh, Thumbtzen hopes her book would open the lines of communication between her and the "Original" Michael, who she felt was the only one who could explain what really happened and provide her closure.

Second, Rabbi Shmuley delineates between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" versions of Michael. He admits in the preface to his book that he did not feel awed by Michael's presence when they first met,[296] and he continued to feel this way until one evening when Michael visited his home for dinner. "Sitting there altogether," Rabbi Shmuley recalls, "I found it almost impossible to imagine him as a superstar. He seemed so utterly ordinary. He remained shy even in his own (albeit temporary) home and I noticed that he hated existing at the center of attention

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[292] Ryan, *The Way He Made Me Feel*, 97.
[293] Ibid., 102.
[294] Ibid., 104.
[295] Ibid., 98.

in an intimate setting."[297] At this point, Rabbi Shmuley has only encountered an "ordinary"

version of Michael. "But then," he continues, "as we were getting up from dinner, which he

barely ate, he hummed a tune from one of his songs and in that instant the beautiful voice

reminded me of his vast talent that was usually nowhere apparent."[298] In that instant, Michael

transformed from ordinary to extraordinary in the eyes of Rabbi Shmuley, who clearly correlates

this transformation directly with Michael's musical talent. For Rabbi Shmuley, what made

Michael special and set him apart from other entertainers—what made him sublime—was his

musical talent, and not his bizarre behavior, eccentric behavior. Furthermore, by delineating

between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" versions of Michael, Rabbi Shmuley suggests that there

are multiple versions of the "Original" Michael Jackson: one who is simultaneously familiar (in

the sense that he is ordinary, like most of us) and unfamiliar (in the sense that he is

extraordinarily talented, unlike most of us). In other words, this particularly dichotomy uses the

language of the uncanny and the sublime.

Finally, others who recall their first encounters with Michael do not employ the same

categories as Rabbi Shmuley to describe their experiences. Instead, they subcategorize the

"Other" Michael into a "simulated" version that later transforms into something "actual" when

they encounter him. It might come to no surprise, however, that although each individual defines

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[296]Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 9.

[297] According to Rabbi Shmuley, Michael openly expressed his desire to live an ordinary existence while giving a lecture at Oxford on parenting (though Rabbi Shmuley admits writing most of the speech): "There was one day a week, however, that I was able to escape the stages of Hollywood and the crowds of the concert hall. That day was the Sabbath…. my friend Shmuley further clarified for me how, on the Jewish Sabbath, the everyday life tasks of cooking dinner, grocery shopping, and mowing the lawn are forbidden so that humanity may make the ordinary extraordinary and the natural miraculous…. On this day, the Sabbath, everyone in the world gets to stop being ordinary. But what *I* wanted more than anything was to *be* ordinary. So in my world, the Sabbath was the day I was able to step away from my unique life and glimpse the everyday." Ibid., 104. Regardless of whether or not Michael actually felt this way, the fact that Rabbi Shmuley includes these statements in his book suggests that the categories "ordinary" and "extraordinary" greatly interested the author.

these categories differently, sometimes providing multiple definitions for a category, they all incorporate the language of the sublime and the uncanny. Take for example the way Marjorie De Faria, who won tickets to attend a meet-and-greet with Michael in the early 1990s, depicts her encounter with Michael: "He walks past us waving and we all started waving back, this man is gorgeous, I mean GORGEOUS. Not like what you see in magazines, or on television, even more beautiful. His pale color makes him appear so fragile; his hands so thin and bony look as if they'd break if one would grab him."[299] De Faria approaches Michael with an image in mind that she gleaned from his magazines photos and television appearances: this is the "simulated" Michael. After meeting him personally, she admits that he appeared "even more beautiful" in real life; in other words, reality enhanced his otherness. Rather than portraying him as "ordinary," she specifically recalls how his pale color underscored his exceptional fragility.

However, De Faria seems to contradict this "extraordinary" portrayal of Michael when she recounts the way he ate during the meet-and-greet: "Naturally Michael, being a kid himself, began picking up the pizza and pulling the cheese off with his fingers and started eating… He was very normal, not a fancy snobby person at all."[300] Here we can interpret her perception of the "actual" Michael in two ways: either she considered it normal for Michael to eat like a kid (in which case, De Man does not divorce the "actual" version from his sublimity), or she considered Michael normal because he did not eat like a "fancy snobby person" (in which case, she separates the "actual" Michael from the "Other" version in order to re-imagine him in uncanny terms—she identifies a sameness within his otherness). Either way, De Faria's initial perception

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[298] Ibid., 11-12.
[299] Bloemen, *It's All About L.O.V.E.: Michael Jackson Stories You Were Never Meant to Hear*, 412.
[300] Ibid., 413.

of Michael seems to change as she spends more time with him, and so the categories she employs to organize her various perceptions change as well.

Turning to another example, let us examine the language Dagmar Herrmann uses to recount his encounter with Michael. Herrmann is an artist who created numerous paintings, drawings, and collages dedicated to Michael. After sending Michael some photographs of his work, Herrmann was invited to present the actual pieces to Michael in his Berlin hotel room. Recalling the way Michael said goodbye after their meeting, Herrmann writes, "He arose in an incomparable kind and manner. I'm wondering all the time, in which video clip or where else I had already observed him doing this movement. He almost floated from his resting place in a way I have never seen a human being to stand up and…hugged me." [301] Again, we see a tension between a "simulated" Michael and the actual version, the image Herrmann recalled from Michael's videos and the living imaged he witnessed in the hotel room. Moreover, Herrmann ascribes Michael with sublimity when he recalls how Michael "arose in an incomparable kind and manner." When Herrmann describes their embrace, he says it "was not fleeting, but tender. Indescribably homely warm—I can't express it in words any better—and he smelled as good as honey or honey cake. I don't know how else to describe it."[302] The author clearly ascribes the "actual" version with sublimity when he says Michael was "incomparable" and "indescribable," and one might argue that Herrmann employs the language of uncanniness when he says their embrace was indescribably (otherness) homely[303] (sameness) warm.

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[301]Ibid., 258.
[302]Ibid., 258.
[303] Interestingly, many scholars translate the German terms *heimliche* into "homely."

As the examples above have shown, Michael's biographers use the same existential category to portray his life and musical legacy in many different ways. For instance, those who juxtapose his "original" identity against his "other" identity characterize each persona in different ways: whereas some consider the "other" identity to be the persona that Michael constructed in order to gain publicity, others associate the same identity with Michael's associates who influenced and directed his business affairs. Similarly, for some the "original" Michael refers to someone who had yet been affected by the power of fame and fortune, while others simply associate the "original" Michael with his offstage personality. Unlike the racial and generational categories analyzed earlier, polemical reactions to the existential categorization of Michael Jackson are not responding to the same boundaries; in other words, while these reactions relate to the same overarching problem of understanding the "authentic" Michael Jackson, there is more than one line that separates the different positions in such debates. It is crucial to keep this in mind whenever we start comparing the different ways his biographers stake claim in who Michael "really" is, since they seems to imagine authenticity in several different ways.

Thinking about different perceptions of the authentic Michael Jackson also introduces us to broader issues involving celebrity and popular culture. It seems that debates regarding the existential identity of Michael have more to do with asserting authority and less with untangling myth from fact. The "Original" Michael that Marsh describes is not necessarily the "real" Michael, but rather it is the version of Michael that Marsh wants the public know and accept over the "Other" constructed image. Likewise, the juxtaposition of the "ordinary" and "extraordinary" versions of Michael is interesting because it diminishes the former and reinforces the latter; that is, the fact that Michael has "normal" tendencies renders his image all the more extraordinary

than if he was simply an anomalous figure. Stories regarding his "ordinary" life do not provide a

historically-accurate account of who he "really" is; instead, they provide strength and support for

the myths surrounding his extraordinary persona. Thus, as with saint and monsters, celebrities

like Michael Jackson are sources of power for those who tell their stories. Though his

biographers utilize that power for different reasons (to encourage others to share a particular

viewpoint, to advance careers, to teach people how to live moral lives), they convene to negotiate

the distribution of power at the same point: the existential categorization of Michael Jackson.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I examined how selected biographers imagine Michael Jackson by focusing on accounts that employ the language of sublimity, uncanniness, hybridity, and metamorphosis. As they narrated Michael's life, these biographers recounted the different ways that Michael blended and transformed racial, generational, and existential categories: black-white, adult-child, original-other. I suspect some readers (especially those who are not particularly interested in Michael Jackson) are wondering why any of this analysis matters: "Who cares if Michael's biographers say he blended and/or transformed categories?" While it might be interesting to consider, for example, how and why, Michael raised so much controversy with his childlike behavior, what can we learn from such considerations?

As with stories about saints and monsters, biographies on Michael Jackson can teach us a great deal about the communities that tells these stories. Recall Bynum's claim that metamorphosis reminds us of the narrative and mutable qualities of life, and hybridity reveals the multiplicity of reality through the combination of various expressions. Similarly, Kearney says that most monsters reveal our own multiplicity because they are "tokens of fracture within the human psyche" that remind us how we too are split between "conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other."[304] In other words, "our most feared monsters can serve as uncanny doubles for our all-too-human selves."[305] Coleman makes this same point (though from a more sociological perspective) when he writes, "All saints, even those about whom there is abundant information, are inscribed with and molded by our concerns and priorities."[306] Like

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[304] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 4.
[305] Ibid., 50.
[306] Ditchfield, "Thinking with Saints: Sanctity and Society in the Early Modern World," 579-81. He continues, "Arguably, the perfect saint, from this point of view, is one about whom nothing can be known because he or she

monsters, saints tend to act as mirrors that reflect the images of the societies to which they belong. Both saints and monsters embody the norms and values of a particular society, though they do so in different ways: the image of a saint includes that which society admires and aspires to become, and the image of a monster includes that which society fears and struggles to avoid.

Interestingly, some of Michael's biographers seem to echo hagiographic and teratological scholarship when they suggest their story can teach us something about ourselves. In the first letter-chapter of his book, Marsh admits to Michael that "in finding some things about you that we might hope are true, in thinking about them in different ways than they're usually allowed to be thought about, maybe we can also learn something about ourselves."[307] Nelson George reveals a similar desire when he writes:

> Michael's life raises so many questions—about Michael and about us. How do we collectively balance his musical/performing brilliance with his inappropriate relationships with a litany of young boys? What do we make of his relationship to the black culture that nurtured him? Are there any lessons left from the success of *Thriller* that can be applied to the profoundly altered pop culture universe of the twenty-first century? [308]

These questions directly relate with many of the themes discussed earlier: race, sexuality, maturity, celebrity. Likewise, Andersen uses the language of sublimity and uncanniness when he writes, "It had been said repeatedly that Michael was not like other mortals, that he was ore

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never existed in the historical sense." Considering the fact that there are at least 100 books written on Michael Jackson, millions of internet videos of him, and countless websites devoted to praising or condemning his fame, Ditchfield's comments prove especially relevant to our analysis.

[307] Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, 13.

[308] George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, 13.

extraterrestrial than human, that he was not of this earth. In truth he is very much of this earth

and all too human, embodying the problems and frailties of a generation."[309] In an article that he

published two days before Michael's funeral service, Rabbi Shmuley asserts that Michael

"represents a microcosm of America," and asks "how different were his peculiarities from our

own?"[310] After all, Rabbi Shmuley claims, we too live in "an age of reality TV where washing

our dirty laundry in public makes us into celebrities," struggle with drug addiction and material

decadence, undergo unnecessary cosmetic operations, and sexualize our teens.[311] "In sum," he

writes, "we are fixated on Michael Jackson because he was always just a very extreme version of

ourselves…. Where Michael goes, the rest of us go."[312] Thus, by looking at the story of Michael

Jackson, Rabbi Shmuley thinks that we can prevent ourselves from repeating the same mistakes

that Michael made while also motivating ourselves to reflect the invariable goodness that he

showed throughout his life. It seems then that scholars and biographers are saying the same

thing—that a saintly figure reflects the values of a particular community or audience.

Focusing on the preceding biographical analysis, I would like to point out how the

biographies might teach us about the norms and values held by Michael's audience,[313] or at least

how particular authors imagine these norms and values. Perhaps most obviously, the racial

categories used in his biographies illustrate different perceptions of race. According to the

biographies, Michael's audience seems divided between the norm of maintaining rigid racial

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[309] Andersen, *Michael Jackson Unauthorized*, 410-11.
[310] Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 7.
[311] Ibid., 7-8.
[312] Ibid., 8.
[313] Even though some authors featured in this thesis are not American, I have included them within this community because they imagine themselves in participation with American popular culture, by which I mean "the immediate and natural human environment…where the creation, reading, re-reading, acceptance, denial and destruction of most of our everyday definitions take place" within an American context. Moreover, "Popular culture can be thought of as

boundaries and tearing those boundaries down. It also seems that racial boundaries are valued by

different communities for different reasons: whereas the black community seems to support rigid

racial boundaries so as to preserve their black identities in the face of white assimilation, white

business executives endorse these boundaries so long as the generate financial revenue. Because

books have been published on Michael Jackson for over forty years, we can trace responses to

his racial hybridity and metamorphosis and perhaps notice changes in perceptions of racial

inequality; as new generations of biographers contribute to the "canon" of literature on Michael

Jackson, writers who have not personally experienced legal segregation might portray Michael's

racial hybridity and metamorphosis differently than those who have. On the other hand, it might

turn out that these writers do not react differently, which might suggest that our country has not

abandoned some of the racist ideologies that are expressed in earlier biographies. We also might

compare the way people imagine Michael Jackson with similar black entertainers (such as Prince

and R. Kelly) to determine whether racial categories are employed the same way in their stories.

Comparisons such as these might also encourage us to examine occurrences of the "crossover

phenomenon" in other areas of American popular culture, such as hip-hop.

    Biographies on Michael Jackson can also teach us about certain norms and values when

we think about the generational categories used by his biographers. For instance, these

biographies include different perspectives on child stardom. Rabbi Shmuley thinks "a whole

generation has now grown up like Michael Jackson, pushed to achieve too early, made to feel by

parents that they were machines of productivity at too young an age. Deprived of the wholesome

attention that is their birthright, they have grown up lusting for the spotlight and will do anything

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a library of texts which contradict, overlap, enrich, and disempower each other." Brzozowska-Brywczyńska,
"Monstrous/Cute. Notes on the Ambivalent Nature of Cuteness," 214-15.

to get it."[314] According to Rabbi Shmuley, the innocent child has been (wrongly) sacrificed for a higher value—fame and fortune—and he is greatly concerned by how much this trend has become an accepted norm in American society. With these observations in mind, we can compare perceptions of Michael's child stardom with other famous child celebrities (such as Shirley Temple, Lindsey Lohan, Justin Bieber, and Willow Smith) to see if others also think child stardom poses a widespread threat to the moral fabric of America. We also might consider how Michael's biographers exhibit different views on age and maturity more generally, and whether they suggest that "youth" has surpassed "maturity" in social value. For instance, since Michael's biographers often discuss issues related to sexuality as they explore different generational categories, we can think about how they portray social norms involving childhood sexuality, sexual deviance, and sexual abuse. For such considerations, the works of Michel Foucault[315] might prove especially helpful; his lectures on abnormalities and sexual misconduct provide a genealogical explanation as to why certain generational boundaries exist that limit what is considered to be "proper sexual conduct" between adults and children. Thus, reading biographies on Michael Jackson through the lens of sainthood and monstrosity not only reveals certain norms and values, but also encourages us to explain why these norms and values even exist. Even if the biographers talk about "the rules of society" as if they were self-evident, the scholar of religion knows better than to make the same mistake.

Finally, we may reflect upon the existential categories biographers use to describe the multiplicity of Michael Jackson in order to examine social norms and values regarding authenticity and identity. If saints and monsters serve as mirrors that reveal reflections of society,

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[314] Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation*, 283.
[315] Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1974-1975*.

we may find certain meanings ascribed to Michael also persist in other areas of popular culture as well. For example, the reification of the "Wacko-Jacko" mythology speaks to the passivity of the American public's relationship with the media. The stories about Michael sleeping in hyperbaric chambers and purchasing the Elephant Man's bones became real because the vast majority of his audience embraced the tabloids as truth, and because Michael perpetuated the myth himself through his music and videos. It seems that similar situations often occur in American media: the controversy surrounding President Obama's birth certificate, the demonization of Muslims since 9/11, and the popularity of reality television provide additional examples of media-generated simulations that are embraced as actual representations. [316] How is this even possible? Or consider the overwhelming popularity of banal "musicians" such as Rebecca Black, the internet sensation whose homemade music video has been called "the death of music." Although many of Michael's songs carry deep messages, much of his music is simple, repetitive, and unoriginal, which makes one wonder why more sophisticated artists do not receive more attention than him. Why is "bad" music unequivocally more popular than "good" music? [317] By analyzing biographies written on Michael Jackson, we can familiarize ourselves with broader issues involving popular culture that we might otherwise ignore because they are so commonplace in our daily lives.

Lastly, biographies on Michael Jackson can teach us a great deal about celebrity culture and religion. Although we would like to think of ourselves as a more highly evolved society than our medieval predecessors, it seems that modern celebrity culture has much more in come with

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[316] The work of Jean Baudrilliard has been particularly helpful in sorting out this issue. Jean Baudrilliard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

the medieval cult of saints than we would like to admit. When we compare the role celebrities and medieval saints played in their respective communities, it becomes clear that both functioned as a source of power that edified specific norms and values. Moreover, both medieval saints and modern celebrities are memorialized, emulated, immolated, and commodified, though in very different ways specific to their particular socio-historical context. My research aims to draw out these similarities and encourage the reader to think more critically about the role of religion in popular culture, both today and in the past.[318] Much like saints, monsters, and Michael Jackson, the boundaries that divide the religious from the secular is not always obvious.

To review, my thesis is a hybrid project, a fitting description considering the material covered here. On the one hand, I provide a ground-breaking analysis of scholarship on hagiography and teratology: to my knowledge, no other comparative project like this exists today. In my analysis I look for moments where stories about saints and monsters (and analysis of them) converge. On the other hand, I provide a unique interpretation of biographies written on Michael Jackson, one that both retells his story (so as to demonstrate the complexity of his mythology) and analyzes his story through the lens of sainthood and monstrosity (so to explain why and how he became a global phenomenon. Throughout my thesis, these two parts are in conversation with each other and converge at three important points: they provide a map of boundaries by using the concepts of the sublime, the uncanny, hybridity, and metamorphosis;

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[317] This is the very question Theodor Adorno tries to answer; in his view, bad art is more readily consumed because it simply regurgitates popular and harmonious styles, whereas good art challenges the status quo and creates something new and discordant. Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[318] Other scholars in religious and cultural studies have embarked on similar projects by looking at other celebrities. For more, see: Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Kathryn Lofton, "Practicing Oprah; or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spritual Capitalism," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 4 (2006); Kathryn Lofton, "Public Confessions: Oprah Winfrey's American Religious History," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 18, no. 1 (2008). Doss, *Elvis Culture: Faith, Fans & Image*; Doss, "Popular Culture Canonization: Elvis Presley as Saint and Savior."

they reveal a tension between history and myth; they demonstrate the constructed nature of the stories—their polemical and apologetic qualities. By looking at these convergences, I tried to identify the boundaries that separate extraordinary from ordinary and saints from monsters, to point out various social boundaries and categories. I also tried to illustrate the constructed nature of mythology, a quality which many outside the field of religious studies seem to take for granted. Finally, I tried to explain the power and significance of celebrities in general, and Michael Jackson specifically: why they captivate our consciousness, why we continue to follow their lives, why we choose to compare ourselves to them.

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APPENDIX A

1. **Christopher Andersen,** *Michael Jackson Unauthorized.* **New York: Pocket Books (1995), pp. 466.** One of the more critical biographies on Michael Jackson, Andersen's book is the first to tackle the 1993 allegations of the child molestation levied at Michael. In his account of these allegations, as well as the subsequent investigation and settlement, Andersen relies on off-the-record testimonies from former employees, many of whom claim to have witnessed Jackson molesting various children, including Macaulay Culkin and "Joey Randall," (otherwise known as Jordie Chandler, the child who accused Michael of child molestation in 1993)."the first accuser." Although the book lacks overt interjections of the author's opinion, (thus enhancing the historical quality of the text, one might argue), and Andersen openly recognizes the dubiousness of some people in Jackson's "camp," this biography employs eyewitness interviews and court documentation in order to provide an "unauthorized" declaration of Michael's guilt. Andersen also recounts Michael's prolonged drug abuse, numerous unethical business practices, and questions regarding Michael's sexuality. Perhaps most telling, however, is his underlying criticism of the unconditional love of Michael's fans (ordinary and celebrity) and the media's insatiable obsession with Michael's personal life; clearly, Michael Jackson is not the only one Anderson is trying to expose. This biography includes an extensive appendix of notes and sources, most of which come from interviews conducted by Andersen and his researchers, court documents, newspaper and magazine articles, and other celebrity biographies. It also includes 65 images, ordered chronologically, and it is clear that he selected only photos that correlate with his "unauthorized" account of Michael's life. A former contributing editor of *Time* and senior editor of *People* magazine, Andersen is the author of twenty-nine books and 13 New York Times bestsellers, some of which include: *The Day Diana Died, The Day John Died, Jackie After Jack, Bill and Hillary, Barack and Michelle, Jaggar Unauthorized,* and *Madonna Unauthorized.*

2. **Brigitte Bloemen, et al, *It's all about L.O.V.E.* Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH (2010), pp. 444.** This book is a collection of sixty stories and poems written by fans of Michael Jackson from all over the world. The editors of this book began compiling these stories in the beginning of June 2009, and it originally was intended to be a gift for Michael. After he died, they initially gave up on the project, but later decided to publish the stories so the generations that follow will know "what it was like being a Michael Jackson fan in the 'MJ-era'" (most of them take place in Europe or California from the late 1980s until March 5, 2009, when he announced the dates for his upcoming *This Is It* Tour). This book provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of a Michael's global fan base, for these stories recount fans witnessing Michael in various situations and settings, including live performances, hotel visits, and random encounters. Especially because the authors of these stories consistently self-identify with a community of fans, this book would prove invaluable in a study of Michael's devotional cult. Furthermore, religious language is employed in many of these stories to convey the intensity of the fans' adoration of Michael and his effect on their lives. Although they do not ignore the more negative aspects of Michael's biography (there are multiple accounts from those who attended the 2005 trial proceedings), they never fail to defend Michael's innocence or blame someone else for his mistakes. There are numerous images throughout the book, most of which are personal photos taken by the stories' authors.

3. **Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes*. New York: Vanguard Press (2009), pp. 299.** This book consists of transcripts from taped conversations between Rabbi Shmuley in Michael Jackson, the author conducted between August 2000 and April 2001. The conversations are organized thematically into eight parts the cover topics such as "Childhood Fame and Joe Jackson," "Fame in Adulthood," and "Romantic Relationships and Getting Hurt." The book also includes an interview Rabbi Shmuley conducted with Michael's mother, Katherine Jackson. The author openly and repeatedly admits in the introduction and conclusion to his book that he hoped to help Michael "consecrate his fame to a higher purpose," and this desire largely shaped the direction of their conversations. However, as time progressed, Michael grew increasingly unresponsive and distant from Rabbi Shmuley, who posits various reasons as to why this occurred. Eventually Rabbi Shmuley ended his relationship with Michael because he no longer felt Michael was capable of letting go of his celebrity identity. Rabbi Shmuley decided to publish these tapes only after Michael died; until then, Rabbi Shmuley felt that the child molestation trial and other scandals involving Michael would tarnish the wholesome goals of their conversations. Yet once Michael had passed away, Rabbi Shmuley felt it necessary to reveal a side of Michael Jackson that he thought the world need to see. Although Rabbi Shmuley is often quite critical of Michael Jackson and the choices he made—especially towards the final years of his life—he also expresses deep empathy and respect for the entertainer as well. This book is the first of a two-part series, the second entitled, *Honoring the Child Spirit: Inspiration and Learning from Our Children*, which was released in January 2011. No images are included in this book

4. **Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*. New York: Dell Publishing (1984), pp. 128.** Although there are earlier publications that focus on his solo career, I chose this title because it is the first of two books about Michael Jackson written by *Billboard* journalist Nelson George. Nevertheless, it might be an interesting project to trace and compare the mythological themes and patterns among the books published at this time. For instance, this book one of the earliest biographies to acknowledge the Michael' religious affiliation with Jehovah's Witnesses, yet it is not the first to mention Michael's reclusiveness and man-child hybridity. George also tells us in his "Acknowledgements" that the material for this book comes from his own interviews with Jackson family members, friends, and business associates; interviews that other journalists shared with him; and other "written accounts of Michael Jackson's rise since 1968." Then, after he thanks various people who helped him write the book, he thanks "Michael Joe Jackson for music that has thrilled me since we both were kids and for illustrating that there is no substitute for dedication and determination in turning God-given talent into *magic*." Thus, this book is one of the last books to offer an entirely favorable account of Michael Jackson's life, perhaps because the controversy surrounding Michael's life had yet to reach scandalous proportions when this book was published (indeed, we learn in George's second book that he was commissioned to write *The Michael Jackson Story* shortly after Michael performed at the momentous *Motown 25* special, where he first danced the moonwalk). Michael is mostly characterized as an entertainment prodigy with an unparalleled quality of talent who serves as a role model for the entire African-American community. The book concludes with an Appendix that includes an extensive discography, a list of Michael's ten favorite vocalists, and five awards won by Jackson. Sixteen images are included, the majority of Michael since the release of *Off The Wall*.

5. **Nelson George, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press (2010), pp. 241.** George's second book about Michael Jackson might best be described as part-biography, part-memoir, and part-commentary. As he revisits his earlier writings on Michael, George tells us stories about his experience of Michael Jackson's music and performances, and also interjects his interpretation of key figures and events in Michael's life. The author openly admits that he chose to focus explicitly on Michael's music instead of his controversial life more broadly, completely avoiding a discussion of the tabloid scandals and child molestation allegations that haunted Michael in later years. Instead, this book traces Michael's influence on American popular culture, both musically and socially, and especially within the African-American community. George frequently employs religious language and imagery to emphasize the scope of Michael's power, influence, and value as an entertainer, and a defensive and apologetic tone resonates throughout the book; the last chapter, for example, is entitled "Searching for Transcendence." Although the author does not characterize Michael with the same steadfast praise that was bestowed upon him in *The Michael Jackson Story*, George nonetheless encourages the reader to remember why Michael received so much attention over the years, and to recognize the profound impact he has had on the world. Perhaps in keeping with his focus on Michael's musical career, there are no images in this text. Other books written by this award-winning author include *Where Did Our Love Go: The*

Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound, *Blackface: Reflections on African-Americans and the Movies*, *Hip-Hop America,* and his memoir, *City Kid*.

6. **Bob Jones and Stacy Brown, *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask*. New York: Select Books (2005), pp. 163.** Written by "The Godfather of Black Hollywood" as told to Stacy Brown, this self-proclaimed "exposé" claims to offer "the first detailed, candid, and uncensored account from behind the scenes of the life and times of the world's biggest superstar." Bob Jones first met Michael while working as the publicity manager of Motown Records, and later became the vice-president of Michael's production company, MJJ. Published shortly after "his abrupt, unexpected and startlingly undiplomatic termination" in June 2004 (the first hardbound edition of this book was published in 2005), Jones decided to write this book because he wanted "to set the record straight," especially after so many years of being asked to tell his story and defend his actions while employed at MJJ Productions. Using his own life as a backdrop to Michael's story, Jones frequently interjects personal stories into a more general account of Michael's life, causing it to vacillate between a first and third person narrative format. While some of the stories recalled by the author seriously damage Michael's character— tales of racism, greed, manipulation, and pedophilic tendencies— nonetheless Jones admits that he maintains a certain degree of loyalty to Michael and his family (interestingly, another biographer reported that Jones testified in the 2005 trial proceedings and denied many of the allegations made in this book). Perhaps in an effort to enhance the credibility of the book, Jones names many former employees and associates of Michael's throughout the book, including a number of his alleged teenage boys; yet there is no index of those who are mentioned at the end of the book. Twelve photo images are included that are presumably from Jones's private collection, since no credit is given to their source. It also includes seven images of court documents from Michael's ten-count indictment in 2004. A two-time recipient of a NAACP Image Award for community service, Bob Jones did not publish any other books before he died from a heart attack in 2008. Stacy Brown, who claims to be "a longtime friend and confidante of the Jackson family," also co-authored the book, *Blind Faith: The Miraculous Journey of Lula Hardaway and her son, Stevie Wonder*.

7. **Dave Marsh, *Trapped: Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*. Toronto: Bantam Books (1985), pp. 259.** This book offers the one of the first critical analyses of Michael Jackson, and is the earliest of the books in this study. In the opening chapter, Marsh notes how Michael's unprecedented rise to the top has recently experienced a decline. Once unequivocally praised and admired by both his fans and the media, Jackson now received substantial condemnation from the same people. According to Marsh, the backlash for this "cultural hero" occurred in response to The Jacksons' 1985 *Victory* Tour, where outrageous ticket prices and unethical business partnerships tainted the purity of Michael's image. This backlash will remain and grow, Marsh argues, mostly because Michael refuses to explain himself to his audience, so in an effort to "compel such a dialogue," Marsh alternates each chapter of Jackson's biography with an open letter

addressed to Jackson himself. In these letters, Marsh openly criticizes the way Michael has managed his fame, and encourages Michael to recognize his personal limitations (such as his obsession with bigness) and surpass them. They also offer a compelling critical assessment of the celebrity's role in American society, especially when the celebrity transgresses as many social and cultural boundaries as Michael Jackson. Thus, this book reads more like an intervention than a condemnation, especially since Marsh does not fail to extol Michael's accomplishments as a leader in the music industry and the African-American community. This book includes 29 images of Jackson on stage either alone or with his family, as well as photos from different public events that commemorated Jackson's success (such as the 1984 Grammy Awards). A formative editor of *Creem* magazine and journalist for *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone,* Marsh also has published over two dozen books on rock music and popular culture, including *Elvis, Sly and the Family Stone: An Oral History, Louie Louie: The History and Mythology of the World's Most Famous Rock 'n' Roll Song*, and four books on Bruce Springsteen alone.

8. **Ellen Motoviloff, *The Jackson 5*. New York: Scholastic Book Services (1972), pp. 96.** This is one of the earliest biographies published on the Jackson 5 that I have found, if not ever. Unlike other biographies in this study, this book was originally intended for a younger audience, mostly likely female adolescent African-American fans of the musical group. It is divided into ten chapters, and although five of them are devoted specifically to an individual member of the group, Michael is the only brother featured in every chapter of the book. It reads like an extended teen magazine article, and most likely required Motown Record's seal of approval before publication. Not surprisingly, it describes the boys and their career in entirely favorable terms: not once do we see negative or critical assessments of their lives, and it omits the more scandalous elements of their story that consistently appear in later biographies. Joe Jackson, for example, is characterized as loving disciplinary figure that entire family respected and admired; there is absolutely no mention of the abuse and adultery that appears almost unequivocally in later biographies. Instead, this book focuses on topics that clearly target the interests of teenage girls: how the boys rose to fame, what they like to do in their spare time, what type of girl each boy likes, how their personalities reflect their astrological signs, their favorite things, etc. It also establishes some mythological themes and patterns that continue in later biographies, such as the story of their discovery by Diana Ross, examples of how they embody "the American Dream," and comments on their relationship with the African-American community. 23 images are included, some of which were taken by the author during her visit to the Jacksons' home in Encino, CA.

9. **J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, the Madness, the Whole Story 1958-2009*. New York: Grand Central Publishing (2009), pp. 765.** This is the third edition of this book: the first was published in 1991, and the second in 2003 (for this book, he simply updated the second edition with additional chapters; yet although the second edition shares a similar format with the first, they are not the same word-for

word). One of the most significant books written on Michael, almost every book written on Jackson after 1991 cites this biography. His account of Michael's life is also one of the most multifaceted. He writes in the preface to the first edition, "Even though Michael Jackson's story is, in some ways, a triumphant one of great success and accomplishment, it is ultimately a sad one of betrayal and exploitation." The third edition tells a similar tale, but also includes more of the author's personal sentiment toward and experience of the pop star, and carefully outlines the arguments in different debates about Michael before offering his own opinion. While this biography is unabashedly sympathetic, the author nevertheless doubts and criticizes the star at times, especially when he recounts the years following the release of *Thriller*. The author has interviewed Michael and the entire Jackson family on countless occasions since 1972, attended many cookouts in their Encino home from 1976-1981, and sat through the entire 2005 trial proceedings. He also has provided commentaries on Michael in numerous interviews, and was featured in multiple tribute specials after Michael died. The book includes 39 images of Michael throughout his life, many of which come from the author's private collection, and concludes with thirty pages of sources notes. The former editor of *Soul* magazine, Taraborrelli is well-versed in the history of black popular music, especially Motown. He has written over a dozen celebrity biographies, including *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe, Call Her Miss Ross, Elizabeth, Madonna: An Intimate Biography, Motown: Hot Wax, Cool City & Solid Gold,* and *Sinatra – Behind the Legend*.

10. **Tatiana Y. Thumbtzen,** *The Way He Made Me Feel.* **Self-published with Tonia Ryan through WII books (printed 18 July 2010), pp. 192.** Written by the female lead cast in his music video, "The Way You Make Me Feel," Thumbtzen recounts her brief and fleeting relationship with Michael Jackson. Although she claims the book derives from a journal she kept while living in Hollywood, it includes only one diary excerpt. Instead, the majority of the book reads more like an interview transcript: a speaker key opens the first chapter, and her co-author Tonia Ryan admits interviewing Thumbtzen after reading her diary, so she could "stay true to her original format." Formatting ambiguities aside, this biography recounts Thumbtzen's personal encounters with Michael, his family, and other celebrities while she worked in Hollywood as a professional dancer, model, and actress. A self-proclaimed fan of Michael, she recounts how a sexual chemistry between her and Jackson ignited while they filmed the music video. She also claims that many in Michael's camp knew he had romantic feelings for her, and some told her directly that Michael was attracted to her. However, after kissing him onstage during a *Bad* tour performance, Thumbtzen says certain members of his staff became outraged and convinced Jackson to replace her with Sheryl Crow. She never spoke with him again. Heartbroken, Thumbtzen tried numerous times to contact Jackson, sometimes with the help of his family members, but to no avail. She discusses familiar topics (such as Jackson's sexuality, plastic surgery, and trouble with his employees), and details her own experiences with fame and celebrity that occurred as a result of starring in his music video. The images in this book include photos from Thumbtzen's modeling portfolio, costume production stills from the video production of "The Way You Make Me Feel," and personal photos of her with Michael, or in his parents' Encino home. This is the

second book authored by Thumbtzen, though she claims the publishers of the first, *Once More With Feeling*, grossly misquoted her and omitted stories that she wanted to include.

APPENDIX B

Lyrics to "Black or White"

I took my baby
On a Saturday bang
Boy is that girl with you
Yes we're one and the
same

Now I believe in miracles
And a miracle
Has happened tonight

But, if
You're thinkin'
About my baby
It don't matter if you're
Black or white

They print my message
In the Saturday Sun
I had to tell them
I ain't second to none

And I told about equality
And it's true

Either you're wrong
Or you're right

But, if
You're thinkin'
About my baby
It don't matter if you're
Black or white

I am tired of this devil
I am tired of this stuff
I am tired of this business
Sew when the
Going gets rough
I ain't scared of
Your brother
I ain't scared of no sheets
I ain't scared of nobody
Girl when the
Goin' gets mean

Protection
For gangs, clubs
And nations

Causing grief in
Human relations
It's a turf war
On a global scale
I'd rather hear both sides
Of the tale
See, it's not about races
Just places
Faces
Where your blood
Comes from
Is where your space is
I've seen the bright
Get duller
I'm not gonna spend
My life being a color

Don't tell me you agree
With me
When I saw you
Kicking dirt in my eye

But, if
You're thinkin'
About my baby
It don't matter if you're
Black or white

I said if
You're thinkin'

About my baby
It don't matter if you're
Black or white (2x)

Ooh, ooh
Yea, yea, yea now
Ooh, ooh
Yea, yea, yea now

It's black, it's white
It's tough for them
To get by
It's black , it's white, whoo
(2x)

℗ 1991 MJJ Productions Inc.

Lyrics to "Childhood"

Have you seen my Childhood?
I'm searching for the world that I come from
'Cause I've been looking around
In the lost and found of my heart…
No one understands me
They view it as such strange eccentricities…
'Cause I keep kidding around
Like a child, but pardon me…

People say I'm not okay
'Cause I love such elementary things…
It's been my fate to compensate, for the
Childhood
I've never known…

Have you seen my Childhood?
I'm searching for that wonder in my youth
Like pirates and adventurous dreams,
Of conquest and kings on the throne…

Before you judge me, try hard to love me,
Look within your heart then ask,
Have you seen my Childhood?

People say I'm strange that way

'Cause I love such elementary things,
It's been my fate to compensate, for the
Childhood
I've never known…

Have you seen my Childhood?
I'm searching for that wonder in my youth
Like fantastical stories to share
The dreams I would dare, watch me fly…

Before you judge me, try hard to love me.
The painful youth I've had

Have you seen my Childhood…

Ⓟ 1995 MJJ Productions Inc.

Lyrics to "HIStory"

He got kicked in the back
He say that he needed that
He hot willed in the face
Keep daring to motivate
He say one day you will see
His place in world history
He dares to be recognized
The fires deep in his eyes

How many victims must there be
Slaughtered in vain across the land
And how many struggles must there be
Before we choose to live the prophet's plan
Everybody sing...

Every day create your history
Every path you take you're leaving your
legacy
Every soldier dies in his glory
Every legend tells of conquest and liberty

Don't let no one get you down
Keep movin' on higher ground
Keep flying until

You are the king of the hill
No force of nature can break
Your will to self-motivate
She say this face that you see
Is destined for history

How many people have to cry
The song of pain and grief across the land
And how many children have to die
Before we stand to lend a healing hand
Everybody sing...

Every day create your history
Every path you take you're leaving your
legacy
Every soldier dies in his glory
Every legend tells of conquest and liberty
Every day create your history
Every page you turn you're writing your
legacy
Every hero dreams of chivalry
Every child should sing together in harmony

All nations sing
Let's harmonize all around the world

How many victims must there be
Slaughtered in vain across the land
And how many children must we see
Before we learn to live as brothers
And leave one family oh...

Every day create your history
Every path you take you're leaving your
legacy
Every soldier dies in his glory

Every legend tells of conquest and liberty
Every day create your history
Every page you turn you're writing your
legacy
Every hero dreams of chivalry
Every child should sing together in harmony

A soldier dies
A mother cries
The promised child shines in a baby's eyes
All nations sing
Let's harmonize all around the world