MICHAEL JACKSON'S RADICAL AESTHETIC

VOLUME ONE: HOW HIS EARLY FILMS CHALLENGED AND CHANGED WHITE AMERICA

Willa Stillwater

Michael Jackson's Radical Aesthetic

This two-volume work encourages students, fans, and scholars to take an expansive view of Michael Jackson's art. Focusing on his films, which it approaches as exquisite works of art as well as a theoretical framework for interpreting his other work, it demonstrates the depth and scope of his art and its far-reaching cultural significance. Specifically, it demonstrates how Jackson engaged in a sophisticated process of telling, untelling, and retelling entrenched cultural narratives that perpetuate prejudice, and how he modified affective responses to racial signifiers and other marks of difference. In this way, Jackson confronted prejudice more profoundly than any other American artist in recent memory.

This work also takes a detailed look at the allegations of child sexual abuse. These were so shattering for Jackson both personally and creatively that his life and career divide into two parts – a division reflected in the two-volume structure of this work. Volume One focuses on Jackson's early films followed by analysis of the allegations, including historical factors that may have influenced how the police, press, and public reacted. Volume Two then focuses on the art Jackson created in response, including some of the most poignant, political, and significant work of his career.

Volume Two also looks at evolving perceptions of Jackson's face and persona, approaching them as revolutionary yet deeply troubling works of art – works that became even more unsettling as Jackson wrestled with the intense emotions unleashed by the abuse allegations. It posits that popular perceptions of Jackson's face and persona were illusions that performed critically important cultural functions, and that Jackson himself – the man behind the illusion – was a trickster artist. It concludes that Jackson was the most important American artist of our time, and that his face was his masterpiece. However, it only arrives at these conclusions after careful analysis of his films. It's through his films that Jackson articulates his aesthetic. Therefore, it's his films that make his face legible.

Willa Stillwater co-founded and serves as co-author and co-editor of *Dancing with the Elephant* (dancingwiththeelephant.wordpress.com), a blog devoted to fostering conversations about Michael Jackson, his art, and social change. Stillwater has a PhD in English, and her doctoral research focused on the many ways cultural narratives are made real by being inscribed on the body, which she sees as an important concept in Michael Jackson's work.

This compendium of Michael Jackson's visual art is remarkable and revealing. Through intense research and rich interpretation, Stillwater examines Jackson's work, from his short films to his physical body, as both artistic expression and a means of challenging long-held cultural narratives. The overarching story Stillwater tells is one of history, race and power. It is a story that celebrates the scope of popular art and, more specifically, Black popular art as an agent of social change. This is an extraordinary project that befits an exceptional artist and a phenomenal body of work.

Harriet J. Manning, author of *Michael Jackson and the Blackface Mask*

The protagonist of *Thriller* (1983) observes his transformation into a werewolf. In a pose reminiscent of Hamlet holding the skull of poor Yorick and pondering his own mortality, the protagonist looks at his hand and appears to ponder his own mutability.

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Volume One: How His Early Films Challenged and Changed White America

Willa Stillwater

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for Allyson, Clay, Gavin, Joanna, and Paul – wonderful ambassadors of the next generation

“You make a desperate escape to get down into the subconscious, where I really think all the goodies come from.”

– Quincy Jones on creating meaningful art

Contents

List of Figures xi
Acknowledgments xii
Author's Note xv

Prelude: Telling, Untelling, and Retelling **1**

ACT ONE
The Early Films **19**

1 Selected Films of the 1980s **21**
The Triumph (with The Jacksons) *26*
Billie Jean 31
Beat It 43
Say Say Say (with Paul McCartney) *53*
Thriller 62
Bad 70
The Way You Make Me Feel 76
Dirty Diana 81
Liberian Girl 85

2 *Moonwalker* and Its Component Films **96**
Moonwalker 96
Man in the Mirror 100
Retrospective 102
Badder 103
Speed Demon 104
Leave Me Alone 112
Smooth Criminal 119
Come Together 132
The Moon Is Walking 133

3 Selected *Dangerous* Films **137**
Black or White 138
Remember the Time 158
In the Closet 160
Jam 165
Heal the World 171
Give In to Me 174
Who Is It 177

ACT TWO
A Time of Crisis **189**

4 Historical Contexts **191**
The Black Sexual Predator *193*
The "Working Mom" *195*
The Politics of Pedophilia *197*

5 The Allegations **203**
Victor Gutierrez and the Media *204*
The Chandlers *213*
The Francias *227*
The Toronto "Street Kid" *229*
The Arvizos *231*
Robson and Safechuck *234*

6 Additional Factors Influencing Perceptions **250**
The #MeToo Movement *252*
The "White Negro" and the "Female-Acting" Man *255*
An Affinity with Children *258*

Codetta **264**

Works Cited in Volume One *272*
Index to Volume One *296*

Figures

1.1 A shooting star emphasizes the arch in *The Triumph* (1981) 28
1.2 A billboard projects the protagonist's thoughts in *Billie Jean* (1983) 40
1.3 Mac and Jack's painted faces reimagine blackface in *Say Say Say* (1983) 59
1.4 The werewolf attacks his girlfriend in *Thriller* (1983) 66
1.5 The protagonist reveals cat-like eyes at the end of *Thriller* 69
2.1 An officer tickets the protagonist for dancing in *Speed Demon* (1988) 111
2.2 The protagonist and dancers mourn for Annie in *Smooth Criminal* (1988) 127
3.1 The protagonist joins dancers with painted faces in *Black or White* (1991) 148
3.2 The black panther confronts a statue of George Washington in *Black or White* 150
3.3 Framed by a soldier and his rifle, a child plays in *Heal the World* (1992) 172

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Author's Note

These volumes explore one avenue for gaining a deeper understanding of Michael Jackson's work, especially his visual art. My goal when writing these volumes was to convince readers that this approach is valid and worth considering and, even more importantly, that his art is deserving of this kind of in-depth analysis. However, I certainly don't believe that this is the only way to view Jackson's films and other art. This is simply how I see them. I realize my interpretations may not chime with how others experience or understand his art, and I welcome and encourage them to share their perspectives. Jackson's work is amazingly rich, with a depth of meaning that's a joy to explore, and I believe it's only by sharing our diverse perceptions that we can even begin to appreciate the magnitude of his accomplishment.

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Prelude

Telling, Untelling, and Retelling

In the fall of 1982, not long before the unprecedented success of his *Thriller* album changed his life forever, Michael Jackson quietly met with *Rolling Stone* correspondent Gerri Hirshey for an interview in his California condo. It was just the two of them – no managers or PR people or bodyguards – and after talking for a while, Jackson introduced her to his boa constrictor, Muscles. Jackson then set Muscles on a nearby railing, "where it will remain, motionless, for the next hour or so."[1] Jackson and Hirshey continued the interview, and it appears they had a good conversation. However, when it was time to leave, Jackson made a startling request: he asked Hirshey to wrap the eight-foot-long snake around her body. Hirshey writes that Jackson didn't "force the issue" but it was clear he was sincere – it was "not meant as a prank." Hirshey saw this as a trust-building exercise and suggests that, by encouraging her to engage with Muscles, Jackson was trying to help her understand his fear of the press. As she notes in her article, "Fear of interviews can be just as deep-rooted as a fear of snakes, and in consenting to talk, Michael was told the same thing he's telling me now: *Trust me. It won't hurt you*."[2] She therefore interprets Jackson's unusual request as an appeal for her to empathize with him, feel some approximation of his fear of reporters, and connect with him through shared experiences.

Hirshey's explanation makes sense, but a closer look suggests a different interpretation: that Jackson wasn't asking her to empathize with him so much as Muscles, a creature marked since biblical times as an object of fear and even hatred. (After all, it's a serpent who encourages Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, leading to humans' banishment from the Garden of Eden – though Hirshey suggests that perhaps snakes are simply "the oldest victims of bad press," a remark that makes Jackson laugh out loud.) When Jackson first introduces Muscles, he assures Hirshey that he's "real sweet" and isn't a threat – that actually, her "presence has probably made Muscles a trifle nervous." In this way he humanizes Muscles, as it were, and encourages her to see the situation from Muscles' point of view. Jackson then positions him on the banister, which appears to be a well-considered location: a place where Muscles will stay still enough that Hirshey can feel safe, yet close enough that she can become accustomed to him.

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Finally, Jackson makes his unusual request and, as Hirshey writes, "We compromise." Here's her description of what happens next:

> Muscles cakewalks across an ankle. Its tongue is dry. It just tickles. Block out the primal dread, and it could be a kitten whisker. "You truly believe," says Michael, "with the power of reason, that this animal won't harm you now, right? But there's this fear, built in by the world, by what people say, that makes you shy away like that."

We like to see ourselves as rational beings, but Jackson believed we are guided by what he called our "conditioning" – by the emotions and sensations and gut reactions, the full array of affective responses we've been carefully trained to feel – as much as our intellect. So, as Jackson tells Hirshey, "the power of reason" is on one side, telling her that Muscles "won't harm you." But on the other side, there's a powerful prejudice instilled in her "by what people say," including stories that have been passed down for millennia, generating "this fear … that makes you shy away." Jackson's analysis of the situation is that Hirshey is torn between reason and an irrational fear created by her cultural conditioning – and in that contest, fear almost always wins. But Jackson encourages her to overcome her fear and to some extent she does, at least temporarily: Hirshey, who admits to a "primal dread" of snakes, nevertheless allows a fully grown boa constrictor to slither across her ankle. Even so, she continues to refer to Muscles as "it" (by contrast, Jackson refers to Muscles as "he") and it's obvious she's still fearful. So, while she writes that Jackson "was most convincing," it's rather doubtful that she will be more welcoming to snakes in the future. But perhaps her feelings will be a little more complicated and nuanced, a little more self-aware.

This vignette between Jackson, Hirshey, and Muscles symbolically illustrates what would prove to be a central focus of Jackson's career: to engage White America, in particular, in experiences designed to alter our conditioned responses to the Other, especially those we have been carefully trained to see as uncomfortably and even threateningly different. We see this impulse running throughout Jackson's visual art, from his earliest films to his later, more experimental work. This is one manifestation of an animating conviction underlying all of Jackson's work: namely, an unwavering belief in the power of art to bring about social change.

This belief wasn't unique to Jackson. In the most dramatic example in American history, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 with the explicit goal of educating readers about the horrors of slavery in the South and the concomitant moral wrong of the Fugitive Slave Act in the North. She makes her purposes very clear in the final chapter of her book:

> For many years of her life, the author [Stowe herself, writing in the third person] avoided all reading upon or allusion to the subject of slavery, considering it as too painful to be inquired into, and one which advancing light and civilization would certainly live down. But, since the legislative act of 1850, when she heard, with perfect surprise and consternation, Christian and humane people

> actually recommending the remanding [of] escaped fugitives into slavery, as a duty binding onto good citizens, – when she heard, on all hands, from kind, compassionate and estimable people, in the free states of the North, deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty should be on this head, – she could only think, These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a *living dramatic reality*.[3]

As she emphasizes with italics, Stowe made a conscious decision when writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to create "a *living dramatic reality*" that brings the physical, emotional, and psychological horrors of slavery to life for her readers, so that white Americans – Northerners, especially, for whom slavery was more of an abstraction – would be forced to confront slavery in all its manifestations and imagine what they themselves would feel in similar circumstances.

Stowe employs multiple characters to explore the psychological effects of slavery on enslaved people, but she uses her main character, Tom, to explore the psychological effects of slavery on enslavers. Tom is presented as a Christ-like figure: he's morally superior to all three of his enslavers, and they know it. The first sells Tom to pay off family debts, but when it's time for Tom to leave he's so ashamed of what he's done that he's unable to face him. The second is inspired by him and begins to imagine a life different from the lethargy that has gripped him throughout his adult life – a moral paralysis brought about by his participation in a system he abhors. The third becomes sadistic. He's determined to break Tom, to bring Tom down to his level, and when Tom refuses to bend his moral code and whip other slaves or reveal the location of two who escaped, his enslaver tortures and kills him. (Popular notions of Tom as a fawning, sniveling traitor willing to betray his race for his own security and advancement derive from the many dramatic productions of Stowe's novel that were very popular on the minstrel stage and in early Hollywood, not from the novel itself. Stowe's Tom is no Uncle Tom, but minstrelsy corrupted his character and betrayed her vision.)

Uncle Tom's Cabin awakened many White Americans to the myriad ways slavery caused unfathomable misery among enslaved people and moral degradation among enslavers, and through that awakening it changed American history. Once they had read Stowe's novel, many White Americans could no longer deny that slavery was immoral and intolerable. The Civil War began nine years after its release, and no less an authority than Abraham Lincoln identified the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an inciting event. (When he met Stowe, Lincoln reportedly said, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."[4]) However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* isn't simply a political thought-piece. It's also a moving and powerful work of art. Leo Tolstoy considered it a great literary achievement "flowing from love of God and man"[5] and called it "one of the greatest productions of the human mind."[6] Langston Hughes called it a "moral battle cry for freedom"[7] and said, "The love and warmth and humanity that went into its writing keep it alive a century later."[8] So *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of those rare works that succeeds both artistically and politically.

At first glance, it's hard to imagine two artists more dissimilar than Stowe and Jackson, but they shared an unparalleled ability to connect with an audience. Stowe created the most popular novel of the nineteenth century – a time of novels, when fiction led the cultural discourse – and Jackson created the most popular album of the twentieth century – a time of albums, when music captured the cultural zeitgeist. (As Paul Gambaccini put it, "The way that young people related to each other and communicated was through music."[9]) Even more importantly, Stowe and Jackson shared a belief in the power of art to alter the thoughts and feelings of their audience, particularly White Americans. Both were rather shy and retiring in person but breathtakingly bold in their art and their vision of what their art could accomplish. Stowe sought nothing less than to challenge and perhaps end the institution of slavery. By contrast, Jackson's goals were arguably more complex than hers though just as profound: to alter White America's affective responses to those marked as Other. In other words, both artists fought racism, but Stowe's focus was outwards, on changing the laws White America had enacted to perpetuate slavery, while Jackson's focus was inwards, on rewiring White America's "conditioning" – especially our gut reactions to Blackness and other signs of difference.

This inner dimension of racism is subtle yet pervasive, and it can place a devastating psychological burden on those it excludes. Frederick Douglass gave an indication of just how crushing this burden could be in his first documented public address, published twenty years before the start of the Civil War:

> Prejudice against color is stronger north than south; it hangs around my neck like a heavy weight. It presses me out from among my fellow men. … I have met it at every step the three years I have been out of southern slavery.[10]

At first glance, this passage may seem confounding. Slavery was a horrifying legal reality in the American South but not in the North. So how could Douglass possibly claim that "Prejudice against color is stronger north than south"?

Douglass appears to be wrestling with one of the most vexing challenges Americans face when trying to eradicate racism: most racial bias in the US functions at a subconscious level. The vast majority of White Americans do not identify as White supremacists. Quite the contrary. Most find this ideology abhorrent and support the principle of racial equality, at least intellectually. However, racism endures because it has been woven into the psychological fabric of White America for centuries – specifically, into the visceral reactions White Americans have been culturally conditioned to feel in response to racial signifiers. These reactions are spontaneous, occurring before the conscious mind has a chance to weigh in, and often they're so subtle they aren't even recognized. However, they exert a powerful influence on the behavior and beliefs of many White Americans by shaping in some nebulous, unspoken way what feels right and comfortable and acceptable and what doesn't: what feels scary or threatening or disturbing or just vaguely wrong somehow.

In other words, most racial bias in the US today isn't the result of ideology but of *sensations* – conditioned affective responses, including what's commonly

known as gut reactions – that are experienced emotionally, psychologically, even physically. And it's this physical component that makes these involuntary responses so extremely difficult to overcome. While we can debate a political issue, how do we debate a physical sensation? These feelings are largely impervious to logic or our best intentions. Suppressing them doesn't make them go away. And because the sensations of racism are experienced physically, they seem innate and real and true in a way that ideas or opinions don't. In short, these responses are learned reactions – they are passed down from one generation to the next, particularly through our cultural narratives – but they don't feel learned. Instead, they feel instinctive and natural – as natural as the body itself. That's one reason these sensations have been so effective at maintaining the power structures of racism for so long.

However, Jackson suggests there is a way to alter the sensations of racism: through art. Art has the power to transform our feelings in ways that other forms of political discourse (speeches, debates, editorials, protests) simply can't. Martin Luther King Jr. himself seemed to recognize the power of art, as Robin Terry, chair of the Motown Museum explains: "Dr. King sent a message to [Motown founder] Berry Gordy, and he said … what you are doing with your music is as important to the civil rights movement as the marches."[11] Speeches and protests have played a vital role in pushing for change in institutions of power – legal, political, financial, educational, all the myriad structures and networks that together maintain how power is organized – but they don't get to the essence of racism, which lies in the hearts and minds of individual Americans. But art can go where politics can't. It can engage with the subconscious mind and alter those biased feelings.

Altering this "prejudice against color," as Douglass called it, and against difference more generally was a crucial issue for Jackson, one he addressed throughout his work, though often in subtle and sophisticated ways that slip beneath the notice of his diverse audiences. But while his methods may have gone unrecognized, that doesn't mean they didn't have a powerful effect. In fact, they may have been more effective precisely *because* they went unrecognized – because they function at a subconscious level that alters our feelings while bypassing the resistance of the conscious mind. However, if we take a close look at Jackson's visual art, we can begin to tease apart his revolutionary artistic vision, which he articulates in his films especially.

For example, in his art, Jackson will often tell a culturally compelling myth or folktale – specifically, a story that has helped shape our perceptions and understanding of the world around us, as well as our affective responses to that world. But after evoking that narrative, he will untell it in a way that shifts its meaning along with our conditioned reactions to it. And then he will retell it in a more just and inclusive way. We can find examples of Jackson retelling popular narratives throughout his work. For instance, the Jacksons' 1984 *Victory* tour concerts began with a retelling of the legend of King Arthur, but with a significant difference: instead of a young Arthur pulling Excalibur from a stone to elevate himself and become king, Jackson's younger brother, Randy, pulled a sword from a stone to free his people from slavery by mythical creatures called the Kreetons

(cretins). In another example, professional flutist and musicologist Lisha McDuff interprets Jackson's 1986 Disney film *Captain EO* as a retelling of *The Magic Flute*.[12] But while Mozart's 1791 opera features an innocent daughter and her evil mother, the Queen of the Night, Jackson reframes this opposition, merging mother and daughter together into one character: another evil queen called the Supreme Leader. And while Mozart's hero (accompanied by a comic sidekick) uses the power of music to earn the right to marry the daughter, with the queen defeated and banished, Jackson's protagonist (accompanied by a band of comic sidekicks) uses the power of music to transform the queen and reveal her inherent goodness.

This process of telling, untelling, and retelling is developed even more fully in Jackson's music videos, which he called short films. *The Triumph* (1981) is a film he made for the Jacksons' song "Can You Feel It." It was the first film he had a substantial role in producing, and it presents a vision of inclusion and equality. Through a combination of lyrics and images, it also emphasizes art's ability to influence not only how audience members think about difference but how they *feel*. Importantly, as the lyrics address the audience directly and repeatedly ask, "Can you feel it?," the visuals tell an ancient story: one of creation, destruction, and recreation. So *The Triumph* precisely maps out Jackson's process of telling, untelling, and retelling, providing a blueprint for a narrative method he'll return to again and again in his films and other visual art.

In *The Triumph*, an idyllic world becomes corrupt, is destroyed by flood, and then undergoes a physical and spiritual rebirth. This is the story of Noah in the Bible, of Ziusudra in Sumerian creation myths and Utnapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, of Manu in the *Matsya Purana*, and Deucalion and Pyrrha in Greek mythology. A similar tale also appears in many American Indian creation stories. For example, the Navajo *Diné Bahane'* describes how early beings were forced to climb a reed to a new Fourth World after Coyote stole Tééhoołtsódii's babies and, in her grief and anger, she flooded the Third World. In *The Triumph*, Jackson evokes these ancient and pervasive myths but then fundamentally shifts them. In his retelling, the corruption that overtakes this perfect world isn't hubris or greed or adultery or murder or one of the other sins typically depicted. Instead, it's racism, misogyny, and other prejudices that cause people "to ignore the beauty in each other."

Just as importantly, *The Triumph* suggests that the spiritual rebirth following this watery destruction is brought about by popular artists such as the Jacksons. In *The Triumph*, the Jacksons tower over the landscape like gods as they share a message of love among all people – an aspirational feeling they spread through their music as well as their position as Black cultural icons. In fact, in Jackson's retelling, modern popular artists appear to perform multiple functions: as performers they draw together diverse audiences to form multicultural communities, as artists they create new stories and new perspectives, and as cultural figures they populate those stories and fulfill cultural roles once occupied by the gods and goddesses of ancient folklore and myth.

By contrast, *Say Say Say* (1983), a short film Jackson created with Paul McCartney, tells a different kind of creation story: namely, the evolution of the

American entertainment industry from medicine shows to Vaudeville and ultimately film. As Harriet Manning explains, racism is central to this history, with blackface minstrelsy informing the entire progression. Americans in the early- to mid-1800s felt "a deep sense of inferiority" to Europe and desired "a native identity distinct from European culture."[13] Blackface minstrelsy answered that need. It was the first quintessentially American art form, predating jazz by several decades, and it became extremely popular throughout the US and Europe – a popularity that proved remarkably durable. According to Manning, "Blackface minstrelsy held centre stage … in American popular culture for the best part of an entire century."[14] In fact, minstrel shows became a source of national pride, especially after they gained the approval of cultural centers in Europe.

More than that, these shows helped forge a new American identity, one that was defined in opposition to Blackness – or more precisely, in opposition to a knowingly debased and distorted portrayal of Blackness created by White performers. This development of an implicitly White American identity then carried through to Hollywood. Most of the major milestones in the emerging American film industry – from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) – in some way enact this practice of defining what it means to be a (White) American in contrast to Black stereotypes derived from blackface minstrelsy.[15]

In *Say Say Say* Jackson imagines what could have been and tells an alternate, more idealistic origin story. In his retelling, Mac (a White artist) and Jack (a Black artist) are trickster figures who con money from those who can afford to lose it and give it to those in need – specifically, the Black and White children at a local orphanage. Importantly, Mac and Jack's performances provide a compact history of American popular entertainment from medicine shows to Hollywood, but they are presented as equal partners who support one another. For example, as they prepare to leave the orphanage, Mac gives Jack a helping hand into their caravan – a marked contrast to the actual historical record, where White performers often appropriated the innovations of Black artists and reaped the profits that derived from them. So, in both *The Triumph* and *Say Say Say*, Jackson tells a culturally compelling creation myth but then untells and retells it, placing racial divisions at the center of the story and subtly shifting our understanding of those narratives as well as our emotional response to them. Significantly, in both films he also points toward popular artists as agents of social change.

Jackson takes on a different kind of story in *Beat It*, *Bad*, *The Way You Make Me Feel*, and *Jam*. In the 1980s, reports of young Black men committing horrific crimes in America's inner cities dominated the news.[16] A number of factors contributed to a rise in poverty, urban decay, and violence, particularly gang violence, in America's inner cities at this time – not the least being Nixon's policy of "benign neglect"[17] following the civil rights advances of the 1950s and 60s. This policy, which spread from the federal level to both state and municipal governments, led to disinvestment in urban centers and a sharp decline in services to minority communities, including a loss of police and fire protection. However, news outlets largely ignored those political and socioeconomic factors. Instead,

the recurring message in the 1980s was that there was something pathological and scary about young Black men themselves.

In the film cycle of *Beat It*, *Bad*, *The Way You Make Me Feel*, and *Jam*, Jackson evokes this cultural narrative but then untells and radically reframes it. First, he situates us as an audience so that we experience these conflicts from the perspective of a young Black man in the inner city. So, from the outset, Jackson fundamentally alters how White American viewers engage with this story. He then takes a sophisticated look at the psychology of violence that confronts his promising young protagonists. For example, in *Beat It*, *Bad*, and especially *The Way You Make Me Feel*, Jackson points toward feelings of powerlessness combined with corrosive definitions of masculinity as significant factors motivating violence among Black men. He then offers his own unique solution to the problem: the transformative power of art. Specifically, throughout this film cycle, Jackson encourages disenfranchised young people to express their frustrations through art rather than violence. While many critics dismissed his proposal as hopelessly naïve, implying that music and dance were no match for a bullet, the rise and enduring legacy of hip-hop as a form of social protest has proven Jackson right. Hip-hop has shown that music and dance can indeed provide a forum for oppressed young people that helps reduce violence, so Jackson was advocating a solution that works.

And then, of course, there's *Thriller*, one of Jackson's most iconic and emotionally evocative films. While popular critics over the decades have been nearly unanimous in their praise, they have nevertheless tended to trivialize *Thriller* as merely fun, escapist entertainment. However, a closer look reveals a psychologically complex structure that grapples with some of White America's deepest racial fears. Specifically, *Thriller* repeatedly tells a culturally significant narrative, so that we as an audience are led to feel the emotions aroused by that narrative, but then it untells and retells that story in a way that alters our emotional and affective response to it.

Thriller begins by introducing us to Michael, a Black teen out on a date. He seems somewhat shy, with a sweet face and a soft voice, and we as an audience are immediately drawn to him. But then he transforms into a werewolf before our very eyes, and we feel a mixture of shock, fear, and even disgust at what's been revealed. Clearly, Michael is not what he seemed. Suddenly, the scene shifts and we're in a movie theater watching Michael, his date, and a mostly White audience react in horror to the images on screen. Gradually, we realize that what we've just witnessed was a fiction – as Michael tells his date, "It's only a movie!" – and our feelings of fear and revulsion begin to subside. So, in these opening scenes, Jackson evokes and even magnifies some of White America's worst fears about this young Black man, but then he deflates those emotions and shows they're "just imagination." And then he repeats this process of telling, untelling, and retelling throughout the film.

What gives *Thriller* its emotional heft is its grounding in one of White America's most potent cultural narratives: the enduring myth of Black men and other men of color as sexual predators. For centuries, White America's feelings toward American Indians, non-White immigrants, and especially Black Americans have been shaped

by this false narrative.[18] Its power is still clearly evident in modern politics, as seen in the 1988 presidential contest between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, and the subsequent rise of Donald Trump. In 1988, Lee Atwater, Bush's campaign manager, placed the little-known story of William Horton, a Black man accused of raping a White woman, at the forefront of the Bush campaign. As Atwater declared, "By the time we're finished, [voters are] going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis' running mate,"[19] and he turned the Horton story into a national obsession. (He also gave William the nickname of "Willie," a randy euphemism for a penis. Horton was never called "Willie" before Atwater commandeered his story.) Atwater even sent the victim's fiancé out on the campaign trail with Bush, where he described listening to her screams as she was raped in the bedroom above him.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, longtime director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, said the center contacted Bush's staff about their source for the Horton story, and they cited an article in *The Lawrence* [Massachusetts] *Eagle-Tribune*. However, as Jamieson noted,

> That source had other instances of people jumping furlough who were White, and they committed more horrific crimes than Horton did. Why select the African American? And why select that particular narrative, in which there is a rape as part of the story?[20]

Atwater explained his reasoning this way: "The Horton case is one of those gut issues … particularly in the South." Susan Estrich, Dukakis' campaign manager, described it less euphemistically: "There is no more powerful symbol of racial hatred, still, than the Black man who rapes the White woman."[21] However, Atwater's rather innocuous explanation does point to a crucial feature of these kinds of stories: they evoke strong, visceral "gut" reactions that seem to be located in the body yet carry out an explicitly ideological function. In this case, the Horton story triggered deep-seated racial fears that Atwater knowingly activated for political purposes.

However, the Horton story evokes these intense affective responses through what's become known as a "dog whistle," meaning a political message that "operates on two levels" at once: "inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another."[22] In this case, the Bush campaign denied the Horton story had anything to do with race. Yet Atwater predicted that it would produce a strong "gut" reaction among his targeted demographic – Southern Whites – and the 1988 election results suggest his political calculations were accurate. The Horton case helped the Bush campaign go from a 17-point deficit in the polls to a decisive win, including a sweep of all the Southern states.

One person who seems to have learned important lessons from how the Bush campaign politicized the Horton case is Donald Trump. Soon after Bush's remarkable turnaround, Trump conducted a number of high-profile interviews where he floated the idea of running for president himself.[23] And in a move that mimicked Atwater's strategy, he seized on the case of the Central Park Five, enflaming public opinion against five 14- to 16-year-old boys – four Black and one Latino – accused

of brutally beating and raping a young White woman jogging through Central Park. One of the Central Park defendants, Yusef Salaam, later called Trump "the fire starter" in stoking public anger against the young men, saying, "he lit the match."[24] Salaam also linked Trump's actions to America's long history of White mobs lynching Black men accused of raping – or even looking at – White women. As Salaam said, "It was the scariest, scariest time in my life. … Had this been in the 1950s, I would have had the same fate as Emmett Till. I would have been hung." In 2002, the convictions of the Central Park Five were vacated after another man confessed to the crime and DNA evidence both corroborated his confession and exonerated them.

However, Trump discounted the evidence and continued to question their innocence during his 2016 presidential campaign – and these weren't the only men of color Trump targeted. He kicked off his presidential bid on June 16, 2015, with an announcement speech that claimed immigrants from Mexico were "rapists."[25] The next day, a White supremacist murdered nine Black Americans at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, after parroting Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric, reportedly telling the assembled parishioners, "You rape our women, and you're taking over our country. And you have to go."[26] It didn't seem to matter that none of the victims were immigrants. (Conflating Black Americans and immigrants was a strategy Trump perfected during his birther attacks on President Obama, and his followers seemed to perfectly understand that particular dog whistle.) Trump continued to stoke White fears of non-White men throughout his campaign and presidency, accusing them of rape, murder, and other violent crimes.

Trump may have inherited some of his ideology from his father, Fred Trump, a real estate tycoon who was arrested at a 1927 Ku Klux Klan rally and appeared to share their views.[27] For instance, he engaged in discriminatory rental practices for decades, as described by one of his tenants, Woody Guthrie, who called out "Old Man Trump" for exacerbating "racial hate":

> I suppose that Old Man Trump knows just how much racial hate
> He stirred up in that bloodpot of human hearts
> When he drawed that color line
> Here at his Beach Haven family project[28]

Beach Haven was an affordable housing project built by the elder Trump using government financing, which of course includes money from Black people's taxes, but Black people weren't allowed to live there. Stanley Leibowitz was a rental agent for Trump in the 1960s, and when asked the number of Black tenants in Trump's rental properties, he replied, "To the best of my knowledge, none."[29] He explained that when a Black person submitted a rental application, Fred Trump instructed him to "put it in a drawer and leave it there." And Fred Trump both shaped and launched Donald Trump. "His father was his idol," according to Leibowitz. "Anytime he would come into the building, Donald would be by his side." When the Department of Justice sued the Trump organization for discriminatory practices in 1973, Fred Trump was serving as chairman and his son as president.

It seems Donald Trump was profoundly influenced by his father, but he also appears to have learned race-baiting tactics from political predecessors such as Richard Nixon (whose "southern strategy" consciously exploited White grievances against civil rights advances) and Ronald Reagan (whose many dog whistles included demonizing Black mothers as "welfare queens"), as well as Bush and Atwater. He also seems to have learned about whipping up emotions and manipulating perceptions from his mentor, Roy Cohn, an architect of the McCarthy hearings and anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s – a phenomenon Trump would reenact with the anti-immigrant hysteria of his campaigns. Of course, Trumpism is a complex phenomenon, with voters citing many reasons for supporting him, including concerns about stagnant wages, high housing costs, and a shrinking middle class. However, the evidence indicates that much of the energy fueling Trumpism derives from his ability, conscious or not, to trigger deep-seated racial fears and animosities among White voters – specifically, by activating the centuries-old narrative of non-White men as sexual predators. In fact, the affective reactions aroused by that narrative appear to be so strong that they lead many White working-class Americans to vote against their own economic interests, exacerbating the very problems they cite as most critical to them.

The racial fears and resentments evoked by Reagan, Bush, and especially Trump, are a complex component of the cultural conditioning Jackson repeatedly took on in his visual art. The "gut" reactions White voters experienced when they heard about William Horton or the Central Park Five are manmade, a cultural construct. They are manufactured through the multitude of stories and comments and images a person experiences over a lifetime, especially in childhood. But because they are experienced as physical sensations, they don't seem to be manmade. Instead, they seem to exist outside language, outside culture, outside the reach of reason and logic. In short, they seem natural – as natural as our own bodies. The perception that these sensations are simply a natural response and not manmade is precisely what makes them so resistant to change, and so very difficult to fight. But Jackson found ways to address and subtly rewire these conditioned responses. In fact, altering the physical sensations of prejudice is a central feature of his art.

Thriller is a sophisticated example. In this short film, Jackson subtly evokes the pervasive cultural narrative of the Black sexual predator but then reconfigures how we as an audience respond to it. First, he has Michael transform into a werewolf, which can be read as both an archetypal sexual predator and an anxious response to female sexuality. According to this interpretation, what brings out the beast is a young woman's monthly cycle of ovulation and fertility, as represented by the monthly cycle of the moon. This reading is confirmed when Michael, rendered bestial under the moon's influence, chases his date through the woods and presumably rapes and murders her. (We as an offscreen audience don't see this, but the implication is clear. We see the werewolf bend over her as she lies on the forest floor, paralyzed with fear. Then the camera cuts away, and we watch the horrified faces of the theater audience as we hear the werewolf attack her.) Later, after Michael becomes a zombie, he leads a pack of other zombies in pursuit of his girlfriend, breaks into the house where she's hiding, and grabs her by the throat. So, in both

cases, as werewolf and zombie, Michael transforms into a monster who appears to attack a vulnerable young woman in a sexual way. Through these images, Jackson subtly but powerfully evokes the potent narrative of the Black sexual predator – a story that was used to justify the lynching of thousands of Black men in the decades following Emancipation and continues to reverberate in the conditioned responses of White America toward Black men today. But then Jackson untells that narrative ("It's only a movie!") and then retells and untells and retells it again, both throughout *Thriller* and in later films such as *Black or White* and *Ghosts* that also take on this deeply destructive and pernicious narrative. In this way, Jackson works to alter the conditioned affective responses of his audiences in psychologically complex ways.

Given the prevalence of this cultural narrative and how it has been used throughout American history to strip Black men of their property, their livelihoods, and even their lives, it is perhaps not surprising that Jackson himself was eventually accused of being a sexual predator. As he told Jesse Jackson during his 2005 trial, the allegations against him are part of "a pattern among Black luminaries in this country."[30] In fact, some of America's most promising, most successful, and most outspoken Black men have had their careers destroyed by these kinds of accusations, and Jackson certainly fit that profile. As discussed in detail in Act Two, the evidence indicates that Jackson was innocent of the allegations against him. However, as in most cases where a Black American man has been accused of an interracial sex crime, the evidence could not compete with the torrent of emotions those allegations unleashed. Even after the jury in a three-months-long trial returned unanimous not-guilty verdicts on all charges against him, those verdicts appeared to have little impact on media coverage or public opinion. Jackson was vilified for the rest of his life and spent his remaining years in exile.

Following the allegations, Jackson's music and films became even more focused on altering the cultural conditioning of his audiences, but often in ways that functioned on a preconscious or subconscious level. In other words, Jackson didn't combat the allegations by simply presenting a reasoned argument to the conscious mind, though he did encourage his critics to consider the actual evidence before condemning him. Rather, he focused on altering his audience's gut reactions – specifically, their conditioned affective reactions to cultural narratives that promote racism and injustice. In this way, Jackson pushed back even more urgently against public discomfort with difference.

Uncovering these kinds of bold artistic strategies is one of the main goals of *Michael Jackson's Radical Aesthetic*. By taking a deep dive into his visual art especially, often using interpretive approaches suggested by Jackson himself, I hope to reveal the depth and range of his artistic understanding and experimentation, particularly in terms of his theories about art as an agent of social change – one that can bring about profound psychological and cultural shifts. Approaching his work in this way also highlights the immense challenges he set for himself. His visual art affirms that he was driven by a passion to "heal the world"[31] on many different fronts, tackling seemingly intractable issues such as racism, misogyny, gun violence, environmental degradation, and the sterility of modern life. More

specifically, he was attempting to rewrite the underlying cultural narratives that give rise to those problems. Through close analysis, I hope to demonstrate just how radically innovative Jackson's work truly is. His visual art, in particular, expands our understanding and even our definition of art.

I also hope to address some critical misperceptions and areas of scholarly neglect. While Jackson has been lauded for his contributions to the performing arts, particularly music and dance, his innovations in the visual arts have been largely overlooked. For instance, Jackson's short films have received surprisingly little critical attention despite their enduring influence and profound cultural resonance. Close analysis reveals that his films are meticulously structured and exquisitely well crafted, with layers of meaning that are a delight to explore, and they are designed to bring about enduring social change. But while many critics have acknowledged that his films are more ambitious than other videos of the time and that he raised the bar for the entire industry, those critics still tend to regard his films as marketing devices for his music rather than works of art in their own right. As a consequence, scant attention has been paid to interpreting Jackson's films: to exploring the ideas he expresses through them, the visionary goals that motivate them, and the emotional and aesthetic sophistication that gives them their psychic power and drive. My analysis challenges this privileging of Jackson's music, arguing that his visual art is just as compelling as his music and dance – that, in fact, his music, dance, films, and other avenues of artistic expression function in concert and sometimes in tension with one another, adding nuance and complexity to interpretations of each.

Jackson was a remarkably multifaceted and integrative artist who drew on diverse forms simultaneously while creating his art. For instance, Touré has come to the surprising conclusion that, for Jackson, dancing was integral to his songwriting process. Through conversations with Teddy Riley, a music producer who worked with Jackson on his *Dangerous*, *Blood on the Dance Floor*, and *Invincible* albums, Touré discovered that Jackson was "dancing in the studio in a different way"[32] as he developed each song, and that he was carefully and deliberately working out the accompanying movements as he finalized the lyrics and instrumentation. Touré sees Jackson's percussive vocalizations as an element of dance as well, "a sort of mouth way of dancing to the song and relating to it rhythmically before you start relating to it linguistically."[33] Longtime Jackson collaborator Brad Buxer has a similar view:

> The thing that's so great about his beatboxing is that it's a way for him to come up with a drum idea that is completely synchronized to the way he would dance. So it's the most transparent, intuitive idea coming from him. It's almost like the way he dances is coming out of his mouth.[34]

While Buxer and Touré approach this idea from slightly different perspectives, they both arrive at a shared conclusion that Jackson's music and dance were closely, even inextricably, intertwined.

A similar claim can be made for his films. According to Jackson, he tended to conceive of his music and films in tandem. As he wrote in his 1988 memoir,

Moonwalk, "The three videos that came out of *Thriller*" – namely, *Billie Jean*, *Beat It*, and *Thriller* – "were all part of my original concept for the album. I was determined to present this music as visually as possible."[35] He went on to write that making these films was an earnest endeavor to create meaningful art: "We weren't shooting on videotape; it was 35-mm film. We were serious."[36] He insisted that others take his films seriously as well, as David Glew, former president and chair of Epic Records, remembers: "you could never say 'video.' He'd say, 'Glew, they are not videos; they are short films. Please tell your staff to say short films.'"[37] Glew also notes that "The video was almost as important to him as the record. And if it were up to him, he would have made a video of every track on the record."[38] So it seems Jackson regarded music, dance, and film as parallel, interconnected elements of a larger artistic vision. It's interesting in this context that Jackson's preferred appellation was the King of Pop since this title encompasses both performing and visual arts. After all, the King of Funk and Soul was James Brown and the King of Rock & Roll was Elvis Presley – both obvious antecedents – but the Pope of Pop wasn't a musician. It was Andy Warhol.

Sylvia J. Martin provides a useful way to conceptualize Jackson's multifaceted artistic vision when she suggests that "the entirety of his lifelong artistic endeavors … epitomizes the *Gesamtkunstwerk*" or "total work of art."[39] As she explains, "the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in art theory and aesthetics refers to the synthesis of the different art forms such as singing, dancing, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as the multi-sensory and deeply immersive experience that a 'total' performance provides." Martin suggests that Jackson's interdisciplinary vision perhaps found its fullest expression in his theatrical concert performances and in the multisensory film *Captain EO*,[40] which included lasers, smoke, and small puffs of air directed at the audience, as well as violently shaking seats when Captain EO's spaceship enters an asteroid field. One benefit of approaching Jackson's art as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is that it encourages us not only to place value on his many modes of artistic expression, including his short films and other visual art, but to see them all as part of an intertwined, interconnected, and cohesive whole.

Drawing on this inclusive approach to Jackson's work, *Michael Jackson's Radical Aesthetic* asserts that his visual art is just as powerful, as innovative, and as culturally significant as his performing arts. More than that, it argues that his films provide a unique perspective on his aesthetic because they function as both art and art theory, and therefore provide guidance on how to interpret his other work. In fact, Jackson's films offer a bold redefinition of art itself, providing an expansive vision of what art can be and what it can accomplish – most notably that art has the power to alter the affective reactions of an audience to entrenched cultural narratives. His films also suggest that his art extends beyond singing and songwriting, dance and choreography, films, fashion,[41] and the creation of immersive concert experiences to include two unexpected avenues of artistic expression: his troubling public persona and his seemingly ever-changing face. In fact, I have come to see shifting perceptions of his face as his masterpiece: his most

revolutionary, most misunderstood, and most consequential work of art. However, to fully understand his face as a work of art, it must be considered within the context of his films. It's his films that make his face legible.

Michael Jackson's Radical Aesthetic therefore begins the discussion of Jackson's art with close analysis of his films. Specifically, Act One conducts a detailed examination of some of the short films Jackson created in the 1980s (Chapter 1), the anthology film segments that comprise his 1988 feature film *Moonwalker* (Chapter 2), and selected short films of the *Dangerous* era (Chapter 3). This analysis approaches these early films chronologically to show the progression of his ideas and the development of recurring themes, motifs, symbols, gestures, and other elements of his visual vocabulary. For example, a full moon often signals a moment of transformation as well as immense creativity. (After all, the full moon in *Thriller* transforms Jackson's protagonist not only into a werewolf and a zombie but also into a dancer – one able to engage a host of other zombies in dance as well.) Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand signals that a character is preparing to take on a more powerful opponent, often answering a threat of violence with art and creativity.[42] A figure who towers above his surroundings, dwarfing mountains and mesas and the built environment, denotes an Artist in the mythic sense – a figure with the power to reshape our cultural narratives and cultural landscape. And cats of all kinds (housecats, tigers, a lion cub, a black panther) appear to function as something of a totem animal in Jackson's films, often representing one of Jackson's protagonists in altered form or suggesting a mystical link to that character. For instance, the housecat in *Remember the Time* seems to provide Jackson's protagonist with insider knowledge of the palace and its inhabitants.

This analysis also shows how, through his films, Jackson expresses his ideas about the role of the artist: as trickster, as mythmaker, as activist and advocate, as showman and spectacle, as mirror, as provocateur, even as exorcist, drawing forth and dispelling the impulses evoked in his audiences through our conditioning by harmful cultural narratives. These films go on to investigate the complex relationship between an artist and his audience, with the artist as seducer of his audience but also potentially seduced by fame. They also examine the cultural function of art. Specifically, they map out strategies for using art to challenge prejudice and effect lasting social change, a central tenet of Jackson's aesthetic. They illuminate how he attempted to rewrite some of America's most deeply held cultural narratives, from ancient stories such as mankind's dominion over nature to more recent ones, including two myths on which the US was founded: that of White male superiority and of non-White men as sexual predators.

But then in 1993 Jackson himself was accused of being a sexual predator. The allegations against him went off like a bomb in the national consciousness, transfixing the public and dominating the national discourse for years – as indeed they still do today, more than 30 years later. They had a shattering effect on Jackson as well. However, as devastating as they were, they also appeared to deepen his understanding of cultural psychology, particularly of White America's fears and

desires, and pushed him to new extremes of artistic engagement and experimentation. Some of his most innovative and culturally significant work was created in the aftermath of the allegations. Therefore, I believe that Jackson's later, more experimental art cannot be understood without some knowledge of the accusations against him, as well as the historical forces that gave rise to them and caused them to land with such intensity.

So, after completing the analysis of his early films that is the focus of Act One, and before starting the analysis of his later art that is the focus of Act Three, *Michael Jackson's Radical Aesthetic* takes a painful but necessary detour to consider the child abuse allegations against him. Specifically, Act Two begins by providing important historical contexts for understanding why the police, the press, and the public responded to the allegations the way they did (Chapter 4). It then takes an in-depth look at the accusations themselves, including important information that has been largely overlooked by the press (Chapter 5). Finally, it considers additional factors, such as the changing color of Jackson's skin, that may have influenced public perceptions of Jackson and the allegations (Chapter 6). Act Three, which is included in Volume Two, then resumes the detailed analysis begun in Act One and explores the art Jackson created in response to the allegations, including some of his most innovative work. Specifically, it focuses on his later films as well as constantly evolving public perceptions of his face and persona.

Like a werewolf, Jackson seemed to transform before our eyes – both onscreen in his films and offscreen in photos by the paparazzi – confronting each of us as viewers with our most visceral feelings and reactions toward him, and to some extent toward Black men more generally. This constantly shifting image acts as a kind of magic mirror, reflecting back what each of us wants or needs to see in him. But then, after entrancing us with our own submerged fears and desires, he gradually shifts those feelings: speaking directly to the subconscious through the language of art, he captures our unruly emotions and reconfigures them. In his films, he tells, untells, and then retells some of our most entrenched myths and narratives, fundamentally altering them as well as our conditioned reactions to them. In a somewhat parallel process, his seemingly ever-changing face functions as a kind of visual storytelling, capturing the narratives each of us projects onto him – predator, savior, victim – before untelling and retelling those stories as well. Through sophisticated manipulation of our affective reactions as well as the cultural narratives that underlie them – narratives that give those feelings their psychic force and drive – Jackson challenges how each of us makes sense of the world and opens up possibilities for new, more equitable storytelling.

Notes

1 Hirshey.
2 Hirshey, emphasis hers.
3 Stowe, page 466, emphasis hers.
4 Hughes, page 491. Lincoln's comment was passed down orally for decades before it was written down, and like most quotations pulled from an oral tradition, variations appear