

— THE —
DANGEROUS
PHILOSOPHIES
— OF —
MICHAEL
JACKSON

HIS MUSIC,
HIS PERSONA,
AND HIS ARTISTIC
AFTERLIFE

ELIZABETH AMISU

FOREWORDS BY
JOSEPH VOGEL, PhD,
AND KARIN MERX

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Philosophies of
Michael Jackson

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*His Music, His Persona, and
His Artistic Afterlife*

ELIZABETH AMISU

Forewords by Joseph Vogel, PhD,
and Karin Merx



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*For all who “danced” with MJ,
mourned his passing, and
celebrate his life. With love.*

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When a great poet dies, the immediate critical question is often where to bury him. In the choice between the public tomb and private resting place, a prominent quarter in Westminster Abbey or the wood-choked corner of a foreign graveyard, posterity makes its first decision about how the poet will be remembered. And often enough the result has been a scandal. . . . Not even a proper burial can guard against infamy. Milton's bones, for instance, were dug up at the end of the eighteenth century for souvenirs, just as fragments of his early poems had been exhumed and confiscated by minor poets. Neglected at first, eventually competed for, like Homer, by contending cities, the poet goes to meet his shades. But not unsung. With his dying breath, frequently, an industry springs up around him—memorialists, literary undertakers, chisellers, epitaph-makers. The custodians of his fame take charge of manuscripts and the will. He enters his tomb.

—Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet:
Beginnings and Endings*

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Foreword

Just over 10 years ago, when I began writing about Michael Jackson in the midst of his 2005 trial, books and articles on the artist were hard to come by. I emphasize the word “artist” because, as Elizabeth Amisu makes abundantly clear in this book, much had been written and spoken (superficially) about Jackson the celebrity, the caricature, the freak. But for a figure who had such a demonstrably seismic impact on global culture, it was remarkable how little serious coverage existed on the artist. Consider this: At the time of Jackson’s death, the most widely available books about the pop icon included *FREAK!: Inside the Twisted World of Michael Jackson* (2005) by David Perel and Suzanne Ely; *Be Careful Who You Love* (2009) by Diane Dimond; *Unmasked: The Final Years of Michael Jackson* (2009) by Ian Halperin; and of course, J. Randy Taraborrelli’s biography, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (2009). The most widely read articles were written by gossipmongers like Roger Friedman and Maureen Orth. More talented writers who had covered Jackson in the 1980s and early 1990s, like Nelson George, Michele Wallace, Kobena Mercer, and Michael Eric Dyson, had moved on to other subjects. One could count the total pieces of scholarship dedicated to Jackson on one hand—maybe two.

Fast-forward 10 years: There is now a substantial enough body of work on Jackson—from Spike Lee’s acclaimed documentaries (*Bad 25* and *Michael Jackson’s Journey from Motown to Off the Wall*), to college courses offered by professors Mark Anthony Neal and Marie Plasse, to Susan Fast’s brilliant 33 1/3 study on *Dangerous*, to an explosion of books, essays, and articles—enough to prove that Michael Jackson Studies is not only a thing, it is a thing that is thriving. Elizabeth Amisu’s intelligent and illuminating book, *The*

Dangerous Philosophies of Michael Jackson, not only adds to this growing field; it documents in great detail how much important work has been done in this short amount of time.

I will leave the particulars of what now constitutes Michael Jackson Studies to Elizabeth—her second chapter, “A Critical Survey of Michael Jackson Studies,” offers an excellent introduction to the field and how it has developed over time. The broader point I would like to make, however, is that in spite of the influx of new work on everything from Jackson’s music, to his short films, to his dancing, to his cultural impact, Michael Jackson Studies is still in its infancy. It is an exciting time of exploration, innovation, and possibility. No single individual or lens can tell the whole story—nor should they. Indeed, if anything, the most refreshing thing about Michael Jackson Studies at this stage is its embrace of complexity and variety. Pushing back against decades of reductive narratives, Michael Jackson has once again become dynamic, paradoxical, and mysterious.

A multifaceted human being and artist is precisely the portrait of Michael Jackson that emerges in Elizabeth Amisu’s book. Her study covers considerable territory—not only spanning Jackson’s career, but also the many different forms he used and the many historical, social, cultural, and artistic contexts in which he was operating. Her passionate, keen, and often daring interpretations combine to create a kind of mosaic, with each chapter offering a different color or shape or piece of the picture.

Over the course of his career, Jackson was often dismissed as a serious artist by the cultural gatekeepers. See, for example, the critical commentary of heavyweights like Dave Marsh, Greil Marcus, and Jon Pareles, which consistently reduced Jackson to a commercial phenomenon. In a 2009 interview with NPR, prominent cultural critic Stanley Crouch summed up the conventional wisdom, when he was asked if Jackson should be classified as an artist or an entertainer:

I think he was an entertainer. I don’t think he was an artist because his material doesn’t contain much human understanding or human value beyond an adolescent vision of life, you know, like, which is like, we would all be better if people would just treat each other right. Well, you know, that’s nice, but that doesn’t tell you much of anything.

In *The Dangerous Philosophies of Michael Jackson*, Elizabeth Amisu proves how deeply misinformed such an assessment is. Michael Jackson was an artist *and* an entertainer (as with so many things, he refused the either/or terms). What his creative life and work tells us, it seems, largely depends on what one is able to see, hear, and feel. One thing’s certain: He did not aim low. He was

not content with a niche audience, and he despised limitations. His art was intended for everyone, yet it managed to be as singular and subversive as anything pop music had seen. A dangerous philosophy indeed.

Joseph Vogel, PhD

Author of Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson; Featuring Michael Jackson: Collected Writings on the King of Pop; and Earth Song: Michael Jackson's Magnum Opus

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Foreword

This is an amazing book. I have seen this book grow from an essay first published on the Internet to what it is now—an indispensable source for all who wish to know about Michael Jackson's art and who seriously want to study this multitalented artist. Elizabeth has an eloquent writing style, combining her literary qualities as an author with her academic writing, which makes the book very pleasant to read. I have great admiration for Elizabeth because she dared to take the opportunity to write this academic book on Michael Jackson and his art. Especially since writing about Jackson is a delicate subject for many, and there is not that much academic writing about him available, I would say that the task she took at hand was a sign of courage. However, I am also sure that everyone who reads this book will be pleasantly surprised. *The Dangerous Philosophies of Michael Jackson: His Music, His Persona, and His Artistic Afterlife* is a considerable volume that gives so many starting points for those who wish to expand their knowledge and study of Jackson's catalogue. In fact, for me, this book is the place to really start studying, listening, and reading.

So many books were published about Michael Jackson in the last seven years, but this is truly one of a kind. It is actually the first academic book on the art and life of Michael Jackson that uses his work as its main source material. Elizabeth has written 21 unique and compelling chapters. Each chapter has a different approach and answers a specific question: whether it's about the significance of a specific work Jackson created; how he was a storyteller able to engage an enormously wide and diverse world audience; his influence on culture then and now; his clothing; his short films; the use of his voice; or how he related to other artists. Elizabeth comes to informed and academic

conclusions and insights about Jackson's life, art, and artistic afterlife that I am sure people will have never heard before. If you are a fan, or academic of musicology, art history, black history, history, culture, philosophy, religion, dance, fashion, film, literature, or just interested in the life and work of an incredibly versatile artist, this book definitely is something for you. It is so inspirational that I am sure you will not be able to do anything but start your own research in earnest and explore again the stunning art of Michael Jackson.

Karin Merx

Editor of *The Journal of Michael Jackson*

Academic Studies and author of *A Festive Parade of Highlights:*

La Grande Parade as Evaluation of the Museum Policy of Edy De Wilde

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Michael Jackson: A Selected Chronology

This chronology has been compiled from a range of sources. It aims to provide an overview of Jackson's career to accompany the academic criticism that has emerged and focused on his career.¹

- 1958 Michael Joseph Jackson born on August 29 in Gary, Indiana, to Katherine Esther Scruse and Joseph Walter Jackson, eighth of 10 children.
- 1963–1968 The Jackson 5, a musical group consisting of Jackson and his brothers—Jermaine, Tito, Jackie, and Marlon—perform at several talent shows. They also perform at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York, and on the “chitlin circuit.”
- 1968 The Jackson 5 release their first single, “Big Boy,” with Steeltown Records. In the same year they are signed to Motown Records.
- 1969 The Jackson 5 perform on the televised *Ed Sullivan Show*.
- 1970 The Jackson 5's first four singles, “I Want You Back,” “ABC,” “The Love You Save,” and “I'll Be There,” peak at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Jackson is the youngest artist to reach No. 1.
- 1971 ABC-TV airs an animated television series based on The Jackson 5.
- 1972 Jackson's first two solo albums, *Got To Be There* and *Ben*, are released. The latter includes his first No. 1 single, “Ben.” Subsequent solo album releases at Motown are *Music & Me* (1973) and *Forever, Michael* (1975).

- 1969 The Jackson 5 release several albums, including: *Diana Ross Presents The Jackson 5* (1969); *ABC* (1970); *Third Album* (1970); *Jackson 5 Christmas Album* (1970); *Maybe Tomorrow* (1971); *Goin' Back to Indiana* (1971); *Lookin' Through the Windows* (1972); *Skywriter* (1973); *The Jackson 5 in Japan* (1973); *G.I.T.: Get It Together* (1973); *Dancing Machine* (1974); and *Moving Violation* (1975).
- 1976 The Jackson 5 leave Motown and move to CBS Records. Motown's ownership of the band name causes the group to rebrand as The Jacksons. The Jacksons release several albums, including: *The Jacksons* (1976), featuring Michael Jackson's first published song, "Blues Away"; *Goin' Places* (1977); *Destiny* (1978); *Triumph* (1980), *The Jacksons Live!* (1981); and *Victory* (1984).
- 1978 Jackson stars as the Scarecrow in his first feature film, *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet, and meets the film's score composer, Quincy Jones.
- 1979 Jackson releases his first adult solo album, *Off The Wall*, produced by Quincy Jones, the highest-selling album of all time by a black artist to date. Number 1 singles from *Off The Wall* include "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" and "Rock With You."
- 1982 Jackson releases his second adult solo album, *Thriller*, coproduced with Quincy Jones, which becomes the highest-selling album of all time. Number 1 singles from *Thriller* include "Billie Jean" and "Beat It."
- 1983 Jackson debuts "the moonwalk" on the televised NBC special *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today and Forever*. "Say Say Say," a duet with Paul McCartney for McCartney's album *Pipes of Peace*, is released. The 14-minute *Thriller* short film, directed by John Landis, airs on MTV. *The Making of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'*, directed by Jerry Kramer, is released on video. Along with *Beat It* (directed by Bob Giraldi) and *Billie Jean* (directed by Steve Barron), these short films serve to break down racial barriers.
- 1984 While filming a commercial for Pepsi, Jackson is burned in a pyrotechnic accident and rushed to the hospital. He wins eight Grammy Awards in 10 categories for *Thriller*. In the same year, he receives a Special Achievement Award from President Reagan at the White House. Jackson embarks on

- The Victory Tour* with The Jacksons and announces that he is leaving the group.
- 1985 *The Making of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'* wins a Grammy for Best Video Album. The charity single "We Are the World" is released and peaks at No. 1. It is estimated to be the highest-selling single of the 1980s. Jackson purchases the ATV catalogue of music publishing rights for \$47.5 million. This catalogue includes 251 Beatles songs. Kobena Mercer's essay "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'" is published in *Screen*.
- 1986 Jackson stars in *Captain EO*, a 17-minute short film, codirected by George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola for a new 3D-ride at Disneyland.
- 1987 Jackson releases his third adult solo album, *Bad*, and becomes the first artist to have five No. 1's from one album: "Bad," "The Way You Make Me Feel," "Man in the Mirror," "I Just Can't Stop Loving You," and "Dirty Diana." Jackson embarks on his first solo tour, which breaks several records of attendance. He uses the tour to visit several hospitals and orphanages.
- 1988 Jackson is commended for his generous financial contributions to the United Negro College Fund through the Michael Jackson Scholarship Fund. He releases his first autobiography, *Moonwalk*, published by Doubleday and edited by Jacqueline Onassis, which becomes a New York Times Best Seller. Jackson moves to Neverland Valley Ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley near Los Angeles, California, and performs at Wembley Stadium in London with Prince Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales, in attendance. He also donates several hundred thousand dollars to the Prince's Trust, Great Ormond Street and the Motown Museum Historical Foundation. Jackson also releases *Moonwalker*, an anthology film directed by Jerry Kramer, Jim Blashfield, and Colin Chilvers.
- 1989 Jackson appears on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, photographed by Annie Leibowitz. He also befriends Ryan White, a teenager hemophiliac, who became a poster child for AIDS after contracting HIV from a transfusion. Michele Wallace's essay "Michael Jackson, Black Modernisms and the Ecstasy of Communication" is published in *Third Text*.

- 1990 White dies of AIDS-related complications. Jackson immediately flies to Indiana to console White's bereaved mother, Jeanne. In this year, Jackson is briefly hospitalized for stress-related illness.
- 1991 Jackson co-writes and coproduces the song "Do The Bart Man," for the character of Bart (voiced by Nancy Cartwright) in *The Simpsons*. He also appears in the episode "Stark Raving Dad," under the name John Jay Smith. Jackson signs a new recording contract with Sony Records worth approximately \$890 million, and receives a royalty rate of 25 percent. The widely referenced biography *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness*, by J. Randy Taraborrelli, is published by Citadel. David Lynch directs the television ads for Jackson's fourth adult solo album, *Dangerous*. Number 1 singles from *Dangerous* include "Black or White."
- 1992 Jackson tours Africa and is given the title King of Sani in the Ivory Coast. He publishes his second book, *Dancing the Dream: Poems and Reflections* with Doubleday and begins his second solo world tour. He also launches the Heal the World Foundation and performs at the Super Bowl halftime show. *The Jacksons—An American Dream*, a televised mini-series based on the Jackson family, is aired on ABC-TV.
- 1993 Jackson gives a live interview entitled "Michael Jackson Talks . . . To Oprah," his first televised interview in over a decade. He also receives the Grammy Legend Award, presented by his sister Janet. The Los Angeles Police Department begin a criminal investigation of Jackson, based on accusations by a 13-year-old named Jordy Chandler. The international press begin disparaging coverage of the allegations, and Jackson cancels his tour in order to begin treatment for painkiller dependency. *Dangerous: The Short Films*, is released on video. Jackson's four-minute statement of defense airs on American television.
- 1994 Although no corroborating evidence has been found, representatives of both Jackson and his accuser settle out of court for an undisclosed sum. In the same year, Jackson marries Lisa-Marie Presley, the only child of Elvis. Delores Martez Jackson, the former wife of Jackson's brother Tito, is found dead at the bottom of a swimming pool. Donald Bohana would be convicted of her murder in 1998.

- 1995 *GQ* publishes the landmark article written by Mary A. Fischer, “Was Michael Jackson Framed?” Jackson releases his fifth adult solo album, *HIStory: Past, Present and Future Book 1* in a double-disc format with 15 of his greatest hits. Its commercial success is widely ignored by the mainstream media, but it remains the highest-selling double album of all time. Number 1 singles from *History: Past, Present and Future Book 1* include “You Are Not Alone” and “Earth Song.” Robert Burnett and Burt Deivert’s essay “Black or White: Michael Jackson’s Video as a Mirror of Popular Culture” is published in *Popular Music and Society*.
- 1996 Jackson and Presley divorce. Jackson begins his third solo tour. His short film *Ghosts* (directed by Stan Winston) premieres. Jackson marries his second wife, Debbie Rowe, a dermatological nurse.
- 1997 Son Michael Joseph Jackson, Jr. is born. Jackson releases his sixth solo adult release, *Blood on the Dance Floor: HIStory in the Mix*, a remix album. Jochen Ebmeier’s monograph *Das Phänomen Michael Jackson* is published in Hamburg.
- 1998 Daughter Paris Michael Katherine Jackson is born.
- 1999 Jackson and Rowe divorce. Jason King’s essay “Form and Function: Super Stardom and Aesthetics in the Music Videos of Michael and Janet Jackson” is published in *Velvet Light Trap*.
- 2000 Jackson enters the Guinness Book of World Records for supporting more charitable organizations than any other individual.
- 2001 Jackson delivers a speech called “Love: The Human Family’s Most Precious Legacy” at the Oxford Union, and appears with the band N’Sync at the MTV Video Music Awards. He also reunites with his brothers for the *Michael Jackson: 30th Anniversary Special* at Madison Square Gardens. The day after the final performance, September 11, terrorists attack the World Trade Center. A month later, Jackson releases his seventh adult solo album, *Invincible*. Christopher Lynch’s essay “Ritual Transformation through Michael Jackson’s Music Video” is published in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.
- 2002 After its initial success, *Invincible*’s promotion becomes embroiled in a feud between Jackson and Sony Records

- executive Tommy Mottola. Jackson stars in *Men in Black II*. Son Prince Michael Jackson II is born.
- 2003 *Living with Michael Jackson*, a controversial documentary directed by Martin Bashir, is broadcast on ITV in the United Kingdom. It is soon followed by *Michael Jackson—The Footage You Were Never Meant to See* and *Michael Jackson—Private Home Movies* on FOX in the United States. Jackson is nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. A compilation CD/DVD album, *Michael Jackson Number Ones*, is released. Shortly thereafter, the Los Angeles Police Department formally charges Jackson based on accusations by a 13-year-old named Gavin Arvizo, who was featured in the documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*. Jackson's Neverland Valley Ranch is raided by the police.
- 2004 Jackson features in *Miss Cast Away and the Island Girls*, directed by Bryan Michael Stoller.
- 2005 After a lengthy trial, Jackson is acquitted of all charges. Francesca Royster's essay "'Hee hee hee': Michael Jackson and the Transgendered Erotics of Voice" is published online via the *National Sexuality Resource Center*.
- 2006 *Thriller Live*, a musical showcasing the music of Michael Jackson and The Jackson 5, premieres at the Dominion Theatre, London. Margo Jefferson's monograph *On Michael Jackson* is published.
- 2007 Three articles are published about Michael Jackson in the journal *Social Semiotics*: "Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? Documenting Emotivism and Fandom in *Wacko About Jacko*," "The Face of Ruin: Evidentiary Spectacle and the Trial of Michael Jackson," and "Presenting Michael Jackson™."
- 2008 *Thriller 25*, the 25th anniversary special edition of *Thriller*, is released.
- 2009 *Thriller Live* begins its run at the Lyric Theatre in London. Jackson announces *This Is It*, a 50-concert residency at the O2 Arena, in North Greenwich, London. *This Is It* sells out approximately one million tickets. Michael Jackson dies on June 25 of acute propofol and benzodiazepine intoxication. His sudden death provokes an unprecedented outpouring of grief. Several of Jackson's albums chart highly around the world. In the same year, Jackson's autobiography *Moonwalk* is published in a new edition by Doubleday, with a foreword by Berry Gordy. An edited collection, *The*

- 2010 *Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson*, and a new edition of Adrian Grant's *Visual Documentary*, are both published. Conrad Murray, Jackson's personal physician, is charged with involuntary manslaughter. Ubisoft releases *Michael Jackson: The Experience*, a multiplatform game based on Jackson's choreography. Armond White's collection of articles, *Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles*, is published, and the *Journal of Pan-African Studies* devotes an entire issue to Michael Jackson. Charles Thomson writes a series of articles regarding Jackson's coverage by the mainstream press.
- 2011 Cirque du Soleil performs *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour*. *Immortal*, a compilation soundtrack to the tour, is released. *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson* by Joseph Vogel is published by Sterling. The posthumous album *Michael* is released. Murray is convicted of the involuntary manslaughter of Jackson. Joseph Vogel's monographs, *Earth Song: Inside Michael Jackson's Magnum Opus*, are also published. The *Journal of Popular Music Studies* devotes an issue to essays on Michael Jackson.
- 2012 The posthumous album *Bad 25* is released. Jackson features posthumously in the documentary *Bad 25*, directed by Spike Lee. Joseph Vogel's collection of articles, *Featuring Michael Jackson: Collected Writings on the King of Pop*, is published, along with Francesca Royster's landmark monograph, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. The edited collection *Michael Jackson: Grasping the Spectacle*, is published by Ashgate. Michael Bush's monograph *The King of Style: Dressing Michael Jackson*, is also published this year.
- 2013 Cirque du Soleil performs *Michael Jackson: One*.
- 2014 The posthumous album *Xscape* is released. The first academic journal dedicated solely to Jackson's life and creative work, *The Journal of Michael Jackson Academic Studies*, is founded by Elizabeth Amisu and Karin Merx. Susan Fast's monograph *Dangerous* is published as the 100th edition of Bloomsbury's *33 1/3* series. Susan Woodward's *Otherness and Power: Michael Jackson and His Media Critics* and Zack O'Malley Greenburg's *Michael Jackson Inc.* are also published this year.

- 2015 Jackson's former home, Neverland Valley Ranch, is put up for sale by Colony Capital and the Michael Jackson Estate. Joseph Vogel's essay "I Ain't Scared of No Sheets': Re-Screening Black Masculinity in Michael Jackson's Black or White" is published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. Karin Merx's essay "From Throne to Wilderness: Michael Jackson's 'Stranger in Moscow' and the Foucauldian Outlaw" is published in the *Journal of Michael Jackson Academic Studies*. The journal also publishes the first *Companion to Michael Jackson Studies* for free online.
- 2016 Seven years after Jackson's death, *The Dangerous Philosophies of Michael Jackson: His Music, His Persona, and His Artistic Afterlife*, the first comprehensive academic monograph entirely dedicated to Michael Jackson's art, is published by Praeger.

PART I

Art as Life

This section focuses on Jackson's artistic output. It is investigative in that it seeks to deeply consider aspects of Jackson's work that may have been overlooked in the past. It also engages with the current body of discourse on Jackson's creative output and draws links to cultural, film, and literary theory and criticism.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Reading, Writing, and Rewriting Michael Jackson

“Thou art a monument without a tomb. . . . And art alive still while thy
book doth live. And we have wits to read and praise to give.”

—Ben Jonson¹

I, like countless others, was born into a world filled with the music of Michael Jackson. One of my most wonderful memories is of listening to Jackson’s final studio album, *Invincible*, for the first time. There were fireworks at my boarding school in 2001, and as I watched them, my ears were alive with the electricity of his songs. I was transported to a new world. It would be another 13 years before I would begin to tackle one of the most prevalent questions in Michael Jackson Studies: Where are all the books? No, not the celebrity biographies, not liner notes and sheet music, but the actual books—the academic books, the celebratory books, the ones on Jackson’s art and his inspiration, the edited collections focused on his filmmaking, composition, clothing, and artistry. The kind of books of which there are dozens on artists like The Beatles and Elvis Presley. Then I discovered that “books on Elvis Presley alone outnumber titles on Chuck Berry, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson combined.”²

I was not, by any means, the first academic to realize how few books and journal essays had been written on Jackson, whose “career, cultural impact and artistry deserve—and reward—serious exploration.”³ As further illustrated in Chapter 2—“A Critical Survey of Michael Jackson Studies,” “the only way Michael Jackson could get covered was if he was presented as a freak, a curiosity, a spectacle,” and precious few pieces written used his actual music, short films, and interviews as their primary sources.⁴ However, much like the

pioneering academics who paved my way, I took this challenge as an incredible opportunity to model what Michael Jackson Studies could be. As Jonson writes in his elegiac poem to William Shakespeare, Jackson's work may yet live, while "we have wits to read and praise to give."⁵ In other words, the only enduring method by which to venerate any great artist is to write about their creations.

When I began my research in 2014, one of my most pertinent unanswered questions about the world-renowned artist, Michael Jackson, remained—who was he? While completing academic research in Early Modern English Literature at King's College London, I found myself asking similar questions about the 17th-century playwright, Shakespeare.⁶ What truly shocked me was that—though the artists were born four centuries apart—aside from the bodies of creative work they left behind, their contemporary audiences knew little about who they were. Despite this fact, images of Michael Jackson and William Shakespeare remain fixed in public consciousness. In light of this, I have chosen similar methodologies (approaches) as those employed in the study of Early Modern (Shakespearean) English Literature. I specifically chose a Cultural Materialist approach because it allowed me to construct a narrative from a wide range of sources and convey a clearer account of specific concepts, such as Jackson's personas.⁷

There are those who argue that the popularity of Jackson's work undermines its artistic value, and others who claim that to write about Jackson is to profit from the materialism that stole his life. However, to them I put this argument: William Shakespeare's work was also predominantly created for a mass audience, and this does not in any way diminish his contribution (see Figure 1.1).

Moreover, while Shakespeare's genius will forever be shrouded by untold stories, Michael Jackson Studies has a rich catalogue of compositions, cinematic works, autobiography, poetry, fashion, live performances, and collaborative material, as well as numerous interviews to draw from. There has been much discussion about Jackson's legacy in the past seven years, especially with regard to how his art has been presented in his absence.⁸ Academic study may well fulfill Jackson's most heartfelt wish, to be respected for the artist he was: "I always want to do music that inspires . . . to escape death, I attempt to bind my soul to my work"⁹—hence, the use of the original portrait of Jackson by artist Karin Merx, in order to further reiterate Jackson's regality and the respectful nature of this work (see Figure 1.2).

This book is a collection of original essays focused entirely on the art, music, and life of Michael Jackson. It seeks to emulate accessible and informative academic books like Kim F. Hall's *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Sonia Massai's edited collection *World-Wide*

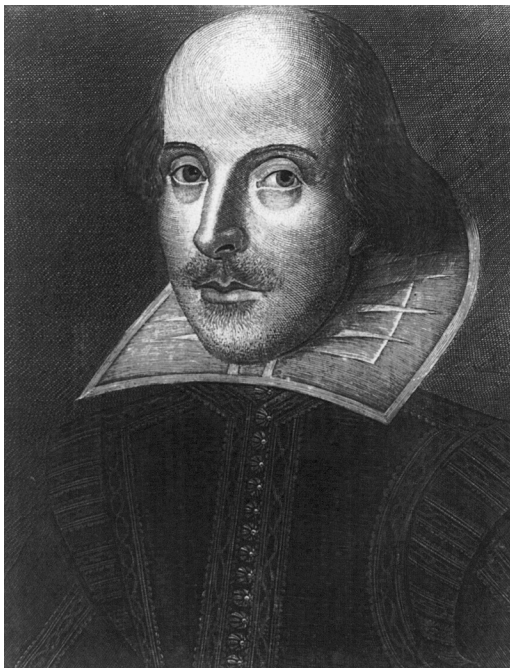


Figure 1.1
William Shakespeare, 1564–1616.

One print: photograving. (Photograving/Typographic Etching Co./
Library of Congress)

Shakespeares, and Francesca Royster's *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*.¹⁰ It also imitates Joseph Vogel's *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson* and Susan Fast's *Dangerous*, by utilizing Jackson's art as primary source material.¹¹ The first section, *Art as Life*, focuses on case studies from Jackson's canon (back catalogue), ranging from the 1997 short film *Ghosts*, to his use of clothing as costume. The second section, *Life as Art*, explores Jackson's life, especially in terms of his representation and personas. The final section, *Art Beyond Life*, explores Jackson's artistic afterlife, and discusses his posthumous releases and legacy. This book also proposes several models for further study of Jackson's creative works. It has been written primarily for those interested in or studying music, art, film, popular culture, literature and African American heritage.

This book uses the following primary sources: musical compositions, interviews, books, articles, and performances produced by Michael Jackson in life. Posthumously released works are not used as primary sources; however, some demos are occasionally referred to. The secondary sources include



Figure 1.2

A Portrait Drawing of Michael Jackson, 2014.

Ink pen on watercolor paper, Frame & Sight 44.5 × 34.5 cm. Private Collection of Elizabeth Amisu. (Artwork by Karin Merx)

monographs, edited collections, journal essays, news, and blog articles that focus chiefly on Jackson's art, life, and cultural significance. The use of secondary sources is a form of recognition of wider discourse in which this book exists. Throughout the chapters that follow, all albums and songs performed, written, composed, arranged, or recorded by Jackson during his lifetime and released in Jackson's life are considered canon. Posthumously released songs are not. As a result, songs that have been altered or revised after Jackson's death are used sparingly. Songs from the solo adult album releases, for which Jackson was executive producer, were chosen by the artist to depict themes, ideas, and concepts he wanted to present to the wider world. Though not all of these songs were written by the artist, they are referred to as *his*. I have elected to use the artist's own autobiographies, *Moonwalk* and *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, because they illuminate the artist's life.¹² I have chosen not to use biographies that rely on undisclosed sources because it is difficult to ascertain their authenticity. Nevertheless, the accounts of relatives and colleagues of Jackson are used only when their version of facts corresponds with the artist's. Lastly, all term dating, definitions, and etymological references (unless otherwise stated) have been taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*.

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CHAPTER 2

A Critical Survey of Michael Jackson Studies

This chapter is a critical survey.¹ Its aim is to familiarize the reader with the emerging critical field of Michael Jackson Studies. It also illustrates the critical “conversations” about Michael Jackson, which various academics have engaged in, and how these conversations have shifted between 1986 and now. After outlining its key terms, this survey examines the rapidly growing study of Michael Jackson as an artist, and it concludes with a brief discussion of the future of Michael Jackson Studies.

“In the beginning was the word . . .”

—John 1:1, *NIV*.

The story of Michael Jackson Studies is doubtless a story about words. In the biblical book of John, a mysterious connection is made between what is spoken and written and what becomes a living, breathing being. Likewise, in Michael Jackson Studies, words very much made the man in question, and words unmade him. The first series of words to which I am referring are those of the masses of tabloid ephemera published during Jackson’s lifetime.² However, the second set of words are the books, academic and otherwise, that circulated primarily between 1986 and today. What remains remarkable, though, is the stunning lack of words devoted to one of the most superlative musicians of modern times. At the time of the artist’s death, there were absolutely no published academic books dedicated to Jackson’s art in the English language. The single book with an academic focus this survey uncovered was first published in 1997 by an academic named Jochen Ebmeier in German.³

The primary use of a word to describe the study of Michael Jackson was the term “Jacksonism” in 2009. This was at least four years before the academic, Joseph Vogel, introduced the term “Michael Jackson Studies” as the title for his unique online resource page.⁴ “Jacksonism” was used to describe the artistic contributions of Michael Jackson in an article by Mark Fisher that argues emphatically that Jackson’s “mass-mediated demise” was symptomatic of a disease that had been present at the earliest moments of his career.⁵ The article is an interesting example of much of the literary discourse that emerged about Jackson posthumously, and it incorporates the well-worn notion that: a) Jackson’s only vital art was the “soul to sell your soul for” *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* albums, and b) Jackson’s changing appearance to a “repellent white sepulcher” was, in Fisher’s opinion, synonymous with an artistic decline.⁶ What is particularly interesting, however, is Fisher’s use of the suffix “ism” in addition to Jackson’s name. For “ism” denotes a movement that commands action, and this is particularly true in Jackson’s case. Jackson’s art persistently required action from those who engaged with it. Audiences were galvanized into listening to Jackson’s music, watching Jackson’s short films, emulating his moves, focusing on his physical appearance, and investing in his products.

Throughout this book, Michael Jackson Studies is used as a proper noun that describes the entire canon of Jackson’s artistic creations and the artist himself, as well as how both were received by audiences. This definition, *all that pertains to Michael Jackson and how he was presented*, has been employed because it enables the reader to examine 1) how Jackson was both a product and producer of popular culture and 2) how the very same culture constructs and enacts notions of ethnicity, gender, consumerism, and celebrity.⁷

1986–2008

Though he was born in the late 1950s, Jackson’s early musical catalogue spans the breadth of the late 1960s and 1970s. Academically speaking, however, the critical analysis of his work begins in 1986 with Kobena Mercer’s essay, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller,’” published in a leading academic journal of film studies, *Screen*.⁸ Mercer has been cited here as the first key example of criticism, rather than the monograph by Dave Marsh, *Michael Jackson and the Crossover Dream*, published a year earlier.⁹ The main reason for this is the negative bias in Marsh’s account, and several more detailed explanations are provided by Susan Woodward in the second chapter (“American Messiah”) of her 2014 monograph, *Otherness and Power: Michael Jackson and His Media Critics*.¹⁰ She writes, “Marsh was left with a feeling of profound betrayal” and “compares Jackson to performers in a minstrel show.”¹¹

Mercer's essay was an early example of emergent academic discourse of both Cultural Studies and Film Studies. After providing a significant introduction to both Jackson and his LP, *Thriller*, Mercer launches into a detailed reading of the film text that deconstructs *Thriller's* narrative aspects, its characterization, and its mise-en-scene.¹² Jackson's *Thriller* short film provides ample ground for analysis, especially since it is a pioneering short film of a field that would become known as the music video. Mercer argues that "in the absence of a direct economic imperative . . . its use of cinematic codes and structures provides a framework for Jackson to act."¹³ Mercer's essay is a particularly useful one for those studying Film Theory and Film Language, both as a resource and as an example.

Building upon Mercer's focus on African American Cultural Studies was Michele Wallace's 1989 essay, "Michael Jackson, Black Modernisms and the Ecstasy of Communication."¹⁴ Originally published in *Third Text*, it would be included in her landmark 1990 monograph, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, a critically acclaimed, unique, holistic, black feminist manifesto. In this collection, Wallace ties together studies of popular culture, film theory, and gender. Michael Jackson's *Bad* had been released a few short years before, and Wallace gives a laser-sharp focus to it, including short films and public performances like the Grammy Awards, arguing that Jackson "must constantly struggle for space alongside considerations of consumerism and televisual postmodernism."¹⁵ Wallace's article remains one of the most fruitful offerings of criticism in Michael Jackson Studies and is an integral source for any essay on Jackson, quite simply because it contextualizes him so aptly: "American television still keeps one unfathomable secret: this country's Afro-American presence."¹⁶ Black presence is also a focus in "Michael Jackson's Postmodern Spirituality" by Eric Dyson, published in 1993 as part of *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*.¹⁷ Both Dyson and Wallace use the lens of postmodernism when discussing Jackson's art and representation, and both are far ahead of the critical curve, taking into account both Jackson's influence and context, and also his artistry: "Jackson's videos may be capable of playing a key role in evolving public discourses of race, sex, and class."¹⁸ However, Dyson's perspective takes into account, to an even greater extent than Wallace's, the cultural connections between Jackson's music and performance, African American culture, and spiritualism: "Jackson's concerts thrive on call and response" and "mediate ritual structures of an antiphonal oral and verbal exchange between artist and audience."¹⁹

In terms of primary sources, Jackson released autobiographical material alongside his studio albums: *Moonwalk*, a monograph published by Doubleday in 1989, a collection, *Dancing the Dream: Poems and Reflections*, in 1991, and *HIStory: Past Present and Future, Book I*, a musical autobiography, which

gives his account of the events that transpired between 1989 and 1995.²⁰ The 1990s were a fertile season for the artist who, “in the midst of the circus that surrounded him . . . managed to leave behind one of the most impressive catalogs in the history of music.”²¹ Jackson drew from a huge intellectual and artistic library and, at key moments in his career, based his art on both the aesthetics of Tchaikovsky and of black children from the ghetto, while crossing the boundaries between ethnicity, gender, and class.²²

During his life Jackson’s art achieved mainstream success, as evidenced by countless awards, accolades, and records, but this lucrative production of popular music and popular culture in short films and albums was often misrepresented and misunderstood. In order to give context to these misconceptions, and to how they are perpetuated through academic criticism, it is necessary to contextualize the wider discourse, particularly in the mass media.

The journalistic criticism produced during Jackson’s career, primarily after *Thriller*’s huge success, would go on to determine the perceived quality of his art. This criticism was not produced by academics. It was produced by music critics, whose goal was often not to give well-researched appraisal of the work but to discredit the artist and largely sideline the art by discussing widely circulated rumors about his personal life.²³ Music critics had the preserve of evaluating “some of the most substantive music ever to have been obliterated by personal scandal.”²⁴ Throughout Jackson’s later career, especially after 1993, the damning critique of journalists would repeatedly counter the value of his work; as Vogel states, “reviews of the albums, post-*Thriller*, focused on the sensational and were overwhelmingly patronizing, when not outright hostile.”²⁵ A particularly useful resource for those interested in how the criticism of journalists, reviewers, and tabloids made the man, Vogel’s 2011 monograph, *Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson*, is an indispensable resource. It boasts a comprehensive and detailed bibliography of contemporaneous reviews.

To many of the aforementioned music critics, subject to the dominant ideologies of white heterosexual patriarchy, a black, androgynous, socially powerful man who toppled the crowns given to the Beatles and Elvis was, at best, a nuisance. *Thriller* remains a testament to Jackson’s success, though the label “commercially successful” has now acquired negative connotations. Furthermore, this negatively biased criticism that dogged Jackson’s career also exists within the wider context of African American heritage; as critic Margo Jefferson remarks, a black man, “William Henry Johnson was still playing the missing link between man and ape in 1906, when a group of anthropologists arrived in New York with Ota Benga, a central African Batwa . . . scientists put Ota Benga in the monkey house at the Bronx Zoo.”²⁶