

“WHO’S BAD?” DISRUPTING CULTURAL (RE)PRODUCTION THROUGH
REPRESENTATIONS OF MICHAEL JACKSON

by

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic process of producing and consuming commodities shapes not only individuals but also their relations with each other and their societies. Although popular culture theorists have often attributed to popular music the effect of securing the consent of subordinated people for their own domination, Michael Jackson's pop music has the opposite effect: it opens up dominant norms to critique and allows consumers to see the ideological relations portrayed in music as constructs rather than as normal or natural. While several of the songs on Jackson's *Bad* subvert dominant norms, some of the songs try to sustain the fixity of the relationships they portray, and thus work to appropriate Jackson's subversions into the service of dominant ideologies. Yet Jackson's embodied responses to such appropriations make clear the subversive and political power of the body to disrupt the unquestioned (re)production of dominant culture.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION: LOCATING *BAD*'S PLACE IN POP CULTURE AND POP CULTURE'S PLACE IN SOCIETY

"I love to create magic—to put something together that's so unusual, so unexpected that it blows people's heads off. Something ahead of the times." (Michael Jackson to *Interview Magazine*, October 1982).

As you walk down the aisle at a record store, you spot a copy of Michael Jackson's *Bad*. What strikes you about it? It seems, well, bad. The title itself is spray-painted on a wall, tag-style. The artist isn't the same Michael from just one album before, *Thriller*. That smiling Michael wore a suit and presented himself as a passive object for us to love, and love him we did. Here, there is no welcoming smile, no passive, romantic man lying prone for us to take advantage of. This Michael is in black leather with straps and buckles and studs. This Michael is also paler, and the paleness is accentuated by the contrasting black outfit and the much longer, looser dark hair. Since *Thriller* had become the number one selling album *of all time*, he knew he had a captive audience. So what did he do with it, and why did he change himself?

Intrigued, mesmerized by the changes, you pick up the CD, you pay for it. You own a part of Michael now. Does that implicate you in a commodity-driven capitalistic culture? Are you a slave to consumerism and the ideology that culture presents? You look down at Michael, who only stares back challengingly. You are obeying the rules, and he's spray-painting walls. His stare seems to ask, "Who's the 'bad' one here?"

This thesis walks through the *Bad* album track by track (with one deviation from the album's organization), drawing attention to the intersecting, conflicting messages it creates about culture, about relationships, and about Michael himself. I am indebted to Susan Fast and her contribution to the 33 1/3 series, *Dangerous*, as a springboard for my

thinking, as well as organizational and methodological concerns. My focus is on the importance of *Bad* as an influential cultural artifact. Though Michael Jackson evolved throughout his career, the biggest changes or seeds of changes were sown in *Bad*. Later albums were overtly political (as Fast's *Dangerous* explains) but also much less commercially successful. In many ways, *Bad* serves as a culture-shaping artifact precisely because it was still commercially viable. And this project will show how commercially successful "pop" art has the most culture-shaping potential of any art.

Bad was a turning point in Jackson's career in many ways. To set the stage for my analysis, I want to discuss briefly some of the events and changes leading up to the *Bad* album that make it particularly interesting to study and particularly important for the development of Jackson's career and for cultural change in general.

Before *Bad*, Jackson worked with an array of writers on every song, and he continued to collaborate for the rest of his career. But for the first time in his career, Jackson wrote and co-produced most of the songs on this album. Many people glance over this point: it is a popular myth that Michael Jackson wrote all of his own music. While this can be considered true in some very specific and important ways (which I will address in Chapter 4), it must be acknowledged that there were always multiple agents behind the creation of each song and artifact stamped with the Michael Jackson brand name. "Thriller," perhaps the most famous of the songs in Jackson's discography, was written by a man named Rod Temperton. But of the tracks on *Bad*, only two were not written by Jackson. They are *of course* still Michael Jackson songs even though he didn't "write" them, *per se*; but perhaps more importantly, the inverse is also true: the artifacts,

the songs, the messages that consumers receive and perceive as “Michael Jackson” aren’t necessarily products of a full, non-contingent agency on the part of the man who bears the name. The balance between Jackson-authored and other-authored songs switches decisively on *Bad*, which complicates and enriches what the album does for Jackson’s career and for popular music in general.

It is notable that the *Bad* tour was Jackson’s first without the supporting cast of his siblings (Bush). Though he had already released a few solo albums, touring without his family allowed the “individual artist” mystique to fully set in. It seems to send the message, like writing and (co-)producing most of his own songs, that this is *his* music, *his* doing, *his* message, whether or not this was “actually” and completely the case.

During the *Bad* tour, Jackson struck a partnership with Michael Bush and Dennis Tompkins, the duo who would design his clothing for the bulk of the remainder of his career. While his outfits for the *Thriller* tour and videos were iconoclastic, the *Bad* wardrobe (and all the outfits beyond) transcended to the level of spectacle. Commencing with this partnership, his clothing and body started to make him more than just a strange or exceptional human; they made him increasingly super-human. The evolution of dance moves on the videos connected to *Bad* took Jackson’s dance from entertaining to spectacular. Though he had incorporated the moonwalk into his “Billie Jean” routine on the *Thriller* tour, he honed and perfected it in the *Bad* videos. Through developments in his dancing and clothing, Jackson began to push the boundaries of what bodies could and should do, and what they could and should look like.

During the 5-year gap between the release of *Thriller* (November 1982) and *Bad*

(August 1987), Jackson's physical body also changed dramatically. In 1984, he was filming a commercial for Pepsi when mistimed pyrotechnics lit his hair on fire and he suffered second- and third-degree burns on his face and head. This prompted his first significant plastic surgery. Media, fans, and critics have been quick to categorize Jackson's bodily transformations as products of a deranged mind, an abusive past, or symptoms of general creepiness. The Pepsi incident was likely not the sole impetus for Jackson's surgeries (he also had a skin condition called vitiligo, which causes blotchy light patches on the skin). But despite legitimate medical reasons for the changes, Michael Jackson's changing body prompted a multitude of stories, and thus became an increasingly important battleground about what was culturally appropriate for bodies: some people prefer the earlier Jackson who looked more like a young black man, while others prefer the later Jackson whose body had an increasingly ambiguous gender and whose lyrics and dance moves broke open assumptions about the gender binary. There are many factors influencing the changes in his appearance, but the fabricated stories about these changes had real-world effects and thus became effectively real.

This project is *not* about "setting the record straight," finding out the "truth," or separating out the "authentic" Michael Jackson from the constructed one. My point, rather, is to show how Jackson *embraced ambiguity* about himself, his background, the stories people told, his skin color, his gender, his sexuality. He relished the uncertainty and discomfort because it made people ask hard questions about their assumptions. Essentially, the *Bad* album was the beginning of Jackson's turbulent relationship with the tabloid media, but this caused a fruitful proliferation of meanings about himself, his

appearance, and his body, and that proliferation of meanings disseminated through his music to a vast audience.

Now that I have given some important context for the album, I will now delimit my theoretical approach for analyzing it. I give a brief review of cultural criticism surrounding the problematic of hegemony and popular culture. After describing various theorists' attempts and failures to resolve the problem through subcultural subversions, I will highlight a key weakness in their theories from which I can theorize some possibilities for counter-hegemonic action, and I will situate Michael Jackson and the *Bad* album within this context.

It's no secret that popular music has been of service to hegemonies of all kinds: gender relations, capitalism and production relations, race relations, and more. Horkheimer, Adorno, and several Marxist theorists from the Frankfurt school identified popular music as a vehicle for oppressive ideology. They bemoaned pop music's ability to reinscribe hegemonic values in listeners' lives in seemingly innocuous but pervasive ways. If popular music transmits ideology as they claim, this carries important implications for Michael Jackson's music and its effect on listeners. Consider this explanation for how artifacts of pop culture shape people:

Through the countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed on the individual as the only natural, respectable, and rational ones. He defines himself only as a thing, as a static element, as success or failure. His yardstick is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful approximation to the objectivity of his function and the models established for it. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 28)

Through consumption of mass produced media (which I equate with popular culture artifacts), the individual becomes an object whose value lies in following the norms of

behavior laid out through popular culture. Though the authors are talking about popular films, this theory can extend to other media. Popular culture, they claim, robs people of thought and molds them into copies of what is portrayed on the screen, in the song (126-127, 145). Pop culture produces a (false) reality “as nature,” which then gets appropriated by the masses and becomes a generalized, material reality, or a standard against which to measure reality (129).

None of this seems problematic to the consumer because of the pleasure involved in consumption – pleasure which actually promotes accepting this new reality (Storey *Reader* 142). Adorno discusses how this works in music in more specific terms. He says that standardization in music leads to standardized reactions (Adorno 77). Pop music does the listening for us, and the pseudo-individualization of the details (which are all substitutable and not structurally unique) makes us forget or forgive the standardization (Adorno 79). The end result of consuming mass-produced culture is that we become mere approximations of the model we are given (Storey *Reader* 167): we are not “ourselves” but a combination of tropes we are continually fed by the culture industry.

This educative function of popular culture is a problem for Marxists because of the implications for the dominant and subordinate classes (in popular culture theories, these often get labeled as producers and consumers). If Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s ideas about pop culture are true, then the ruling class could simply pump its ideology into entertainment of all sorts and feed it to the workers, who would then learn to accept the conditions of their own oppression. This problematic was well-theorized as hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, and later Althusser, the ruling class uses

institutions like schools, churches, and, foremost here, the music industry as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), who organize society in specific ways and promote specific values, beliefs, practices, etc. Through these ISAs, the ruling class negotiates a societal acceptance of what is best *only* for them *as if it were* the best for everyone.

Gramsci's hegemony theory is more complex than Horkheimer's and Adorno's ideological education model of producer → consumer because he accounts for subversive action by the subordinated consumer. He describes how any subversion of the ruling class's ideology could be reincorporated into the hegemonic order through a "terrain of exchange," in which ISAs simulate a democratic relationship with the people, but channel disputes into safe places (i.e. not threatening to the hegemony); they also make safe concessions (Storey *Intro* 65) to further solidify the buy-in of the oppressed and ultimately their acceptance of the ruling hegemony.

Louis Althusser explains more specifically how rulers gain the consent of the people: rather than proposing to them a system of relations, the ruling class educates people on how they should fit into the pre-existing system of relations (Althusser 340). He also explains that material practices, not just ideas, are imbued with values and ideologies (342). These distinctions help us talk more effectively about counter-hegemonic possibilities, because we can see how the consumer / subordinate class is generally not aware that power relations are *constructs*: instead of trying to change where and how we fit in a hegemonic order, an Althusserian perspective would have us change the system of relations that has been hidden in the education process. This perspective also helps us see material practices as *changeable* and shows material change as having

meaningful impact on ideology itself.

Horkheimer and Adorno also bring up a possibility for counter-hegemonic practice. They distinguish between two types of cultural artifacts: conformist art and disunified art (131). Conformist art posits itself as representative of reality, which leads, as various representations of reality amalgamate, to a catalogue of culture. This in turn brings culture (and by extension the life/reality that it represents) under the sphere of administration—as realities are ossified, meanings become fixed (Hall, Gramsci), and ideology is formed. Disunity, on the other hand, is key in disrupting that process of ideological formation. Discrepancies between what is expected (generically, culturally) and what is depicted confront tradition (genre) and ideology (culture). It seems that this “failed art” would help consumers escape hegemonic ideology. Subcultures, a name for groups of people and art that are defined in part by these countercultural, confrontational practices, have been theorized as effective counter-hegemonic breeding-grounds by theorists like Dick Hebdige. They claim that radical subversions are needed to push the bounds of what popular culture can deal with in the hegemonic terrain of exchange

Punk subculture, theorizes Hebdige, is one place that breaks open the “naturalness” of society (“Subculture” 91). However, he notices a cycle of reincorporation or reabsorption (94): punk style and music get taken up by marketers and commodified. These commodities get sanitized (96-97): practices are frozen as images of practices, or they are trivialized or made exotic. Finally, they are imbued with mainstream values and ideology and recombined with societal norms. When what was once a subcultural expression (e.g. safety pins in clothing) becomes “normed” by mass

production and marketing in mainstream clothing stores in mainstream ways (e.g. safety pins in a baby’s onesie from Sears), it loses the potential to jar expectations. We can see that punks are “normal” because they, too, have families and are capitalists—they are reabsorbed into mass culture, and this makes them and their subversions “safe.” Hebdige set up popular culture over and against subcultures, and this situates subcultures in a location that is always already a losing one (Hall “Rediscovery” 130, 147). Punk culture can only be successfully subversive on a local level with a relatively small number of individuals.

So far, I have presented variations on a Marxist theory about how popular culture has an oppressive ideological function, and have explored attempts to subvert this.

Consider these two models of what we have discussed:

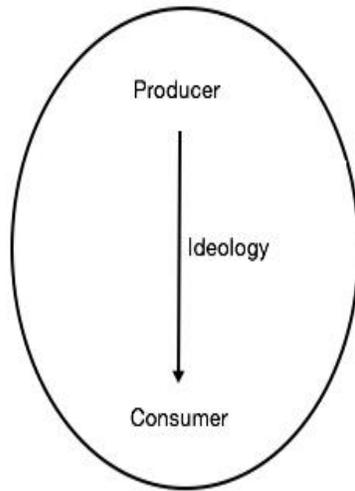


Figure 1. Consumption Model 1

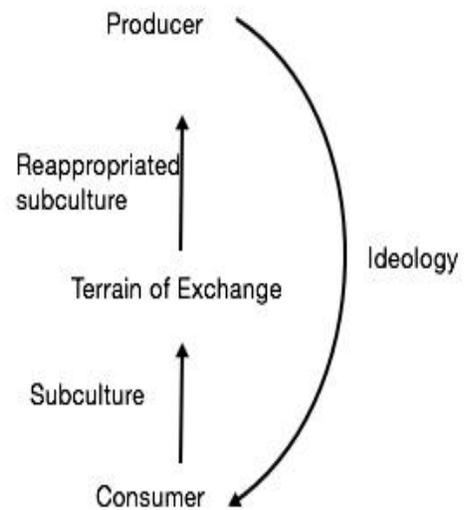


Figure 2. Consumption Model 2

The first model, in which the producer feeds the consumer ideology and the

consumer gobbles it up wholesale, is a poor model. It does not account for the agency of the consumer, and it overestimates the power of the producer. It also falsely imbues the producers with an agency and a purposefulness, implying that they are teaching the ruling class's ideology on purpose or systematically, which is not always the way ideology spreads.

The second model tries to account for the consumer's agency. It better illustrates the "terrain of exchange" principle, and shows that consumers modify as they consume and feed back their own pseudo-Frankenstein ideologies (or "folk culture") to the producers. This model is still too simple, though, in that it gives primacy to the producer, or the ruling class, who always determines where it is safe to give ground to the consumer. Also, since consumers are individuals, it is impossible to guess how they might act: it's possible that one will consume ideology wholesale, that another will reject it outright, and any course of action in between. So far these attempts resolve the hegemony problem either end with reabsorption into the mainstream, where they lose potency and change nothing; or they repudiate the mainstream, which also fails to change the hegemony that controls mass culture.

Let's examine a problematic assumption: why is pop culture always already theorized as being in the service of hegemonic power relations? The pop / sub culture dichotomy is a false and overly simplified one. Could popular music ever be a successful subversion of dominant ideology? It seems like a definitional impossibility, given that "popular" implies that the majority likes it and "dominant" that the majority does it. Yet if we accept the given terms of the argument, and then present an "alternative" or a sub-

cultural subversion of some sort, it is *already unsuccessful* at redefining the *norm* precisely because it is constituted *as alternative*, as *not norm-al*. To really subvert the discussion, the ruling ideology, we must call into question the terms, the ground rules, the ruling logic. In Althusser's terms, we should not renegotiate our place within existing power relations, but rather question the power relations themselves. But this is difficult to do unless you have access to the means of signification, the power to redefine.

My goal in this thesis is to articulate a theory that is capable of creating change in the ideological moorings of mass culture. I believe that such a theory must be a complex one with lots of moving parts that must be "combined, dismantled, bricolaged" if it is to build "politically effective alliances" (Hebdige "Postmodernism" 422). Marxism has gone out of style, but I think that is largely because people have the idea that it's all about economic determinism and simple, fixed binary models (like the producer → consumer or oppressor → oppressed models above). But some of the basic tenets, stripped of their *telos* and arbitrary structuration, create a solid foundation on which to build effective counter-hegemonic solutions. I have established the hegemony problem sufficiently for now, and the subsequent chapters will explore solutions.

Now that I have established my theoretical position, I will conclude with a brief description of the remaining chapters showing how they are situated in the problematic of subverting hegemony. The second chapter explains my own modifications to construct a more flexible Marxism (Hall), one that incorporates a dynamic view of ideological formation and a complex understanding of relations among discourses. I discuss how commodities have agency and how they can be counter-hegemonic without succumbing

to the appropriation cycle, given the right conditions. This functions as the analytical framework for analyzing the entire album. An analysis of the song “Bad” and the accompanying short film, based on this framework of the counter-hegemonic commodity, shows how the song’s main ideological function is to raise questions and destabilize. Language, sound, clothing, bodies, and dance all work to subvert social and cultural norms.

The third chapter focuses on agency and identity in the songs “The Way You Make Me Feel,” “Speed Demon,” and “Liberian Girl.” In the first song, Jackson pursues a woman somewhat relentlessly in the video. The lyrics, though, still place him in a passive position. “Liberian Girl” is about practically the same thing lyrically, but the video shows him as a trickster. While we have been enjoying the media manipulations of him, he has been filming us, watching and planning the whole time. “Speed Demon” depicts a very fluid notion of identity that combats stereotypes. What emerges in this arc of *Bad* is a conflicting and confusing tug-of-war between hegemonic identity formation and alternative conceptions of identity.

In the fourth chapter I take up the question of authorship in an analysis of “Just Good Friends,” “Another Part of Me,” and “Man in the Mirror.” This trio of songs begs this discussion because the first and third were not written by Michael Jackson, and the second can hardly be thought of as an independent text as it was part of the *Captain EO* film. “Just Good Friends” implicates Jackson as an advocate for a certain view of relationships and women, but it also portrays Jackson as comfortable with indeterminacy. “Man in the Mirror” includes an important shift in agency and responsibility for the

world's problems: it claims that we need to change our own ways (locating fault in us) rather than looking at institutional issues. Despite sounding like a utopian dream on its surface, this song is quite conservative in its message. *Captain EO* was made for and continues to be shown in Disneyland, a place that Jean Baudrillard discusses as a quintessential example of simulation and dissimulation. This film simultaneously portrays Utopia and Dystopia, colonial and post-colonial messages. The basic question underlying these songs is this: what versions of Michael Jackson are being put forth and by whom? And what cultural and ideological work are these simulacra doing?

The fifth chapter looks at the polysemous character of the songs "I Just Can't Stop Loving You," "Dirty Diana," and "Leave Me Alone." These songs portray several specific iterations of the simulacra of Michael Jackson. They show us how the man with the body both fought against and reveled in these (un)authorized versions. Each song portrays Jackson's relationship with a woman (as a metaphor for the media) differently, giving agency to the multiple parties in different amounts. In "I Just Can't Stop Loving You," the relationship is mutually beneficial but acknowledged as tenuous. In "Dirty Diana," the media representations of Jackson ruin his personal life and career. In "Leave Me Alone," he sings about wanting to be left alone, yet he is depicted in the music video enacting all the crazy things the media attributes to him. By the end of these three songs, we have multiple representations of Jackson in our minds, and it becomes impossible (and somewhat useless) to distinguish the real from the hyperreal.

Chapter 6 focuses on Jackson's body through an analysis of "Smooth Criminal." Michael Jackson's body and clothing break open our ideas of what constitutes a person,

what people are supposed to do, how they are supposed to look, and more. He pushes the boundaries of what bodies are allowed and able to do through his dance, moonwalking and leaning in particular. We are forced to understand the words “smooth” and “criminal” in multiple senses. This is a richly ambiguous text that refuses ossified significance, that opens up a proliferation of meaning with bodies performing contradictory, openly interpretable, and unexpected acts.

I hope you come away from this project with new ways of thinking about popular culture and counter-hegemonic possibilities. I have been tremendously lucky to work on a project about a man who I have admired since I was a child. My desire is for people to become critically aware of the function ideology plays in their lives and to be able to escape it when it oppresses them. My main argument is that popular art can help perform that function. Michael Jackson’s *Bad* lays an incontrovertible bedrock of uncertainty upon which future subversions of gender, race, and class hegemony can build. It succeeds precisely because it doesn’t provide a simple solution that could easily be invalidated or reappropriated; rather, it asks a question: “Who’s bad?”

CHAPTER 2 – THE COUNTER-HEGEMONIC COMMODITY: A “BAD” SOLUTION TO THE HEGEMONY PROBLEM

Michael Jackson doesn't fit neatly into the role of producer, since we consume not only the music he makes but also him and his performances. This signals that a more comprehensive model than the two presented in the introduction must be constructed to better understand the way he and his music affect cultural reproduction. Stuart Hall makes some important revisions to theories about the hegemony problem, and this chapter draws on Hall's ideas to explore a solution and create a new model of how people participate in and are implicated in ideology-building. As a cautionary note, I want to preemptively aver the inadequacy of my model; Michael already broke the other two before I even started analyzing, and I imagine that mine will similarly fail to “contain” him. But perhaps that's the main point: Michael's “Bad”ness defies fixity, structuration, limitation. His success is his ability to break out of “frameworks of intelligibility” (*Representation*). This chapter explores how this tendency in his work serves the purpose of subverting hegemony.

Hall presents two main modifications that relate to my current undertaking. First, we cannot talk about hegemonic relations in terms of blocs of people (producer vs. consumer). Rather, we should talk about them as discourses that articulate with one another through people (“Rediscovery” 146). Hall says that the “class struggle in language” is “not one in which whole discourses could be unproblematically assigned to whole social classes or social groups.” Although different discourses' ways of seeing and valuing the world may have some alignment with the lived materiality of certain classes,

that is “not the same thing as ascribing ideologies to classes in a fixed, necessary or determinate way”; it is also true in the same way that discourses cannot be assigned unproblematically to a race, a gender, a sexuality, etc.

This non-fixity of “ideological terms” is an important foundational lynch-pin for theorizing the subversion of oppressive ideology: a group may “conduct an ideological struggle to disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it within another, different chain of connotations,” giving it a new, non-oppressive function (146). The song “Bad” and its accompanying short film radically question the way certain values are assigned to race, class, and gender and disrupt any notion of permanency in these connections. By taking elements from the dominant meaning-system and reassigning them, this artifact of pop culture works subversively against any attempt to lock down hegemonic meanings.

The short film for “Bad,” directed by Martin Scorsese, was created in two parts, the first in black and white and the second in color. The second, more famous part contains the song and choreographed dancing, and I will discuss it after I lay some additional groundwork. The first part of the video depicts how the dis-articulation and re-articulation of discourse elements in new configurations leads to structural change, so I want to discuss it here. It is viewed far less often than the second part (evidenced by view counts on YouTube), so it may not have as much cultural effect. For those who do see it, though, it undeniably opens up for examination the relationship between articulations of ideology and configurations of class, race, and gender.

On his way back to the inner city from his mostly-white prep school, “Daryl”

(Michael) runs into a Hispanic student. He asks, “How many guys proud of you?”, to which Michael responds, “Three.” The other student says, “Shoot, four guys proud of me,” and they laugh it off together. This moment of racial-minority solidarity highlights the discrimination both of them face in their white schools, where they get demeaning pats on the head because no one expects them to succeed; but it also looks forward to the discrimination they face from people of their own race. Daryl and the Hispanic student expose how problematic it is to impose ways of knowing, believing, understanding, and living on people based on their race. Both the students at their schools and their peers at home resist the fact that the students disarticulate elements of a dominant ideology (education, manner of dress, style, and speech, etc.) and rearticulate them into their home ideologies.

One potent scene portrays potently this resistance to rearticulation. One of Daryl’s friends sports stolen glasses and jokes about having taken the lenses out. When another friend calls the style of the glasses “turtle shell,” Daryl corrects him: “It’s *tortoise* shell.” An awkward moment, silent but filled with tension, follows his remark. This signals differing values, along with differential access to status and class markers (Hodge).

The leader of the crew (Wesley Snipes) implies that Daryl is betraying them in terms of race, class, and even gender when he says Daryl would rather play tennis (traditionally a very elitist sport) with his white friends than hang out with his old friends. “Are you bad?” he challenges Daryl, “You either down, or you ain’t down.” Here the black and white color choice for the film highlights the simple-mindedness of such a challenge. By disallowing the rearticulation of ideological elements into their home

discourse, Snipes's character shows a limited perspective that can only see two possibilities. He views Daryl's rearticulation as gentrifying rather than hybridizing, and he cannot envision how that might actually be a resistant move.

The crew challenges Daryl to show solidarity with them by robbing a man, but he turns "soft" at the last moment and he helps the chosen victim escape. This leads to an argument over "who's bad" and what counts as "bad," which leads into the song. This argument is the setup, and the song in the second part is Michael's reply. Juxtaposing the black-and-white first section against the full-color second allows an analysis in terms of disarticulation of hegemonic meanings and rearticulation of ideological elements in newer, freer configurations. Taken as a reply to Daryl's friends' resistance, "Bad" contests a notion of fixed meanings and concretely assigned ideologies, and offers new definitions of old terms that may offer subversive potential.

The second key revision from Hall shows why Michael Jackson and "Bad" are particularly well-situated for such subversion. An oppressive ideology, Hall says, can best be subverted from a position of power, because one must have insider access and power to renegotiate the terms of the discussion ("Rediscovery" 147). Access to the means of signification is not distributed equally: groups that use the dominant discourse can "establish the primary framework or terms of an argument," while subordinate groups using other discourses have to "perform with the established terms of the problematic in play." If the subordinate group takes up "*the privileged* definition of the problem," this gives "credibility to the dominant problematic," and "*reproduces the given terms of the argument*" in the very act of making a counterargument. This model of

dialogue reproduces the material conditions of hegemony and reifies the subordinate status of the dissenting group. In terms of this theory, Michael Jackson is thus in a better position to subvert hegemonic cultural reproduction than, say, a punk band. This is partly because of his position of power in the industry. Michael Jackson calls into question the terms of the argument in several ways: he asks for a redefinition of what “bad” means, but also a redefinition of what it describes, who gets the label, and what effects the label has.

Before diving into a deeper analysis of “Bad,” I want to briefly consider how and why it can be successfully subversive given the cycle of appropriation and sanitation of subversive music I introduced in the introduction. Consider this third model that I have constructed that takes into account Stuart Hall’s revisions on ideology, articulation, and power:

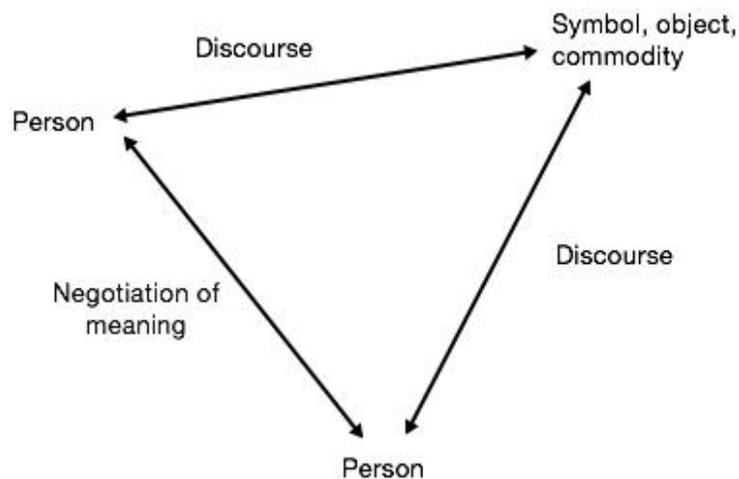


Figure 3. Consumption Model 3

The third model accounts for the non-fixity of meanings (Hall *Representation*). When

different discourses articulate distinct meanings for the same symbol, there is potential disagreement between interpreters. When people have differential access to power, this disagreement turns into ideological control or oppression. The importance of this model is that neither the meaning of the symbol within any discourse nor the outcome of the negotiation between people (let alone the identity of those negotiating) is predictable, and hence not assessable in a generalized way. We cannot make a model that satisfactorily accounts for consumers' behavior, so I focus on something that is available for assessment: the commodity, and specifically Michael Jackson as a commodity.

The significance of the commodity itself has been neglected in past models of critical pop culture analysis (the preoccupation seems to have been with whether consumers affect producers or producers affect consumers, or both). Commodities have an ideological agency because discourses flow through them (note that the arrows flow both ways in my diagram: our interactions with commodities form us and our discursive practices). Michael Jackson had a position of power in the industry, but the way he gets mass-commodified and mass-consumed allows him to shape discourse in a unique way that the role of "producer" in older models simply cannot account for. Analyzing Michael Jackson as a commodity is a unique theoretical move that allows me to tease out nuanced dynamics of the way his music shapes culture. I theorize the position of "commodity" as a discourse-laden object (or person-as-object) that does three things:

First, commodities simulate and dissimulate—they are simulacra. Any representation that seems to be merely a transmission of reality is problematic: representations are productions of meanings (*Representation*). Yet commodities often

dissimulate, or pretend that they aren't fabricated commodities, objects, and desires; then they simulate, or pretend that they are authentic, original, true, natural, or objective (*Simulation and Simulacra*). I analyze this feature of commodities more fully in Chapter 5. For now, it is important to view "Bad" as *a* re-presentation of *a* reality even if it seems to be a real-istic depiction.

Second, commodities manufacture demand for themselves, and by doing so they have a formative effect on consumers. Because music is a symbolic commodity (made with symbols), it is always already ideologically inflected; therefore, to manufacture music is to manufacture beliefs, values, and attitudes. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the culture industry creates the desires they pretend only to cater to (122). Yet because of the agency of the commodity, we don't have to blame "producers" of culture. Meaning already exists in the process of interpreting a commodity: it implicates us in the meaning-making process and shapes our habits and expectations (*Representation*). So interpreting an image (or consuming a commodity) forms our desires, and is also an identity-forming, practice-forming act.

The ideological pull of a commodity is not necessarily *solely* hegemonic or subversive. Some commodities meant to create profit for capitalistic interests are simultaneously subversive to dominant ideology (Lovell 513); and since commodities create desire, such a commodity could create dual and conflicting desires. Michael Jackson is precisely this type of commodity. *Bad* became Jackson's second highest-selling album, creating enormous profit and stoking the flame of the commodity-capitalist engine. Yet within "Bad" we see and hear multiple subversive and at times contradictory

ideological messages.

Third, commodities manufacture consensus. This is a fabricated consensus; it does not have its basis in actual consumers, but in an image, a hyperreality constructed and shown to consumers as if it were reality. Baudrillard calls these fabrications “silent majorities” (*Shadow*). Stuart Hall says that “the media become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the ‘production of consent’ – shaping the consensus while reflecting it” (“Rediscovery” 153). Hall clarifies that this is not a process of “conscious intentions and biases,” which further justifies my focus on media commodities—songs, videos, images. These representations produce meanings about events, objects, and relations, and then communicate those meanings. By their very physically static nature, they attempt to fix the meaning, to naturalize it; this is one way power is asserted (the agent here: the commodity) to enforce an ideology. This property of commodities, however, also opens up the possibility for commodities to reshape reality by fabricating a consensus in terms other than the currently constituted ones. In this way, “Bad” fabricates a consensus towards a different relation among ideologies, and participates in this “process of consensus formation” by re-presenting, hence producing, a *new* reality.

These three functions of commodities constitute their ideological agency. As they manufacture demand for their own partial representations of the world, representations that often pose as if they were neutral or whole or original, they enable a mass consumption of a system of hyperreality. If we view Michael Jackson as a commodity, then, these three functions inform how representations of him (songs and videos) actually exercise agency, regardless of who made the representation or their intent, and regardless

of individual consumption. Trying to parse out the “authentic” Michael from his presence in his art is an unattainable goal and a theoretically misinformed one. A new focus on Jackson-as-commodity will demystify the process of the transmission of ideas from Jackson’s artifacts into actual disturbances of material reality.

Through a multiplicity of representations, Michael Jackson has been used as both a hegemonic and a counter-hegemonic commodity. Many representation of Jackson subverted norms of the dominant cultural ideology, and many of those subversions were absorbed, sanitized, and appropriated by popular culture just as Hebdige explains. But because he was in such a position of power when *Bad* was released, the effect of this appropriation is actually *change*, not stasis. Jackson’s subversions contradict expectations, and when images contradict our expectations, they subvert and partially reconstruct our reality (*Representation*). Hall explains that with enough of these contradictions, meaning will “loosen and fray.” With this theoretical framework of counter-hegemonic commodities in place, I will show how “Bad” serves the purpose of loosening, fraying, and finally un-fixing meaning in many ways.

Language, Structure, and Sound:

The lyrics of the song present both a radical destabilization and proliferation of definitions of words, as well as a post-modern distrust of language in general. First and foremost, Michael sings over and over again, “I’m bad, I’m bad!” As I mentioned earlier, the song is presented within the video as a retort to his friend. They disagree about who is bad, but Michael disagrees more fundamentally about what bad *means*. These two

definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary represent at least some of the conflicting meanings of the word in this song and video:

12. As a general term of approbation: good, excellent, impressive; *esp.* stylish or attractive. (According to OED's etymology, this usage developed around the 1950's by jazz musicians.)

13. Originally in African-American usage. Of a person: (originally) dangerous or menacing to a degree which inspires awe or admiration; impressively tough, uncompromising, or combative; (in later use also) possessing other desirable attributes to an impressive degree; *esp.* formidably skilled. (OED's etymology documents this usage starting in the 1940's and 50's.)

The song does not reject one definition in favor of the other. Rather, what it rejects is a *singular definition* of the word. Wesley Snipes uses the word "bad" with the connotations listed in definition 13 (it's hard to imagine him getting up in Michael's face and shouting aggressively, "Are you stylish or attractive?"); the lyrics don't shy away from this definition altogether, but they transform it by incorporating other meanings (like "formidably skilled" and the approbatory sense from definition 12) – a rearticulation of new connotations into the discourse. As Michael shuttles among these various meanings and disavows a single, fixed one, the song refuses to accept even its own new possibilities as definitive.

The song doesn't only expand and unfix definitions, but shows a skeptical attitude about language and words to some degree. Michael accuses his addressee twice directly, saying, "Your talk is cheap, you're not a man" and "Your lying eyes, gonna tell you right." One specific misdeed seems to be lying or misusing language. But the distrust of his cheap talk is based on actions as well: "The word is out, you're doing wrong." This set of lyrics gives a confusing picture about language: on the one hand "the word" can be

trusted to give information about this person's actions, but on the other hand the accused's words are not trusted. One possible way to explain this contradiction would be to say that Wesley Snipes represents a one-dimensional understanding of "bad" (and of language and practice in general), whereas Michael and his crew represent a plurality of definitions, a different understanding of how language works. In this sense, "the word" (language is given agency here) can be trusted because it has a polysemous character. A limited perspective of language may itself constitute the wrong-doing. But lest I comfortably proclaim a new reign of linguistic relativity, Michael reminds me that some things do get locked down: "Gonna lock you up before too long," he sings. This fixing prevents me from fixing unfixing as the fixed interpretation of this song.

At the end of the chorus, there is a sense that plurality of voices can contribute to building trust in language: "And the whole world has to answer right now just to tell you once again: who's bad?" First, the consensus of the "whole world" gives strength and believability to the utterance; but second and more importantly, the consensus the world comes to is not an answer, not a definition, an ideology, a solution—rather, it is a question, and a destabilizing one at that. "Who's bad?" appears to be a simple question to end the video with. An obvious answer would be, "Well, Michael is bad, he has just told us so about twenty-nine times." If so, the line could simply be "I'm bad." But the open-endedness itself is what prevents this video from being appropriated into the service of hegemony. As I have consumed this text an uncountable number of times, I have incorporated its ideological accents and I have interpreted it according to mine. Sometimes we come to a stable, resting, temporary agreement. But it always sings out to

me again, “Wait, really?” “What’s bad?” and “Are *you* bad?” The very act of consuming this commodity disrupts stability.

One of the most culturally potent ways “Bad” troubles hegemonic representations is by disarticulating violence and crime from each other by discriminating carefully between different types of crimes depicted in the film. When Michael and his gang try to rob a man in the first segment, Michael clearly doesn’t want to participate in that illegal action of physical violence to another person. However, he and his (new) crew jump the turnstiles in the subway station as they dance, which is technically a crime but a non-violent one. They also spray-paint BAD on the wall and tear down a “wanted” poster with mug shots and “BAD” written on it. Why commit these crimes when he was hesitant about other crimes (robbing and drug-dealing) earlier in the film?

The question goes back to a connection between “bad” and “smooth” in one of the closing choruses. Michael sings, “You know I’m smooth, I’m bad, you know it,” and equating those terms points directly to the song “Smooth Criminal” near the end of the album. This implies a connection between what it means to be “Bad” and what counts as “Criminal.” “Bad” in the sense of this video is explicitly *not* criminality in the way the current American judicial system thinks of it—that’s the point made by tearing down the “wanted” poster labeled BAD. The dancers, the video, the song, they’re all calling for a reconsideration of these terms and problematizing the simplicity of the bad = criminal (= black) equation. Why would we classify assault and robbery under the same term as jumping over a subway turnstile? Both are technically illegal, and called “crimes” (the legal system has different levels of severity, but it’s more the issue of what counts as

illegal or “bad” in general that I’m getting at here). What does this conflation say about real-life values? Being a “good” or upstanding citizen in this society means precisely being “not bad,” while “bad” covers a wide spectrum of activities. It’s a troublesome label that this video forces us to reconceptualize.

Beyond rearticulating via language, the structure of “Bad” also reinforces a disarticulation of fixed norms and opens itself up to question. The third bridge presents both a utopian moment and a puzzling mystery. Michael sings, “We can change the world tomorrow. This could be a better place.” He presents no Earth-shattering, specific solutions, but at least there’s an acknowledgement that “change” (not fixity) is necessary to create a “better place.” These lines juxtaposed against the second part of the refrain present a contradiction: “If you don’t like what I’m saying, then won’t you slap my face.” Michael invites physical violence as a method of conflict resolution (likely a taunt playing on Wesley’s propensity towards violence). There are, obviously, multiple ways to see these lines. The most interesting to me, however, is to *unsee* them: this entire stanza is absent from the music video! Why? Perhaps this reinforces the song’s general distrust of language. Or perhaps the choreography was more interesting than the lyrics. It would be very like Michael Jackson to remove these lines just to make people like me scratch our heads in wonderment. Any small move to throw stability out the door is a success for “Bad.”

There is another structural subversion in the second verse, similar in effect. The verse has 3 four-line refrains, not 2 or 4. Even numbers are typical in pop music. When odd numbers are used, they are almost always symmetrical and match throughout all the

verses or choruses. But the first verse has 4 four-liners, so it is strange and rare for the second verse to have 3 in comparison with most pop music. Even a passive listener could find this disruption of expectations to be disorienting. This is a subtle but “bad” move: even the structure keeps you on your toes and unfixes previously locked-down meanings.

The sounds and pronunciation in this video make it obvious that the dominant ways of understanding sound do not always suffice. Michael’s sounds and words defy transcribers’ attempts to spell and write them. For example, I’ve chosen to write “gonna” instead of trying to spell some mangled version of what I think I hear on the track, and I make that conscious choice to respect the inability of written language to contain this commodity and this artist. Michael’s pronunciation of “come on” (a lyric not universally agreed upon) similarly defies the spelling tools I have (linguists, have a go with your phonetic transcription). Michael repeats a sound like “nah” (unvoiced, but with passion!) after every other line, and there are many other sounds and yells and noisy breaths in the video. These unintelligible sounds act as yet another destabilizing feature: you simply *cannot* understand everything in this song. If that’s the way you approach music, it asks you to reconsider what you’re doing.

Clothing and Aesthetics:

The very act of listening to the pop commodity of “Bad” requires the consumer to disarticulate and rearticulate several sets of meanings. The lyrics, the structure, and the sounds all call into question what is “normal” and create new associations for the listener. Watching the visual aspects of the video is an even stronger counter-hegemonic

experience. In the moment before the song starts, the video switches from black and white to color. This signals that the visual aspects of the film have just become more important. Out of the shadows and from behind the pillars a variety of people pop out and congregate behind Michael. The new crew is racially diverse, and they sport many different colors and styles.

Then the camera does a slow 180-degree pan around Michael's body, starting at his heels and ending on his face. The silver heels of his boots have gold longhorn cattle emblems on them, and the buckles and leather straps around them have a cowboy look to them. Higher up his legs there are more straps, but these ones are canvas belts with loop-style buckles, all adorning classic black Levi jeans. Progressing upwards, he is wearing no less than three belts (and likely more) with lots of metal—buckles, studs, metal-ringed holes, with bits of chain and metal loops hanging from the belts. On his right hand he wears a brace similarly adorned with punk-style accoutrements. The jacket has zippers and buckles at odd angles and in unexpected places.



Figure 4. “Bad” screen shot: boots, buckles, and straps



Figure 5. “Bad” screen shot: gloves, belts, and metal

This prolonged focus on Michael’s iconoclastic “Bad” outfit draws attention to its hybridity and distinctiveness. There are at least three distinct genres of fashion combined: cowboy-Western style in the boots and lower buckles; punk style in the metal, the color scheme, and haphazard-esque construction; and military style in the jacket cut and the belts and epaulets. (A fourth genre could be found in his Levis jeans and “everyday” canvas belts.) These elements aren’t just combined, though: each one is overblown to an extreme, which reveals how constructed and non-natural this figure is. The outfit, just like the lyrics, keep us guessing, and we can never quite be sure what it is “supposed” to be. It disarticulates all these elements of style and clothing from their “natural” places and rearticulates them in relation to “bad”ness.

One way to read this outfit would be to call it an incorporation of punk style into popular culture, *a la* Dick Hebdige. By putting non-clothing items onto clothing (studs, metal, safety pins) and by making the clothing bad-on-purpose, punk style subverts the norms of what clothing is supposed to do—a destabilizing surrealist juxtaposition.

However, when pop culture takes punk clothing and commodifies it, Hebdige fears that it loses its subversive power. Clarke, however, asks whether we can envision style incorporation as a *breakthrough* rather than failure (Storey *Intro* 165). Hall's idea that subversion is easier from a position of power helps support Clarke's reenvisioning: since Michael Jackson is the center of pop music, when he "reincorporates" subversive punk style it actually shifts the center towards a punk ideology.

Another way to interpret Michael's outfit comes from Elizabeth Wilson's discussion of postmodern fashion. She says, "Our finished 'appearance,' therefore, is the end result (yet itself alterable and altering) of an often elaborate construction" (Wilson 435). In this sense, Michael's outfit amplifies and obviates its own constructedness, making aspects of each genre conspicuous rather than natural or given. Wilson says Frederic Jameson "objects to this proliferation of practices" in postmodern fashion because "the hysteric overflow of possibilities, the hypertrophy of styles, destroys meaning" (435). But that is *precisely* the point—the fashion is "bad" because it calls for a destruction of fixed categories and a renegotiation of meaning.

In particular, Michael Jackson's fashion opened up gender configurations for men. When fashion "playfully transgresses" gender boundaries and stereotypes, it exposes "the masquerade of femininity" (437), but Wilson suggests that "it would be more subversive to extend the notion of artifice to masculinity" (437-8). Michael Jackson has done just that. Historically, the acceptable and available fashion choices for men have been limited in comparison to women's fashion. Terms like "power suit" and "power tie" reflect how men's fashion privileges certain dominant modes of masculinity. Michael

Jackson's dresses in alarming, shocking, eye-catching ways and thus exposes the "normative nature of social practices, always so intensely encoded in dress" (438) and opens up greater possibilities for men's dress *and* their social practices.

Throughout this project I have tried to avoid sources who knew Michael personally (including his autobiography and other biographies). But I couldn't resist reading what Michael Bush, one of Jackson's long-time designers and dressers, had to say about the construction of Jackson's outfits. Jackson first established a partnership with Bush and Tompkins during the *Bad* tour and collaborated with them throughout the remainder of his life. Bush tells several stories about fashion choices that prompted questions and urban legends. For instance, Michael decided to wear tape on some of his fingers for a while (63). He also started wearing an armband that had no significance whatsoever (71). For a couple of years, Jackson wanted three letters, chosen at random, embroidered on the shoulders of his jackets. Bush came up with "CTE," and says, "It meant nothing. And that felt right" (73). According to Michael Bush, Jackson wanted to do things with his fashion that (a) nobody had done before and (b) would keep people guessing. There was never an answer. Just a question. The "Bad" outfit asks a provocative question just like the final lyrics: "Who's bad?"

The visual, including fashion, is in many ways more important and more trusted than language in this song. Both of these aspects of the video significantly disarticulate "normal" ideological relations. Wilson uses fashion to point to another category: "Fashion in our epoch denaturalises the body and thus divests itself of all essentialism" (437). So now I take that turn and look at how "Bad" destabilizes ideological constructs

of the body.

Body and Gender Practice:

Let us return to the moment when the camera pans around Michael's body and stops on his face. The Michael we see in this video has notably lighter skin and slightly altered features compared to the Michael from previous albums. His face looks beautiful, smooth, almost like porcelain. The cleft in his chin is more prevalent. The longer, looser hair is distinct from his earlier look and from most of the other men in the video. Right after this moment a pipe bursts, prompting Michael to whip his head in that direction.



Figure 6. "Bad" screen shot: Michael's face

The camera is even closer to his face now, and we can see his makeup—lips colored, eye shadow, eye liner, eyebrows well-manicured, and not a hint of a whisker beyond his sideburns. Though not particularly "feminine," this face is not paradigmatically masculine either.

To better understand the aesthetic changes in Michael's face, I draw on Jack Halberstam, who discusses non-normative bodies and their subversive potential. Films that focus on such bodies create a "preoccupation with the body as a site created through technological and aesthetic innovation. Technotopic inventions of the body resist idealizations of bodily integrity" (*Queer Time* 124). It was between *Thriller* and *Bad* that Jackson had his first plastic surgeries, which certainly constitute "technological and aesthetic innovation." Halberstam's argument as applied to Jackson means that since we can see his body *as constructed*, as an invention, it helps us break out of preconceptions of when men are "supposed to" look like. Since he is a living, breathing body, we cannot merely dismiss this as an artistic impossibility or a Utopian dream. He's right there, staring at us, a living proof of the possibility of difference, a challenge to expand our notions of what bodies can or "should" look like."

Dance and Movement:

As I near the end of this chapter, I want to give some well-deserved attention to the magnificent choreography in "Bad" – how the subversive body moves. The dancing in this video, both Michael's and his ensemble's, is of a higher caliber than what appears on the videos of *Thriller*. The choreography for "Beat It" and "Thriller" is both silly and simple. In "Bad" the dancing becomes more skillful and complex (generally) and takes on a new seriousness. They dance for cooperation and solidarity, not for women or power (Hodge). This comes through in their teamwork: they help each other jump and move, and each dancer's steps complement his neighbor's rather than merely copying him. In

contrast, the choreography in “Thriller” is just line-dancing in unison. Not only is the dancing more complex, but its complexity mirrors the subversive message of the lyrics, the clothing, and the body that I described above.

I want to look at two moves that are, to me, mind-blowing and life-changing. The first, not performed by Michael, I describe as a roller-skates split lifted into a moonwalk, depicted in this series of pictures:



Figures 7 and 8. “Bad” screen shot: Roller skate splits (a) and (b)



Figures 9 and 10. “Bad” screen shot: roller skate splits (c) and (d)

Everything about this is backwards from how bodies are “supposed” to work. Starting from a full splits position while wearing roller-skates, the dancer defies common-sense notions of both flexibility and gravity in an enormous feat of strength and pulls himself back to a standing pose. He gives the illusion of pulling himself up by grabbing the collar of his jacket. (This is obviously not what helps him stand, but it could be a satire of the “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” cliché.) And once he’s upright, he starts moonwalking! ... in roller-skates! He gives a brief glance to the camera, as if to say, “It ain’t no thang.” These few seconds leave me flabbergasted every time I watch the video. I half-believe that someone has put a slow-motion video in reverse; played the “right” way, this would be a nasty roller-skating accident.

Throughout this video, men have pushed against boundaries in what they say, how they dress, and how they look, but the ultimate test is to walk the walk. ... or to

moonwalk the walk, rather. If “Bad” is all about subverting hegemonic norms, as I have argued, this move is perhaps the symbolic capstone. It disarticulates items from one discourse and rearticulates them in another: flexibility and skating have been more associated with women than men in general, and walking forward is more common than walking backward. Appropriating new discourse features onto the male body proliferates possibilities for enacting masculinity.

The second move is Michael’s iconic crotch grab. “Bad” is the first music video in which the move appears! Right there at the beginning, before he even sings a word, he



Figure 11. “Bad” screen shot: crotch grab

spins in a full circle, puts one hand behind his head and the other over his crotch, and gives us his first Michael Jackson grab-and-thrust. He does it so smoothly, so casually.

The move is deployed many times throughout this video, and it became a standard feature of his videos and performances.

It takes an incredible amount of chutzpah to grab one's crotch in front of millions of viewers. But *why* does that seem scary? Perhaps because the penis has been constructed as (1) primarily a sexual thing, and (2) therefore as a private thing, and something to be ashamed of in public contexts. The move is often accompanied by a very high-pitched "Ow!", which disassociates the crotch-grab from stereotypical machismo. This move disarticulates the penis from discourses of sexuality and masculinity, and rearticulates it in an aesthetic and kinesthetic system of meaning. In yet another way, Michael questions cultural constructs and makes bodies useful and meaningful in ways heretofore prohibited or unimagined.

Conclusion

When Michael's friends challenge him by saying he's not "bad" anymore, he responds in the baddest way possible. Instead of showing them he measures up to their standard, he radically changes the definition. Badness isn't about aggression or physical violence. It's about changing the world, accomplishing positive things by rubbing up against oppressive systems, challenging norms, and cooperating with others.

I've spent many pages claiming that the point of "Bad" is to keep us guessing, to resist fixed interpretations, and in the very act of writing this down I have fixed that as if it were an authoritative interpretation. There are alternative readings for this song and for all the songs I analyze in subsequent chapters. I look forward to reading Michael Jackson's autobiography after I finish this project to find out what he had to say about

these songs, and I deeply hope to find differences in our interpretations. These interpretive differences are the very fruits of a counter-hegemonic commodity. Because “Bad” functions as a counter-hegemonic commodity with agency, its ideologies interact with mine differently than with someone else’s, and the two of us have to renegotiate meaning. I have shown how this song loosens and frays hegemonic, stabilized meanings; the ensuing chapters extend that quality to the entire album: *Bad* succeeds in raising to a conscious level and problematizing previously unconsidered ideological fixtures.

CHAPTER 3 – “EXACTLY WHICH MICHAEL JACKSON
ARE WE TALKING ABOUT ANYWAY?”
AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN *BAD*

Songs: “The Way You Make Me Feel,” “Speed Demon,” “Liberian Girl”

The next three songs introduce the more specific normative constructs of gender, identity, and agency and go beyond troubling or disrupting them the way “Bad” did. They envision alternatives to hegemonic constructs and playfully experiment with different answers to questions such as these: What is a man? Is identity tied up with gender, or can they be separate? What is appropriate and not appropriate for a man to do, when and where, and how does that get constructed and policed in culture? Through these songs, Michael Jackson offers listeners expanded agency and proliferates the possibilities for socially acceptable identities.

Jackson first troubles all the normative answers to these questions that were being relentlessly disseminated through pop media during the 80s (and beyond). Michael Kimmel claims that “masculinities are constructed through media representation” (Craig xii), and if he is right then the way men are portrayed in popular music can have a real effect on how men in society think of themselves and comport themselves. In reviewing a study that catalogued how men were portrayed in music videos from the mid 1980s (the same time *Bad* was released), Steve Craig writes that they were overwhelmingly violent and tried to dominate others in these videos. They were “the center of attention and power and [were] more often aggressive and hostile than helpful and cooperative” (Craig 18). If the goal is to shift or expand these social, cultural, and discursive “definitions of

manhood” to include other versions of manliness, we need a “serious confrontation with images of power” (Craig xii). Each of these songs confronts conventional ways of men exercising power and proposes alternative ways of gaining and using it.

Although there are several seemingly contradictory messages sent through Jackson's music videos for “The Way You Make Me Feel,” “Speed Demon,” and “Liberian Girl,” they ultimately portray a more open definition of masculinity than the videos Craig writes about. A multiplicity of discourses articulates through Jackson's lyrics and body. The contradictions and multiple meanings work to show his identity not as stagnant or fixed, but as an effect, as constructed. Judith Butler says that “the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (*Gender Trouble* 201). Hegemonic portrayals of masculine identity foreclose many possibly courses of action, feeling, believing, etc. for men; but in these videos Michael Jackson opens up new ways of enacting manhood and identity, proliferating possibilities for male agency and disrupting the violent and aggressive hegemonic masculinity that had reigned supreme.

In *Bad*, we see both hegemonic and non-hegemonic identities, but imperatively they are all obviated *as performances*, as constructs. As Michael moves among the various masculinities portrayed in *Bad*, he doesn't advocate one certain way of “being a man;” instead, he shows precisely that there *is no one certain way* to be a man. He doesn't give the answer, but rather asks the question, and in so doing disrupts the gender hegemony. By inhabiting various masculinities, he shows how agency expands when

gender configurations open up.

Early in Jackson's career, he had very little agency and subsequently his music could not challenge hegemonic constructs. The videos for "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" and "Rock With You" (both from his early album *Off The Wall*) place Jackson in a very passive role. In "Rock With You" he stays in one spot on a stage. He wears essentially a bedazzled sweat suit with matching moon boots, and a green light illuminates him from behind. Even though he does some of the dance moves characteristic of his early career—a lot of snapping and hip moving—he doesn't act on anything. He is the only person—indeed, the only object—on the screen, so there is no agency to be had.

In "Don't Stop," he does similar dance moves and is similarly alone. At one point, other people come onto the stage to dance with him, but they are just exact copies of him. The difference in this video is that the scenery has changed: he stands in one spot, but the background behind him changes, as if it were a Michael Jackson screen saver. If anything in the video has agency, it is the scenery that is active; Jackson is passive. The movement of dance may deceive viewers into believing that Jackson has agency, but his movements have no effects on his surroundings or on other people; his movements are without any context (done in fabricated places), they are repeated in both videos, and they are not particularly novel. These qualities of his dancing show that despite the physical movement, these representations of Jackson portray him as static, as a stage prop, a commodity through which or on which something else or someone else acts. This insidiously foreclosed agency (Butler) locks Jackson into a "fixed" identity. This fixity

nips any potential subversion in the bud, and it also validates and reifies the constructs around him.

“The Way You Make Me Feel” presents a stark contrast to the *Off The Wall* videos in every respect. Jackson pursues greater agency through a subversion of expectations around his gender and his behavior in general. Connell reminds us that gender relations happen in moving configurations, and the “hegemonic” is a position of rather than a fixed set of characteristics (*Masculinities*). That is, it isn’t necessarily hegemonic for a man to pursue a woman, to compete with another man, etc.; these traits are only hegemonic when they limit or delegitimize the agency of women or other men. With that in mind, Kimmel describes some current traits of hegemonic masculinity in America: he says it is a “relentless repudiation of the feminine,” including not showing emotions, and placing value on “power, success, wealth, and status” as well as “daring and aggression” (Kimmel 30-31). Rather than trying to subvert this hegemony with anti-hegemonic men who are feminine, emotional, passive, and who lack money, power, and success, Judith Butler conceives of a different antidote: if we can reconceive of hegemonic masculinity as a “mundane operation of heterosexual drag” (Storey *Intro* 127), we can re-see “straight” gendered actions *as performances*, in the same way that “queer” and “drag” are culturally viewed as gendered performances.

Jackson’s performance in “The Way You Make Me Feel” calls attention to the actions of all sorts of men as drag performances. The video opens to a group of men fighting with the police (some getting arrested), cat calling, yelling, touching, and grabbing women violently and incessantly to a point where the women have to yell and

hit the men to make them stop. They also yell at each other in competitive fashion, showing off their bravado and their machismo. They value each other based on how much attention a woman gives to them. Michael walks up to these men, but they tell him to “go on home” because he “don't wanna be hanging with these hoodlums” – basically, to get lost because he’s not doing what they are doing. This group clearly places value on certain of Kimmel's hegemonic masculine norms, particularly the “manly daring and aggression” and “repudiation” of the feminine (or at least differentiation between masculine and feminine). Michael’s character is neither aggressive nor daring, and his body looks somewhat feminine in comparison to theirs – his smooth face, lean body, and long hair. They exclude him from their group on the basis of a shared norm of masculinity that he doesn’t fit.

As he walks away, he passes an old man sitting down by the sidewalk. The observant man tells Michael, “You been trying to act like them boys” (as the camera pans to a man getting up in a woman’s face and her slapping him to make him go away). The man tells Michael that he doesn’t need to be like those men, that he should be himself. On the surface, this is a fairly trite sentiment; however, this remark exposes a fundamentally different attitude about being a man than the other group had: there are *different* ways to do it! This gives Michael the gumption or “daring” he needs to try to get a woman’s attention.

This is also where portrayals of masculinity get complicated and contradictory. To get the attention of the woman who has caught his fancy, he yells “Hey!” so loudly that all the characters stop what they’re doing (she even gasps in surprise) to look at him. He

proceeds to walk up to her and ogle her slowly from head to toe, from front to back, with an objectifying male gaze. This gesture makes it appear that he has decided after all to enact the normative practices of the group of men who rejected him—this is Michael’s most hegemonic moment of the entire video. Now I’m not arguing that this is a respectful, gender-role challenging practice by any means, but it is at least less violent and intrusive than the other men’s practices. In fact, after his very long gaze he begins singing and dancing for her, which are tactics none of the others have tried.

His first movement and first lyric trouble any hegemonic affiliations he might have previously portrayed. He snaps his fingers and whips out his arm, thumb and two fingers extended. The rapidity of the movement calls attention to the gesture of his hand, which is a culturally unintelligible sign. It is illegible, a gesture that means nothing. This misdirection to the hand calls attention to what we cannot understand, the arbitrariness of bodily actions. His dance begins with a destabilizing gesture that prepares viewers for difference.



Figure 12. “The Way You Make Me Feel” screen shot: unintelligible hand gesture

The first sung line comes right after this: “You knock me offa my feet now baby.” This line does the same thing as the hand gesture: it is complicated to read and offers several potential meanings. On the one hand, it objectifies the woman, saying her looks are what gives her power and worth; her looks are what have an effect on Michael. On the other hand, the syntax gives her agency and puts Michael in the passive position. He gives her the action of the verb “knock,” which isn’t a little thing: the men were knocking women around earlier, so it’s a big move toward equality that the woman is now the one knocking.

The video’s introduction of “The Way You Make Me Feel” sets up the expectation that hegemonic masculinity would play a major part, but within the first few seconds of the song Michael has already radically destabilized what being a man means. He continues to enact multiple positions of masculinity (Connell) throughout the video. Rather than drawing a stable, simple picture of what men “should do,” Michael instills the idea that masculinity is a moving target, a variety of roles that one can choose to inhabit or not. He redefines gender as unstable, as a construct, as a simulacrum.

Once the song starts in full force, he suddenly befriends the men who before had rejected him. They sing and dance with him, and he almost becomes a new “alpha” for their group. Michael has now solidified his masculinity because of his pursuit of a woman, a pursuit that is somewhat relentless throughout the song. Several times the woman runs away from him and he chases her. He makes sexual gestures at her while singing the line, “I swear I’m keepin’ you satisfied.” This moment happens twice, and it reinforces the idea that sexual performance is indicative of the quality of a man. These

moments all speak to Kimmel's characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. But lest we essentialize and condemn such behaviors as unilaterally "wrong" and hegemonic, recall Connell's idea that masculinities are better understood by their relation to the gender order than by their characteristics. The examples I have explained here help Michael "fit in" with the other men in the video, but crucially not to the exclusion of the women.

Michael's treatment of both men and women can be considered counter-hegemonic. He displays an attitude of cooperation with the men: he dances with them and seeks approval from them (the old man gives him a thumbs up after he busts a move). This contrasts with how the other men treated each other in the beginning—they were competitively insulting and one-upping each other. He shows them a different way to treat women, which is much more successful than their method: while they would lay in wait and accost individual women, Michael pursues a woman and her friends on his own. Sure, this is a complicated power dynamic to read; pursuit, particularly unwanted pursuit, constitutes a violation of someone's agency. But consider that he was not just pursuing her—she was also leading him, a point which the lyrics make more saliently than the video by attributing the active role to the woman.

Butler theorizes using the regulatory function of language to reconfigure power and change constructs surrounding gender and identity, saying that language "is as an instrument that invariably constructs the field of bodies and that ought to be used to deconstruct and reconstruct bodies outside the oppressive categories of sex" (171). Language can destroy constructs by redefining terms, appropriating them in new contexts, and more (162). The lyrics in Jackson's songs demonstrate how specific

linguistic strategies can be deployed: gender-atypical actions, attitudes about power and agency, redefinitions of terms, and unintelligible sounds.

Most of the lyrics place Michael in a passive position. When he sings “The way you make me feel,” the woman is doing the “making.” Jackson is passive in the lyrics. The woman always does things *to him*: “I like the feelin’ you’re givin’ me, just hold me baby and I’m in ecstasy.” He is an object to be held; he doesn’t generate the feeling, rather it is given to him. The lyrics give agency largely to the woman. Since a redistribution of agency opens up previously fixed configurations of identity (Butler), these lyrics both allow the woman to determine her own identity (as an agent, not an object) and allow Michael to be a different kind of man, not one beholden to the expectation of objectifying women.

So how does this reading align with the video that portrays him as a fairly aggressive pursuer? These mixed messages contribute to a redefinition of gender roles. Rather than simply taking the subject → object relationship and turning it around, which would simply flip the differential power relationship, Michael tries to create a dynamic in which both men and women are subjects (Hodge) and both have agency. The gender subversion here is subtle, but perhaps more effective because of its subtlety: a direct attack on heterosexuality would be hypocritical in a way by not accepting plurality, and it could be easily written off by most audience members. Michael doesn’t become an anti-heterosexual figure, but rather a counter-hegemonic one. The equitable attribution of agency clarifies the distinction there.

Not everything about this song escapes hegemonic ideology, however. As I

discussed in Chapter 2, commodities carry ideological agency with them and have an educative and naturalizing function. Michael reifies the capitalist imperative by objectifying the woman and commodifying the man in this video. He interpellates her into this hegemonic order: “Hey pretty baby with the high heels on;” she is notable because she is pretty and because of her high heels, and those two are connected. He continues, “You’re just a product of loveliness, I like the groove of your walk, your talk, your dress.” Michael literally calls her a “product,” defined by its aesthetic quality, and explains that what he likes about her is her walk (surely affected by the “high heels”), her talk, and her dress (more focus on the aesthetic pleasure of the object).

He doesn’t stop at objectifying the woman, however – he goes on to reify the role of men in this hegemonic commodity-economy: “I’ll be working from nine to five to buy you things to keep you by my side.” Men (and not women) are the providers, the breadwinners. They are *supposed* to work, *supposed* to buy things. And how do love and relationships work? The man (reduced to his production value) buys things for the woman (reduced to her object value) so she can have even more things (becoming more object-like) and so he can keep her by his side (as one would any other commodity). The capitalist imperative drives this relationship, not genuine companionship.

These values, this relational mode, are normalized and naturalized through popular culture. Near the end of the song, Michael repeats this line: “ain’t nobody’s business but mine and my baby’s.” That is a homiletic shift: the nature of this relationship (how commodity-based it is) gets attributed to Michael and the woman, which obfuscates the role that the capitalist economy (which produced this song and video) had in

influencing or designing the structure of the relationship. The first clue? “Ain’t nobody’s *business*.” Since when do we talk about relationships using business terms? Since we live in a society where the capitalist ideology has a hegemonic hold on every aspect of culture. But by Michael’s disclaiming any institutional influence and saying that the commodity-based relationship between the woman and him is solely their “business,” it becomes a simulacrum, a confabulated norm for others to strive toward.

“Speed Demon” calls into question more “common-sense” notions that have enjoyed a hegemonic hold in American culture. In this song, Michael plays with fluidity of identity beyond gender roles. He disturbs the notion of stable identity in more radical ways, both in terms of individual identity and in terms of institutions. For a superstar figure like Michael Jackson, celebrity status makes more visible the fixing of identity and limiting of agency. At a material level, celebrities come to be physical stand-ins, embodied signifiers for the constellation of values and ideological positions consumers ascribe to them. Rosemary Coombe discusses how the American idea of exclusive property rights tries to “freeze the...constellation itself” (Coombe 107-108). There is a continual worry about representations of celebrities being accurate, authentic, and authorized. This worry produces a frozen celebrity, with a frozen gender identity, which limits the commodified celebrity’s agency and identity.

Coombe says that the celebrity *body*, however, always problematizes the making of a celebrity into a pure object (110-111) because it is always moving, which means that Jackson’s subversive gender practices are difficult for hegemonic culture to sanitize and appropriate. In terms of Butler’s argument, appropriating a celebrity image to subvert

gender norms can be quite effective: as discrete and distinct representations of Jackson's commodified body emerge, they "express discontinuous relations" between sex, gender, desire, and gendered practices (*Gender Trouble* 114-115) and proliferate acceptable combinations of those aspects of bodies.

These "discontinuous relations" in practice expose the arbitrariness of, in fact, the unnaturalness of the fixed sex-gender-desire-practice alignment of the identity simulacrum. This exposure of the normative as constructed has the effect of abolishing (or at least disregarding the regulatory function of) the "norms," which "would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, [and] destabilizing substantive identity" (*Gender Trouble* 200). This loss of a stable, fixed identity allows us to reconceptualize identity as an effect, as constructed, which opens up greater possibilities of agency. Michael Jackson's bodily subversions are not only identity-questioning and -forming for himself, but also for the society who consumes his work.

The "Speed Demon" video opens with Michael running away from a mob of fans. He hides behind a replica of the statue of liberty, and as most of the fans pass by she comes to life and says to him, "Land of the free, home of the *weird*." Immediately, the song sets itself up against a long-standing culture of American exceptionalism. Instead of American being the best, brightest, etc., this moment casts our culture as "weird," explicitly *abnormal*. The first line of the song, "I'm headed for the border," solidifies this notion that escaping America might be better than staying.

Because all the other characters are such distorted and grotesque animations, the eyes are drawn to how pretty Michael looks. His recent plastic surgeries have perfected

his features in some sense—he has such smooth lines and a strong bone structure in comparison to the cartoons. Even when he turns into a bunny, he’s a charming bunny with sleek features who still gets attention from girls. As an animated cartoon who morphs into several different characters, he is still recognizable to fans because of his characteristic movements. For instance, he morphs briefly into Sylvester Stallone but does a typical Michael-spin followed by a hand in the air. His constant “identity” is not tied to his physical shape, to his body, but is instead seen through his actions, his movements. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, Jackson’s movements exceed the “normal” limits of what human bodies are “supposed” to do, expanding the boundaries of what can be considered possible. This calls into question the practice of assigning identity to people based on their body shape (Butler) and evokes new notions of how to (or if we should) interpret identity.

As he continues running from fans, he runs through a film set. A cartoon Stephen Spielberg, directing a western film, yells with disappointment, “I ask for a *bad* guy and they give me Michael Jackson!” One of the actors, an angry cowboy, says, “I’ll show you bad.” Both these people call attention to the main theme of the album: what does “bad” even mean? They insinuate that Michael doesn’t fit their definition of “bad.” Yet it’s important to note that he is pursued by people of all types in the video and the song: tourists, fans, media, cowboy actors, and notably, the police.

The video complicates our ideas of badness, our perspective on criminality and justice in general. It is unclear whether he is the “criminal” (as the police chase him for speeding) or pursued by “criminals” (who get ticketed by police for speeding and

crashing). As various parties speed around the freeway in pursuit of Michael, police officers pull them over as Michael sings, “Pull over boy and get your ticket right.” For most of the song the police actually aid him in getting away from his pursuers; but police chase him as well, and he manages to avoid them (until the end). During the bridge he says, “You’re preachin’ ‘bout my life like you’re the law,” which mocks the authoritative tone of the person “preachin’” but simultaneously reifies the authority of the law.

Michael subverts more than normative cultural institutions. He uses his body to subvert language itself. He uses nonsensical words and sounds in “Speed Demon” to destabilize meaning the same way his commanding finger snap gesture does in “The Way You Make Me Feel.” During the final chorus, he sings:

Pull over boy and get your ticket.
 Eat your ticket,
 Get your ticket,
 Eat yo’,
 Get yo’,
 Hoo!

I have centered these lines to show visually how they funnel from meaning through a breaking down of sense and finally into utter nonsense and meaninglessness. “Eat your ticket” means nothing. The only results that match in a Google search are Michael Jackson lyrics for this song. We can try to make guesses about what it might mean. “Eat yo’” and “Get yo’” mean even less, as they aren’t intelligible as complete sentences. The final “Hoo!” is simply my approximation of the sound—an undefinable one—he makes. This funnel down to meaninglessness emphasizes how we cannot neatly distinguish between what *means* and what doesn’t – it’s a rather slippery slope. Furthermore, this

funnel makes visible the non-fixity of meaning and challenges any ideological attempt to fix it (Hall *Representation*).

This portion of the song may also be functioning to show sound as aesthetic, not as communicative. Jackson is well-known for making certain sounds in his singing, and this song is no exception. At the beginning and after each chorus, he makes a sound that might be spelled “chuo!” on the “a” of the 4th count of each measure. This doesn’t *mean* anything! It just throws off the scent of what *means* and what doesn’t. It is subversive because non-meaning sounds are hard to define and delimit, and hence hard to regulate or police. Jackson acts outside of what language has defined, allowed, proscribed and prescribed—and in so doing he *breaks* language. He uses language to reshape the discourse around bodies, and he uses language to reshape and redefine bodies. But he also uses his body to confound and reshape language. When his body does something utterly unexpected, outside of its gendered parameters, new words and concepts have to be used to describe it.

Michael is the only character in the film who can transform, and it may be because he has non-normative notions about identity as linked to physical stability. He turns into Tina Turner at one point and gives traffic tickets to a car full of men. This spectacular moment is a reversal of the gender identity script and the cultural norms surrounding abuse, power, and policing (Hodge). Halberstam says that “creative anthropomorphism” shows the “variations of gender, sex, labor, and pleasure” (“Animating Revolt” 51). As cartoon-bunny-Michael turns into cartoon-Tina, the “variations of gender” allow for historically stuck meanings to be unhinged and

rearticulated by different bodies in different power relations. As Jackson dons various gender roles from one song to the next and even within songs, his repeatedly signifying alternative gender and identity practices are subversive to the normative ones (*Gender Trouble* 198-199).

At the end of the video Michael finally gets a ticket. In this moment he becomes “regular” again, a person who is not “above the law” (Hodge). He loses the invincibility of his shape-shifting self, and has to face the consequences of the “real world.” But he does not get the ticket for speeding—the officer cites him for dancing in a “no dancing” zone. What seems like a silly moment actually opens up to examination the nature of law and order: he is only “bad” because the sign made him bad—that is, he is only bad in relation to the (arbitrary) symbol.



Figure 13. “Speed Demon” screen shot: no dancing sign

When a police officer gives someone a ticket for going faster than the “Speed Limit” sign says, the practice is so naturalized that we think nothing of it. This video

exposes the simulation of the law with an unexpected juxtaposition: a “no dancing” sign is absurd, and it shows that the law’s power is arbitrary and relational, not naturally occurring or essential. Baudrillard says that this type of subversion is “infinitely more dangerous” than transgression and violence “because it always leaves open to supposition that ... *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 20). So even though Michael ultimately acquiesces to the law on the surface, the video actually disrupts a stable conception of institutional power.

In a final important scene from the “Speed Demon” video, a vehicle overstuffed with media and fans overtakes Michael’s motorcycle on the highway, and they laugh and cheer as they take dozens of pictures of him. Michael allows them to do this because he sees that they are going to crash into a cop and that none of them are looking. He slyly cooperates in his own exploitation and the process of media making endless copies of him because he sees how it will end. I want to use this as a metaphor for my project in general: as the media (real life, not the cartoons in the video anymore) produce simulacra of Jackson *ad nauseum*, he cooperates. Whether he was consciously aware or to what level is difficult to say, but his cooperation helped expose the simulacra as constructed, which assures their eventual self-destruction.

“Liberian Girl” has similar themes lyrically to “The Way You Make Me Feel:” Michael falls in love with a woman, but has little to no agency in the relationship beyond capitalistic gestures (commodifying and marrying her, in this case). The content of the music video, however, presents a much more interesting view of Michael Jackson’s agency and identity than the lyrics. Of all the videos from *Bad*, this one departs furthest

from the lyrical content of the song; breaking them apart for analysis will provide a juxtaposition that allows us to see the video/song combination as a meta-critique on the constructedness of media, agency in the process, and the role of the product—the commodity.

As we can see in the first verse and chorus line, “You know that you came and you changed my world,” Michael still attributes agency to the woman – she does the changing. This gets reaffirmed in the second verse: “you do this to me.” Michael is cast as an object being manipulated by the forces around him. Her agency gets problematized in the last verse when he says, “Liberian girl, more precious than any pearl, your love so complete.” He objectifies her, casting her value in terms of a commodity—one that, if we’re being honest, isn’t very valuable relative to other precious stones or metals. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this line contributes to a societal reduction of relationships to commodity exchange-value. This is one of two lines in which Michael has agency, but only ostensibly. The capitalist-imperative discourse articulates through him as a celebrity-commodity, robbing him of agency and cheapening the agency he had attributed to the Liberian girl. That is, any agency in this video is over-determined by capitalism, which fixes their identities down to prescribed roles.

The lyrics also depict this relationship as constructed, not “authentic.” Michael sings that it is “just like in the movies, with two lovers in a scene.” The two lovers in the scene have scripted dialogue and may be on their 5th or 10th take. The filming also doesn’t happen in order; it is jarring to think of these two lovers professing their love to each other (for the tenth time today) and then proceeding to film the scene which depicts when

they first met (Benjamin). With any thought about what actually goes into making movies, it's horrifying to think of any relationship that is "just like in the movies." The comparison between this (bad) relationship and the artificiality of the movies jars us out of the naturalness of the relationship and exposes it as a construct.

This comparison may also have been the impetus for the creation of the music video, which is a video about making a video. We start as if in a black and white film in Liberia, and the Liberian girl looks into the camera at us and says, "Naku penda piya, naku taka piya, mpenziwe;" but we are jarred out of the "realistic" vibe when a man sticks a clapperboard in her face and says, "Marker."



Figure 14. "Liberian Girl" screen shot: the filmic illusion



Figure 15. “Liberian Girl” screen shot: the Brechtian reveal

From that instant we are no longer in the filmic illusion, but are aware that the entire video is a construct. The camera we see through (which remains invisible throughout) makes visible to us the means of production. We see the backstage, the set, and all the accoutrement of filmmaking. We also see actors practicing lines and dances, directors establishing shots, and extras wandering about the studio. We are made conscious of the constructedness of the video itself. Lest we get fooled into thinking that we have a “privileged” or “authentic” backstage view, Bertolt Brecht reminds us what happens when media reveals its own artifice (in this case, showing the cameras and rehearsing): the *verfremdungseffekt*. Estrangement or alienation, he says, makes an audience see that the events, words, actions of a play are not *inevitably* thus and so, but that they could be different from how they are currently constituted (Brecht 431). The effect emphasizes not the actual, but the possible, because constructedness implies that disassembly and reconstruction are possible.

This Brechtian notion emphasizes that the “Liberian Girl” backstage is not a “true-to-life” view of how things happen backstage, but rather an artifice, an exposé of

the means of production that serves to highlight the artificiality of the entire enterprise. The video is dedicated to revealing constructs as such. This is in some ways a healing of the disruptive gestures in the last two videos: here we see reconstructions of meanings that were deconstructed (for example, a heterosexual relationship), but the reconstructions patently own themselves as construct-ed by showing themselves as settled rather than “fixed” (*Representation*).

Whoopi Goldberg asks, “Who’s directing this anyway?” The camera cuts to a shot of Stephen Spielberg acting director-like from his director’s chair. But this Spielberg reference, just like the one in “Speed Demon,” reveals some sort of lie: he didn’t direct either video. Spielberg in “Speed Demon” transforms into an angry lizard, an unsettling view of humanness. In this video, however, a human Spielberg poses as a calm, professional director, resettling our notion of what humans are and what directors do—a resettling of the image from “Speed Demon.” But his image in response to Whoopi’s questions gives the lie to the “authenticity” of the backstage view. So why does he appear as the ostensible director in both videos despite directing neither? Well, to show the artifice, to show that this is all simulation. His presence shows a common move that simulacra make: they parade as an authentic representation through authenticity-building moves like showing a director or evidence of construction. This gives a Baudrillardian twist to the *verfremdungseffekt* happening in this video: once the poles of “authenticity” and “constructedness” collapse—that is, if we take evidence of construction as evidence of authenticity—we have entered a simulation. Noticing that Spielberg isn’t the director despite that the video says so allows us to avoid simulation.

Almost every shot of this video emphasizes Michael's unfixity. As Richard Dreyfuss steers a fake boat (a pose that surely hearkens back to and recalls the artifice of his role in *Jaws*), he asks, "Exactly which Michael Jackson are we talking about anyway?" Since the entire group is made up of prolific actors who have played many roles, this question seems like a natural one to ask (are we talking about *Jaws* Dreyfuss or *What about Bob* Dreyfuss?). Whereas most of these actors have inhabited roles they could take on and slough off, Michael's "selves" are not as neatly separated out from his body. Dreyfuss's question highlights that Michael's different selves are not "roles" but *identities*. The asking of this question shows that it has become a commonplace to not know what to expect from Jackson. He's mysterious, spontaneous, ever-shifting. This song and video combination shows Jackson as a commodity that continually changes its own inflection. The commodity inflects through different discourses and to different people—that is, different consumers will see different "versions" of Michael Jackson. As these differences occur and these consumers have contact with one another, they have to negotiate meaning—which is precisely what happens when Dreyfuss asks "exactly which Michael Jackson" we're talking about. The commodity ironically stabilizes itself as unfixed, as a destabilizing object.

Any semblance of a fixed identity is splintered when actors appropriate Michael's attributes or characteristics. Several actors mime the lyrics throughout the video, and in so doing they co-opt Michael's voice. This is not simply entertainment-as-such: when they "sing" about ideas, people, or objects through his voice, this is a literal example of a commodity (entertainer Michael) articulating a discourse (whatever attitude about the

ideas) through a consumer (the mimer). This shows the commodity's agency and emphasizes its non-fixity.

At the end of the video, Michael descends from high above looking through a camera. He has been secretly filming the explicit (simulated) filming. This reveal shows him manipulating constructedness and providing a meta-awareness of the video-creation project to the actors. They all laugh in surprise and frustration to realize that the very content of the video is themselves wondering what to do, wandering around, hanging out, reading scripts, gossiping, and preparing to make an artifact (artifice). Viewers may feel that they're getting a privileged view of how music videos get made, that this is an "authentic" video that shows actors being "candid" and reveals the "true" nature of video-making. But this final moment ensures we don't fall into the trap of believing the simulation to be "authentic" in those ways.

Michael's Brechtian surprise appearance shows us that the "backstage view" is a simulation. He appears to be interested in filming an "authentic" one-take representation based on the content we see in this produced music video. But there is another camera filming Michael's camera, the one we see through that remains invisible to us. This reminds us that these "candid" shots were scripted and choreographed, that the "authentic" dialogue was written and rehearsed. There are three layers of "sincerity" that all get broken down as constructs: the layer of the music video with the Liberian girl, which is quickly abandoned; the layer of Spielberg making the video with actors and extras, which lasts for most of the video; and the final layer of Michael's "authentic reveal," which we can see as a construct because this video has taught us to expect

nothing less. Michael is portrayed as hyper-aware of the effects of the media game in which he is inextricably implicated as a producer, performer, and commodity; he uses this awareness to push viewers past a naive view of media, to give liberation, to open up new views of what media is for and what it can do and how it operates.

Judith Butler calls us to “destabilize and render in their phantasmic dimension the ‘premises’ of identity politics” (*Gender Trouble* 201-202) in order to break out of confining hegemonies and give people greater agency in constructing their identities. Jackson radically destabilizes the simulacrum of identity through “subversive repetition” (201) of non-normative practices.

“The Way You Make Me Feel” subverts hegemonic masculinity by giving agentive parity to all genders, but even this redistributed agency is mired in a capitalistic discourse about relationships, which forecloses many possibilities. The video unsettles the “fixed” norms of gender, and it also shows how identity can be shaped and limited by a variety of outside forces. “Speed Demon” presents an extreme challenge to the concept of unified identity by subverting some of these forces, such as the law, the entertainment industry, gender relations, and domesticity. It completely destabilizes the historical scripts that had become “norms.” “Liberian Girl” renegotiates and restabilizes some of these constructs, but it also shows that these newly negotiated meanings are only provisional. It does this by presenting several layers of possibly authentic content, including subversive, counter-hegemonic ideas, and then self-consciously exposing the constructedness of each layer.

In these three songs, Jackson strives to expand agency and proliferate possibilities

for acceptable identities in society. As the songs reimagine alternative possibilities for identity, the videos are careful to remind viewers that the new identities are just as constructed as the old, hegemonic ones. In this way, these songs give agency to consumers to choose what type of identities they want to construct for themselves.

Julian Vigo describes Jackson's subversions as "invention and spectacle that transcended all human divisions" (Vigo 34). Jean Baudrillard proclaims that Jackson can "reign over the world and reconcile its contradictions" and that he "will deliver us from race and sex" ("Cool Memories"). Jackson's art defies the language that pretends to fix gender, race, and agency into locked-down boxes. However, Michael Jackson's radical politics are in no way immune to counterattacks from hegemony, whose deft movements we will track in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 – “THERE IS NO DANGER”
SANITIZING *BAD* AUTHORSHIP

Songs: “Just Good Friends,” “Man in the Mirror,” “Another Part of Me” (*Captain EO*)

At the end of the last chapter, I hypothesized that hegemonic representations of Michael Jackson would generally aver their own authenticity in some way, while counter-hegemonic ones would disrupt any notion of fixity or permanence, even within themselves. This chapter explores the mechanics of that hypothesis in great detail in regards to authorship, representation of the body, and the Utopian content of songs and videos. Within “Just Good Friends,” “Man in the Mirror,” and “Another Part of Me,” which I argue are the three most hegemonic songs on *Bad*, various disguises and shifts occur that obscure the creation of these artifacts and then allow them to damage or appropriate the counter-hegemonic representations analyzed in Chapter 3.

In constructing a useful framework to address an analogous cultural problem, Nancy Lesko applies Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial theory to show how adolescence is a construct that has become “naturalized” in our society. Colonialism, she explains,

kept social structural inequalities muted, while the colonized and their psychologized ‘dependency complex’ became hypervisible. ... In Bhabha’s theoretical terms, colonial discourse involves a *splitting*: it obscures the relationships of institutions and apparatuses of power while it emphasizes the inadequacies of the colonized. (Lesko 106-107)

She applies this with an example of “splitting off of context and power relations” (109): a teenager disagrees with her parents; her parents, rather than accepting her perspective as a legitimate complaint, recode her dissent as an “identity crisis,” which simultaneously (1) resituates the conflict as an interior one, (2) legitimizes the adult perspective, and (3)

obscures the domination exercised (109-110).

This “colonialist split” has connections to the way ideological state apparatuses operate to hide their oppressive ideological function. If a hegemonic media artifact can do any of the three functions above (resituate conflict as interior to the consumer, legitimize its own perspective, or obscure the exercise of domination), it works to secure the consent of the subordinated: they come to view the artifact’s portrayal of the world as natural and not constructed. Bhabha’s split occurs in the three songs analyzed in this chapter to all three of the effects Lesko theorizes, making these songs and their representations of Michael Jackson hegemonic commodities.

Shifting Authorship via the Colonial Split

“Just Good Friends” and “Man in the Mirror” are unique on *Bad* as the only songs Michael Jackson did not compose. Neither of these songs has a music video featuring Jackson, either (a significant characteristic, though not unique to these songs). The first colonial split happens in terms of authorship for these two songs. Unless a listener seeks out the information, it would be easy to assume that Jackson wrote these songs; but we can construct a different meaning from them when we know that they were written by other people. This is not to say that Jackson was not involved in the creation of these artifacts. *Certainly* he was. Composing lyrics and sheet music do not by themselves constitute authorship: the *performance* is perhaps even more important, especially in Jackson’s case, and it’s likely he collaborated in the songwriting as well. But the consumer hears the recording and sees the video and watches the live performance. They

don't look at the sheet music. It wasn't Michael's writing but his performance of "Man in the Mirror" that made it his song. This fact makes the performer an even more perfect switching station: the visual and aural are so powerful that *all* the content and constructed meanings may get attributed to the performer, leaving other creative agents invisible. Michael Jackson is, for society's intents and purposes, the "author" of these songs, even though he isn't technically the writer.

I base my analysis of these two songs in critical theory of authorship as a complex and misused phenomenon that can aid in the colonial split. As Barthes pointed out decades before these songs were written, the idea of a solitary author-genius who is solely responsible for the creation and reception of songs is simply not a theoretically sound one. Yet, as Foucault notes, the specter of the author still haunts production and consumption in several specific ways. He says that the author's name not only functions as a reference, but serves to describe and classify a work, and signifies something about it to consumers ("What is an Author?" 233-234). Foucault distinguishes the "real" person who creates an artifact from the "author-function" of that person's name and writing. For better or worse, society (mis)uses the author-function in four general ways, each of which can be helpful or problematic. These ways provide a guide to identify how authorship creates a colonial split in "Just Good Friends."

"Just Good Friends" was written by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle and sung as a duet by Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder. In one (mis)use of Foucault's author-function, society assigns the author-function variable importance based on historical time and genre ("Author" 236-237). In 1987 it might make sense to talk about Stevie Wonder

and Michael Jackson as co-stars, but in 2015? Quick, list five Stevie Wonder songs. If you could, I'm impressed. Most people of my generation hardly know "Superstition," and we are much more likely to think of this song as a duet between Michael Jackson and some other guy. Terry Britten and Graham Lyle are just as much authors as Michael Jackson (if not more so), but whose song is this, *really*? Because of Jackson's superstardom, as time goes on the song only becomes more and more "his" and less and less Stevie's, Britten's, or Lyle's.

Another (mis)use of the author-function Foucault describes is that of appropriation, including regulatory and punitive functions ("Author" 235-236); that is, the author-function not only delineates who owns a song, but who is responsible for its content. This seems to be simply a question of to whom we attribute the song "Just Good Friends" and the messages it contains, but it carries great implications. I argue that listeners (generally) interpret Jackson as the author-function for this song, despite his not being the "author." Just look at the album cover: his image is on both sides, and his name and image are prominently placed near the titles of the songs. The proximity seems to signify affiliation, some kind of ownership, some appropriation. The image of Michael and his name function to incorporate these songs into the category of songs described with the label "Michael Jackson." In this process, the songs and their content function to slightly shift our understanding of the performer, and they change the composition of the whole body of work known as "Michael Jackson."

An artifact like "Just Good Friends," whose authorship is both complex and obfuscated, does hegemonic work to the cultural imagination's understanding of

“Michael Jackson.” So what kinds of representations in “Just Good Friends” get appropriated to the Jackson? The main narrative of the song portrays two men arguing over a woman they are both attracted to. Since the woman is trying to decide between them, she ostensibly has the agency in the situation. She keeps both men guessing: “she never shows she cares,” and “she acts like I’m not there;” and she is the one doing the deciding: “I guess the lady is still making up her mind.” However, it doesn’t take a very careful look to see that her agency is limited: she can choose between Michael or Stevie. In this situation, these particular options don’t sound too bad. But at a conceptual level, the woman’s greatest act of agency is to choose which man to be subordinate to.

Furthermore, the woman has *no voice* in the song! She has literally no say in how she is represented, which makes her ostensible agency a sham – a colonial splitting. The agency belongs in fact to the two men, who have all the power to represent the woman as a subject (object?) and describe her actions and assign them value. Yet their discursive attribution of agency to her shifts the focus from them as agents onto her. Michael sings, “We’ve got a problem here,” which seems to be in reference to the woman; women are *definitionally* a problem. This split “naturalizes” the idea that women are notoriously difficult, indecisive, and two-faced in their relationships. It shows the conflict as interior to the woman and privileges the male perspective. In this way, the song reifies the hegemonic repudiation and subordination of the feminine.

This split that “gives agency” to the woman and masks the male domination mirrors the split going on in the song at the level of production: the song “gives agency” to Michael (and Stevie) because they are the ones doing, saying, singing. But they only

do so because the invisible agent has written them into those roles. In this song we see one of the effects of Bhabha's colonial split, the legitimizing, "naturalizing" function: hegemonic masculinity is reified as the discourse of the lyrics naturalizes inequitable relationships and locks down gender characteristics to a fixed configuration. This calls up contradictions between this song and the counter-hegemonic messages we saw in the last chapter. Since the author-function "serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts" ("Author" 238), it is possible (though not guaranteed) for listeners to shift these contradictions onto Jackson.

Foucault's next point is to distinguish that the author-function is *not* a person but a construct that we make. The image of the author-function should not be seen as a reflection of the person doing the writing, but rather as "projections" of how we read texts, that is, "the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice" ("Author" 237-238). It is one thing to read texts and find similarities, make comparisons, and lump traits into categories; it is quite another to project all that information onto a person and to hold that person responsible for the judgments we have made.

For instance, the author-function can be misused by readers to project a unity onto texts that are "attached to a single name" by implying relationships of "homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation" ("Author" 235). One way of reading "Just Good Friends" is to compare it to "The Way You Make Me Feel" and note the similarities: the syntactical agency given to the woman, the unequal power dynamics in their relationships, and the objectification of women. We might be tempted project these

similar traits and characteristics onto Michael Jackson, and say that something about his personality or values or beliefs caused these similarities to come about. That would be a person-centered reading that ignores how our reading habits project information.

Furthermore, there are huge differences between these two songs that may be ignored based on the “exclusions” we practice in our reading. What actually occurs, in Foucault’s terms, is that we project the comparisons and traits and continuities onto these songs because they are attached to a single name—that is, they aren’t simply *there*, but we construct them using the author-function. Our mental construction of the author determines to a large extent both how we “read” a song and how our picture of the author changes based on our reading.

Since this song is not an individual creation of Jackson’s but a product that coalesced from at least four creative minds, it is simpler to understand Foucault’s last distinction of the author-function: it is not an actual individual with a unified identity that constructs a text, but a variety of egos. Unity is a false ideal to hope for in an author’s catalogue of works. This false hope for unity shows up when we search for a “standard level of quality,” “conceptual or theoretical coherence,” or “stylistic uniformity” (“Author” 238) to corroborate a unified identity for the artist. Only when we search for those versions of unity in a set of texts do we need to “neutralize the contradictions” by pinning them to an author.

There is no “real” or unified Michael inside the song. When the name of the author-function and the proper name of a person are the same, it can be difficult to separate out narrator / singer / performer / songwriter / author. It’s problematic to try to

find the “real” Michael in any of the songs or to attribute to him any of the content he sings about. Instead of asking “Who is the real author?” I have followed Foucault’s lead to get beyond who *made* it and ask instead what it *does*, for whom, and to whom.

Another function of Bhabha’s colonial splitting can be readily seen in the song “Man in the Mirror”: the resituating of conflict as interior to the consumer. This song was written by Siedah Garrett and Glen Ballard and sung by Michael Jackson; therefore, the entire discussion about authorship for “Just Good Friends” applies equally well here, but in even more complexity. “Man in the Mirror” obscures structural and institutional inequalities and in so doing obtains hegemonic consent from the subordinated. This process is hidden through the various colonial splits: the shift of responsibility onto individuals, the removal of the body, and the obfuscation of authorship.

Steve Craig says that the media doesn’t reinscribe hegemonic masculinity (or other hegemonic structures) by simply imposing that ideology; rather, they (re)present “the relations between a series of ideologies (subordinate as well as dominant), overlapping them on to one another, so as to bring about certain movements and reformations of subjectivity” (195-196). Essentially, this means that hegemonic media artifacts portray people interacting with one another and with institutions, and those depicted interactions shape how consumers of those artifacts go about their own interactions. According to what Craig says, hegemony maintains itself by *portraying* subjects of both dominant and subordinate ideological positions moving and interacting with one another in ways that secure the consent of all parties. This means that the absence of dominant discourse doesn’t mean hegemony is not operating in an artifact.

This also means that the soft-spoken, emotional Jackson isn't necessarily subversive, especially when he is portrayed in relation to a hegemonic structure that dominates him.

Let's examine some of the lyrics in this light. The famous chorus starts with the lines, "I'm starting with the man in the mirror, I'm asking him to change his ways." This line on its own certainly does not reinscribe hegemonic values. Self-improvement is a great goal. But is that the right place to start, and is that all that can be done? The remainder of the chorus resoundingly sounds, *yes*: "And no message could have been any clearer: If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, and make a change." The chorus seriously implies that the way to make the world a better place is to change your personal behaviors. Uncovering the solutions that the lyric ignores reveals how it conserves hegemony by hiding structural problems.

How about, "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at corrupt institutions and make a change?" Take a look at inequitable laws and policies. Take a look at systematic prejudices. Take a look at broken political systems based on antiquated models of governance. Taking a look at yourself and making a change will make the world a better place just as much as riding your bike to work will make the world a cleaner place: it'll help, a tiny bit, but it puts the focus on the least effective solution and obscures the real problems from view.

Michael sings that "there are some with no home, not a nickel to loan" and asks, "Could it be really me pretending that they're not alone?" No, Michael, it's not your job to but a house for every homeless person. Don't take a look at yourself; take a look at the policies that maintain an ungodly gap in the distribution of wealth, which directly affects

access to educational resources, which in turn affects ability to accrue wealth and find decent housing. In “Man in the Mirror” we hear Michael’s sadness, which is fine, but we also hear his guilt, and that guilt is projected onto listeners as well. Individuals, I contest, are not the guilty parties for the problems described in this song. There are larger institutional forces – Ideological State Apparatuses, to be exact – that maintain these problems in support of capitalism, yet they are totally obfuscated from this song.

Christine Gledhill says that capitalism’s “processes invariably turn alternative life-styles and identities into commodities, through which they are subtly modified and thereby recuperated for the status quo. . . . In this process, bourgeois society adapts to new pressures, while at the same time bringing them under control” (117). The job of the ISAs is to maintain the status quo by appropriating “new pressures” and adapting them for the service of Capitalism. The entertainment media as an ISA uses this song to take a newly dangerous pressure, Michael Jackson, and sanitize him, and use him to help secure hegemonic consent. There is no threat to capitalism nor the institutions that uphold it as long as they remain in the shadows and Michael’s song safely shifts the problems onto listeners. Media artifacts like this song contribute directly to the invisible strength of capitalism by shifting blame from institutional inequalities onto individuals.

The music video continues this colonialist splitting. As I discussed in the sections on “Speed Demon” and “Bad,” Michael’s body is a destabilizing commodity that calls into question the fixity of categories like identity itself, so his body is very dangerous for a hegemonic project to incorporate. It makes sense, then, that the music video for this very hegemonic song consists of news reel clips and does not figure Michael’s body

except for a five-second “Where’s Waldo”-esque cameo at the end.

The absence of Michael’s constructed body combined with the “real” newsreel content of the video serves as an authenticity-building move, a shift into the “real” world that makes this partial, particular version of the world seem like the one true world instead. The juxtaposition of the song with historical footage implies a relationship, perhaps even causality. Stuart Hall troubles the notion that any event can be simply “represented,” and says that all representations are necessarily interpretations (*Representation*). Therefore, placing representations of events alongside the song lyrics necessarily changes our interpretation of both. These “real” images of “real” people doing “real” things present us with a smorgasbord of choices; but however many “real” choices the video offers, it is nonetheless a *partial* representation of possibilities that forecloses others. Despite the footage being largely of disruptions to hegemonic culture (civil rights protests, anti-police riots, World War II victories), the video itself is not a disruption. All the events portrayed have been recuperable in the service of hegemony: black men are still often victims of police brutality; civil rights still have not been fully secured for all; WWII was a stimulus for capitalism and the impetus for the nuclear race and the nuclear family.

The institutional forces responsible for many of the injustices described in the song are largely absent from the newsreel footage, but Hall explains that absence “signifies as much as presence” (*Representation*), or does the same amount of meaning-making as presence. When the video shows starving children in Africa, part of the interpretation of the image is the viewer’s relation to the image—what the viewer

perceives on the other side of the lens, so to speak. The cause of the hunger is absent. This information may be supplied by our own previous expectations or knowledge, but also by instruction, via the song lyrics. For instance, consumers of this song / video combination may see the footage of starving children and hear Michael's line, "Who am I to be blind, pretending not to see their need?" and come away with the interpretation that they are somehow responsible for child hunger. This is certainly not a guaranteed response – it is one of many – but the point is that in the very act of viewing the images in the video, the viewer is implicated in meaning-making. We aren't simply watching neutral, apolitical footage; the video reinforces specific ideological positions by contrasting the hegemonic lyrics with these images.

My final analysis finds "Man in the Mirror" to be the most hegemonic song on *Bad*. It lulls listeners and viewers into a strange combination of guilt and serenity; it propels them to spare a dime and think of that as sufficient. In short, this commodity manufactures the consent of the masses to an exploitative ideology. The colonial splits in "Man in the Mirror," regardless of intent, shift responsibility onto individuals, ignore the need for institutional change, and obscure the domination exercised.

Due to its popularity and regular live performances, "Man in the Mirror" is identified as a Michael Jackson staple astronomically more than "Just Good Friends." Despite that he didn't compose either song, they became his through performance. "Man in the Mirror" has been appropriated into the body of works we call "Michael Jackson songs," and it does something to shape that body as a whole: it tugs and shifts the center slightly towards the hegemonic.

Suturing Ruptures via the Colonial Split

The colonial split that occurs in the song “Another Part of Me” obscures the exercise of domination. The song appears on *Bad*, but first appeared in the Disney film *Captain EO* (starring Michael Jackson). In his essay “*Captain EO* and the Future of Utopia,” Carl Miller shows how disturbing the film is when analyzed through a post-colonial lens. This video disguises the way it exercises power, especially through its portrayal of bodies and beauty and the word-pairs it operationalizes to the benefit of some and the detriment of others (or Others). Miller has already shown that *Captain EO* portrays a thinly disguised Utopia that is quite colonial. But I go one step further and show how, when the colonial discourse doubles back on itself, the video actually presents counter-hegemonic suggestions. Ultimately, however, the film both presents and satirizes the possibility for meaningful societal change.

Although Michael Jackson did compose “Another Part of Me,” it also falls into the category of somewhat nebulous authorship. It is situated within the film *Captain EO*, which was created by a score of other writers and directors as well as another songwriter collaborating with Michael Jackson. I analyze “Another Part of Me” alongside the song “We Are Here to Change the World” (co-written by John Barnes and Michael Jackson), which also appears in the film and has very similar lyrical content. Although some of my readers may not have heard of the film, *Captain EO* was wildly popular when it first came out, featuring as a Disney attraction at parks across the world for over a decade and reopening there after Jackson’s death in 2010. Since names as prominent as Disney and George Lucas are associated with the film, it seems much less likely that Michael

Jackson would be implicated as a solely-responsible author figure. Authorship is even more complex here than in the two previous songs, so I focus on the intersections of conflicting discourses articulating through the commodity while I continue to avoid (mis)appropriating them to any of the multiple authors.

Because the visual aspects of this video are so alien, it uses familiar language as the premiere venue for fixing hegemonic meanings. *Captain EO* reinforces several binaries, but more importantly, it naturalizes their hierarchical, differential valuation. The film sets up several binaries and reinforces them, but it also allows us to question them. As the film opens, a narrator tells us that the cosmos is a place where the forces of good and evil are at odds. He says that EO's job is to bring "freedom" to world of "despair." This sets us up to believe that Captain EO and his crew are good, free, and right, and that whoever they confront must be bad, in despair, and wrong (and all this before we see any of the characters). The songs reinforce the (arbitrary) idea that the protagonists are in the right: "A revelation of the truth," "we have the truth," and "a revelation, fulfill the truth" all suggest that whatever the Supreme Leader and her world have must be false. Furthermore, "truth" combined with "revelation" has a strong religious connotation, which is emphasized by the use of "we're on a mission" and "this is the mission."

But how do these fervent claims about having the truth stand up to the actions of the crew? And what do the inhabitants of the "despairing" world do to convince us of their badness? As the captain and crew "intrude" the foreign world, they are chased by security aircraft of some kind, and several of those ships crash as they follow the deft-flying intruders. They successfully evade capture and crash-land into a garbage heap.

Keep in mind that Captain EO and his crew have invaded airspace, caused extensive property damage, and probably killed a few security guards. They are quickly apprehended by ground troops and taken to the Supreme Leader to be punished. Up to this point in the video, if we consider what the characters have actually done instead of how we've been told to value them, EO and the crew seem like the evil ones, while the troops and Supreme Leader have only done what any reasonable governing institution would do. She proclaims that the mechanical characters be made into trash cans as punishment. Not only does she care about justice and security, she is also concerned about cleaning up the environment of her world. How is this leader evil, again?

On the surface, this video represents a classic struggle between light and dark, good and evil. One group is "clearly" correct and the other is not. One needs to be changed, taught, enlightened: "we're sharing light," and "we're bringing brighter days," the captain sings. The group of misfits is simply trying to share their Utopian light with this dark world. But underneath that veneer of binaries, we see how problematic the labels are. Instead of a Utopian team coming in to save a Dystopian government, it may just be one society coming in with their ideology and trying to impose it on another society that operates with a different ideology. What is called sharing "truth" on the surface level is actually a devaluation and delegitimization of the knowledge and practices of the group being colonized. I don't suggest that Captain EO and his crew are some sort of Dystopian nightmare. They are simply naive colonialists convinced of the "natural" rightness of their message. I argue that both camps are "good" in their own ways: EO is good in the sense that he shows responsibility and accepts his deserved

punishment (sort of ... he ends up dancing his way out of it); the Supreme Leader is *also good* because she metes out justice and tries to protect her planet.

Once we push past the binaries the film presents us, we can see a new way of evaluating difference. We see desires for unity on the surface when EO sings “so come together.” As he sings and dances, he also transforms the troops into humans who dance with him. It sounds Utopian to promote solidarity and a joining together of difference, but it becomes problematic when we realize that he has gone beyond that and into assimilation. He has changed the way they look and dress and move until he can sing, “You’re one of us” and, “You’re just another part of me.” That level of assimilation constitutes an erasure of difference, not a celebration of it in solidarity: the language has been shifted to disguise the colonialism.

Yet some lines do suggest a celebration of difference: Captain EO sings, “We’re here to shake it up and break it up” and “We’re here to stimulate, eliminate and contradict, illuminate.” Disruption figures as the key component of these lines—disruption in many forms: learning (“stimulate” or “illuminate”), liberation (“break it up”), or colonization (“eliminate”). The messages in this video and these songs are not stable, and they are sure to “contradict.”

My favorite contradiction happens twice, once in each song. In “We are Here to Change the World,” the crew sings in the first verse, “So long, *bad* times” and “Hello, good times.” You’ll remember from Chapter 2 how Michael Jackson destabilizes the definition of the word “bad” to mean so many things besides the negative connotation in the usage here. If “bad” actually means something closer to “good,” does this line mean,

“So long, *good* times?” Are the colonizers subconsciously aware of the false veneer of their enterprise as one of liberation and enlightenment? A similar contradiction happens in “Another Part of Me” when the captain sings, “There is no danger” and “not dangerous.” On his very next album, entitled *Dangerous*, Michael Jackson is absolutely and unremittingly *dangerous* in so many ways. Of course this would be considered a preemptive disavowal, but placing the two commodities side by side present us with an unresolvable conundrum: is he or isn’t he dangerous? Is he or isn’t he bad? These contradictions open up more meaning than can be locked down from the post-colonial critique I have been offering.

Let us return briefly to the plot: the Supreme Leader sentences Captain EO to 100 years of torture, which sounds unreasonable and evil, perhaps the first “evil” thing she has done in the film. But there is a parallel between this ostensibly evil Dystopian government and a modern-day America. One of the punishments for the lawbreaking crew is cleaning up trash (by becoming trash cans); in the United States, it is a common practice to have prisoners clean up trash from highways. The other punishment she gives is 100 years of torture in a dark dungeon. Keep in mind that Captain EO is, from her perspective, either a guerrilla warrior or a terrorist who has committed several crimes, including killing troops. Giving such an offender several life sentences would not be out of the ordinary for the justice system in America. And though it happens far less often and is extremely controversial, shipping a war criminal off to Guantanamo Bay to be tortured is not a far cry from the Supreme Leader’s 100 years of torture sentence. I’m not suggesting that she is good because of this—I’m suggesting that her over-militarized,

oppressive, prison-happy style of governance is a satirical allegory to the United States government, and that *Captain EO* may be sending a political message.

However, this prodding for changes at an institutional level gets reincorporated back into the hegemonic order almost as soon as it appears. Consider *how* the Supreme Leader changes and *into what*. Michael tells her she is “beautiful” but “without a key to unlock it,” and he proceeds to give her the key and make her beautiful. That is also the case with her troops: they were slimy and dirty and monstrous before, and Michael makes them beautiful and bright. This would be problematic enough if beauty signified goodness or represented that a person were good in some way; however, the Supreme Leader’s beauty *is the equivalent* of her goodness. She doesn’t say or do anything after the transformation, so how do we know she is good? Only because she is beautiful. The “liberation” *Captain EO* offers is nothing more than aesthetic conformity. As for the political allegory, this video shows that America may have problems, but Michael Jackson can’t offer any meaningful solutions beyond aesthetics. (Chapter 6 explores in detail how aesthetics can, in fact, provide meaningful solutions.)

When asking whether this video is hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, the simple answer would be yes. Steven Shaviro says that Jackson pushed the boundaries “so subtly” that you can’t tell if “black expression had been ‘mainstreamed,’” or if “the very ‘mainstream’ itself had been alluringly or insidiously carried away, exposed to a strange metamorphosis, allowed to blossom into a new aestheticized state” (Shaviro 56). What actually makes this video effective, as either a hegemonic or a counter-hegemonic artifact, is that it is so hard to tell. It is only simple and didactic on the surface; beyond

that level, it may mean many things to different people.

This film clearly articulates multiple, contradictory discourses at several levels, both conservative and progressive, liberating and hegemonic. Foucault says that discourses are

both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (“Method” 352)

Commodities such as Captain *EO* that have many creators contain disparate discourses, views, influences, and ideologies woven together that cannot help but do what Foucault explains: try to control, police, and fix meaning, and *in so doing* expose meaning as constructed. The insistence on binaries in this video calls attention to the ruptures, and the contradictions reveal the constructedness of the artifact itself as well as the discourses within it.

The final thing I want to discuss about *Captain EO* is its longstanding home in Disneyland. The film was made for the park and has been shown there for a total of 15 years and counting. That the film is thus situated becomes interesting in light of Baudrillard’s use of Disneyland as a prime example of simulation (“Precession” 135). He explains that when we go to Disneyland we are aware that everything there is fantastical, fake, artificial, magical, constructed. When we leave, those feelings juxtaposed against the Los Angeles cityscape make us feel as though Los Angeles *were real* and *not constructed*. In effect, Disneyland exists in order to make Los Angeles feel like a real place. And that’s the magic of Disneyland: it conceals that *there is no real* by positing

itself as fake over and against a “real” LA, a “real” society.” As a Disneyland attraction, *Captain EO* is implicated in this process of simulation. When the amusement park shows a futuristic-fantasy film featuring Michael Jackson to millions of children and adults, it teaches them that their lives are “real,” and it teaches them that Utopia is constructed, change is aesthetic, and that Michael Jackson is artificial.

The song is a multi-dimensional, complex commodity: it has levels that resist critique, and others that allow for it, but another that recuperates and resists again. In the final analysis, it doesn’t close down either critique or conservatism. The film is ingenious and complex according to this reading, but I doubt it was *intended* to be constructed that way.

I conclude by reiterating and emphasizing the point that *intention* is separate from authorship. If we map intention onto the authors of these commodities, it interlaces those commodities with others they have authored and with their personal life, and it becomes a pot of gold that is neither possible nor desirable to find. Authorship has been a main feature of this chapter because most of these songs weren’t authored by Michael Jackson (not credited to him, at least). Thus it is imperative to not interpret the messages we read from the songs as “authentic” representations of the man Michael Jackson constructed by himself. Additionally, this caution extends to the songs that he *did* write: we should not infer that any of those songs contain “authentic” representations of him either. Just as authorship was complex in the songs analyzed here, it remains complex even when “Michael Jackson” is the only songwriter credited.

However, even with that in mind, consumers who haven’t studied authorship

theories may (mis)attribute intentionality to Michael Jackson. Hegemony takes advantage of this by shifting responsibility for hegemonic messages onto the singer, making it appear that he has taken up contradictory stances on gender and relationship issues. This may end up delegitimizing or at least weakening the effect of his counter-hegemonic commodities. Can these ruptures be repaired? Whether he did so intentionally or not, Michael Jackson took a unique approach to this situation by muddying the waters of (re)presentation of himself beyond any clarity. I will discuss this in detail and examine its effects in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 – DOUBLE ENTENDRE:
THE MAN AND THE MEDIA

Songs: “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You,” “Dirty Diana,” “Leave Me Alone”

Michael Jackson’s post-*Bad* career was very explicitly about redefining, questioning, subverting, and casting a critical eye on cultural assumptions (as Susan Fast documents in *Dangerous*). But he started these challenges on *Bad*. Hegemony has never been keen on admitting defeat, though, and the attempts to appropriate Jackson, to neutralize his subversions, appear simultaneously with his challenges. Starting in the mid 1980s (and incessantly after that) a huge number of rumors and stories about Michael Jackson circulated through tabloid media. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra provides a useful way of examining this multiplicity of representations of Michael Jackson. In this chapter I use the songs “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You,” “Dirty Diana,” and “Leave Me Alone,” all songs about relationships, to better understand the nature of the ongoing and every-shifting relationships between Michael Jackson and the simulacra that depict him.

A simulacrum is a copy for which there is no original; when I use the term in this chapter, I am referring to constructed representations of Michael Jackson that claim to be authentic representations of the “real” man. Entertainment commodities, like a story in a tabloid magazine about Michael Jackson and his pet chimpanzees, can act as simulacra: an object manufactured to be bought and sold and to generate entertainment and profit, but that also represents its subjects with certain ideological inflections. These types of stories rarely acknowledge their function as commodities, their subjectivity and partial perspective, the piecemeal construction, the marketing, etc. Instead, they come off as if

(or are read as if) they were one-to-one equivalencies of material reality. When a consumer purchases a copy of the magazine, they know they haven't purchased "the original," but the copy seems to have its basis in an original, actual, real story. If the story isn't actually a one-to-one representation of reality (which it really can never be), then it is a simulacrum that creates and proliferates an ideological *version* of reality.

What such representations do, if they are hegemonic, is make Michael Jackson into an extraordinary, bizarre case against which "norms" can be measured. In a word, they make him into a *spectacle*. Once his subversions are made spectacular, norms seem normal-er. Commodities thus create "universal validity and legitimacy for accounts of the world which are partial and particular" and pass off these "particular constructions" as if they were "the real." I argue that commodities, then, are one "mechanism of 'the ideological'" (Hall, "Rediscovery" 132-133). Commodities function as simulacra by creating and reinforcing discourse that sets itself up as the "natural" and "authentic," by hiding the constructedness of their representation, and by posing as "authentic" copies.

Many of these simulacra have the effect of sanitizing and appropriating Jackson's subversions back into the hegemonic order. But they have an additional, unintended effect, and I aim to expose this effect in this chapter: by proliferating representations of Jackson, these simulacra reveal the constructed nature of all the discourses surrounding Jackson, thereby calling into question which stories are "true" and which norms are "natural."

All three of the songs analyzed here portray Michael addressing a person ("you," "Dirty Diana," and "baby" respectively), and each song shows Michael in a unique

relationship dynamic (symbiotic, exploited, and exasperated). I choose to interpret the relationships depicted as analogous to Jackson's relationships with media simulacra. These songs show us how Jackson fought against, reveled in, and even helped create these (un)authorized versions.

"I Just Can't Stop Loving You" portrays a loving, mutually beneficial relationship. It was the first single released from *Bad* and the first of many chart-topping number ones from the album. The song is a duet sung by Michael Jackson and Siedah Garrett (one of the songwriters for "Man in the Mirror"). Since there was no music video made, I give just a few brief notes about some of the lyrics and how they can be seen as a set-up for "Leave Me Alone."

The introduction of the song features Michael speaking softly and lovingly to a woman. Most of what he says pertains directly to their relationship, but these two lines seem unrelated or tangential at best: "A lot of people misunderstand me. That's because they don't know me at all." This raises many questions and provides no answers. What don't people know about Michael? Do they only know him as a spectacle? What differences exist between that and the man? And what misunderstandings does that create? None of the answers are supplied here, but these out-of-the-blue lines set up the listener to experience this song as a sort of commentary on Michael Jackson's personal life.

During the bridge, Siedah sings a lyric found in "Bad," in *Captain EO*, and "Man in the Mirror," which she helped write: "We can change all the world tomorrow." Michael sings back, "We can sing songs of yesterday." Although these could simply be

trite lyrics, they could also show *how* they plan to change the world: by singing. Several of my analyses show that these “songs of yesterday” on *Bad* have some capacity to disrupt hegemonic thinking and spur people to question institutions of dominance. This pair of lines shows that the singers are talking about something beyond a personal relationship—this relationship is a metaphor that invites us to read the song as an analogy to other types of relationships.

The relationship between the two singers is symbiotic, but also codependent, which is a parallel to Michael’s relationship with the media. They sing, “My life ain’t worth living if I can’t be with you.” What kind of life would Michael have lived without the coverage and consequent fame the media gave him? And what kind of life would media people live without celebrities to cover? They need each other to survive, to exist, and they cannot conceive of what would or could exist beyond the relationship: “I just can’t stop loving you, and if I stop, then tell me just what will I do?” In a sense, Michael and the media offer each other an amplified agency that they would not otherwise have. But when that codependency grows deeper and the agency gets amplified beyond control, the screeching feedback can really pierce eardrums.

The relationship reaches its most violent point in the raucous, raunchy “Dirty Diana,” where the subject of the song (Diana or media representations) ruins Jackson’s personal life and career. This song has a lot in common with other femme fatale songs such as “Billie Jean,” but this one depicts the most unilaterally exploitative woman of them all. The previous song, which depicts an idealistic and mutual love, is diametrically opposed to “Dirty Diana”: there is lust instead of love, exploitation instead of mutual

cooperation, and commodification instead of respect.

The ways Diana exploits Michael parallel the way the media leeches off of him for their own benefit (and profit). Diana “waits at backstage doors for those who have prestige, who promise fortune and fame, a life that’s so carefree.” To extend the comparison to the media, they also hound rich and famous people in order to get a paycheck, a carefree life. As long as Michael Jackson exists, they have a ready-made spectacle and are virtually assured of profits. Diana / the media also promise something in return: “I’ll be your everything if you make me a star.” Diana projects sexual desire onto Michael to justify her exploitation, and this limits the “everything” she gives to just her body as a sexual object; the media projects a desire for spectacle onto Jackson to justify their hounding, which sets in motion a cyclical spectacle / fame building engine that runs itself out of control in “Leave Me Alone.”

The cycle’s voracious appetite quickly moves beyond the public musical career of Jackson’s life as an artist into his private home life in search of ever more stories to feed the spectacle. The unique relationship Jackson had with media stories highlights the way the public and the private feed into each other, the way the man and the music inform each other. As Michael sings to his “baby” on the phone, “Baby I’m alright,” Diana interrupts and yells into the phone, “He’s not coming back because he’s sleeping with me!” His relationship with the media forecloses any possibility of having a neat, clean separation between a private home life and a public work life for Michael Jackson—the two would always be intertwined and in conflict.

“I Just Can’t Stop Loving You” and “Dirty Diana” are touchstones on opposite

ends of a spectrum to which “Leave Me Alone” can be fruitfully compared. In the first there is a co-agentive relationship of peace, love, and cooperation. The second portrays Michael with little to no agency and feeling harrowed and helpless. In “Leave Me Alone,” he strikes an interesting middle-ground between these extreme poles not by negating aspects of either but by integrating them into a convoluted game of representation that refuses fixed meanings and reveals simulacra as such. The lyrics hearken back directly to the two previous songs to establish a thematic connection of relationship building. In a line reminiscent of the tenderness in “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You,” Michael sings, “There was a time I used to say ‘girl I need you.’” The next line sounds more like “Dirty Diana” and recalls a relationship gone sour: “You really hurt, you used to take and deceive me.” These two extremes stand as reminders for a protagonist who continues to struggle through a rocky relationship; the intertext hints at chronological progress as well as increasing thematic sophistication as Michael tries to build an equitable partnership with the subject of the song.

The first line of the song depicts a negative relationship right off the bat: “I don’t care what you talkin’ ’bout baby, I don’t care what you say.” Besides not caring about what the person says, Michael also has his mind made up, and is not going to change it no matter what the other person says. While it’s a negative relationship like in “Dirty Diana,” Michael has developed a greater awareness of the dynamic and progressed to a place of taking back and exerting his own agency. He also seems aware of the exploitation and determined to stop it now, whereas he naively let it happen before. He pejoratively depicts the way she used him, saying, “Don’t you come walkin’ beggin’

back mama.” When he sings, “time after time I gave you all of my money,” he acknowledges his own compliance in the exploitation, but depicts himself as generous and the recipient as having “no excuses to make.” This first stanza shows him not as the helpless victim of an unhealthy relationship, but as a man with newly-(re)found agency and a sense of control. In the chorus Michael doesn’t beg, nor does he ask politely; he demands, “So just leave me alone!” and “Stop it!” These lines evince a forcefulness and agency not dreamt of in the passive “Dirty Diana.” All this suggests that Michael Jackson is prepared to take a stand against media representations of him that exploit him and demand that they stop it and leave him alone.

The angst in the “Dirty Diana” relationship has given way to a defiant, if exasperated, confidence in dealing with the media and their representations. He sees their moves to capitalize on him less as unavoidable traps and more as “begging” that he can react to as he chooses. This disparaging tone continues at the end of the chorus when he sings, “Just stop doggin’ me around.” In the video, reporters and journalists take the physical form of dogs dressed in suits, which is both a demeaning and surrealistic metaphor, perhaps an attempt to restructure the terms of the relationship. The song paints the media as dogs who beg for their subsistence, and Michael has grown tired of their excuses.

Never one to have a straightforward and simple stance, Michael introduces ambiguity into the song. Alongside a more confident and defiant attitude, he demonstrates a playful one in this song by asking ambiguous questions and creating confusion. He sings during the bridge, “Who’s laughing baby? Don’t you know?” And

truthfully, listeners and viewers can't be sure. Perhaps the media used to be laughing, but now that Michael has figured out the game he gets the last laugh. However, in the video as he sings this line he falls into the water and seems to be a target of laughter. If anything has come to light in this project, it's that when Michael Jackson asks a question there is no clear answer. If his ambiguous questions aren't enough to refuse a stabilized meaning, he offers a direct contradiction—he sings “I ain't lovin' you” during the second verse, and he sings “I love you, I don't want it” at the end of the song. So which is it: does he love the girl or not? Or does he love her but doesn't want to? The possible answers to that question, mapped onto Michael Jackson's relationship with the media, show that the solution to the simulation problem is not as simple as asserting a new-found agency. This sets up listeners for a truly perplexing experience once they turn to the video.

A line at the beginning of each bridge acts as a troublesome but productively destabilizing gesture when read in concert with the video. He sings, “Cause there's a time when you're right and you know you must fight,” which is a strange message about a fixed right and wrong, atypical of Michael Jackson. In context of the argument I've made here, this line suggests that Michael is right and that the media representations are wrong. It further suggests that the appropriate solution is to “fight,” which might mean that Michael should correct the false representations, call attention to their falsity, create “right” representations. Yet the video doesn't accomplish any of these tasks, so therein lies a contradiction: as he sings about wanting to be left alone and complaining about misrepresentation, he is visually represented enacting all the very same things the media

attribute to him. He is, in a sense, proving *them* right, fighting *for them*. But by stacking so many different representations of himself into one short artifact, it becomes impossible (and somewhat useless) to distinguish the “real” from the hyperreal. That is, by cooperating with the media in the production of simulacra, he may in fact disrupt their power by exposing the means of production.

At the beginning of the music video, the camera slowly zooms in on a trailer on a California beach, and as soon as the door opens Michael erupts out of the top of the trailer. This non-normal way of exiting the house sets up the expectation that not much will go as expected in the video. The camera follows Michael through a house, down a river, through a cave, and finally through an amusement park. The entire piece functions as a tour through the museum of simulacra of Michael Jackson, but also as a pastiche of them and a commentary on them. The following two sections outline two lenses for understanding these simulacra and analyze several examples from the music video using those lenses.

Hegemonic vs. Counter-Hegemonic Simulacra

An essay from a compilation entitled *Michael Jackson: Grasping the Spectacle* highlights *spectacle* as one effect of hegemonic simulacra. The collection’s title shows one tendency toward the hegemonic: it constructs Michael Jackson as a “spectacle,” as aberrant, and further, as a spectacle that can be “grasped,” understood, and in a final sense, fixed in place. Jesse Schlotterbeck’s “The ‘Split’ Biography” says that Jackson was unable to promote a positive popular image of himself because of his troubled

relationship with the tabloid media. He reads “Leave Me Alone” as a desperate attempt and failure on Jackson’s part to portray himself in a good light and undo the bad the media did to him as a person. In a sense, he argues that the spectacle defeated the man.

Where Schlotterbeck characterizes Jackson’s “inability” to contain and control a particular image of himself as a personal failure, he ignores the ideological aspect of this battle of representation. He shows a desire for the “authentic” Jackson: victory for him would be to grasp a “true” understanding of both Jackson and his music. He concludes with renewed charges that Jackson failed, but his description of the weakness in Jackson’s music inadvertently matches my description of its strengths: the songs “perpetuate a ritualistic enactment of misunderstanding and mis-recognition” (80). Deliberate destabilization, leading to mis-recognition, is the primary characteristic in Jackson’s music that allows it to be counter-hegemonic. This disjunct, so troubling to Schlotterbeck that he reads it as failure, is precisely the victory in the battle against the tabloid media. Both Jackson’s self-representations and media simulacra paint “numerous versions of a ‘split’ self,” and this multivocality “encourages the audience to read him ambivalently” (80). Jackson refused to create a singular, unified representation of himself, but rather than reading that as a failure, we can read it as him taking advantage of the mechanisms of simulation in order to expose it as such.

Throughout the course of the music video, a dozen or so newspapers open up onto the screen, each featuring Jackson’s face singing alongside a large headline containing some rumor or another about him. Some of these stories about Michael Jackson were printed in actual newspapers, while others weren’t. Some of the stories are true, others

may be true, others may be false. It would be counterproductive to bother citing them or finding their origin. These rumors were often effective at appropriating Jackson back into the hegemonic order or portraying him as a spectacle, and they are effective precisely because they seem natural and authentic, not created artifacts from a news outlet. But the endless proliferation of these artifacts, which Jackson aids in this video, has interesting effects.

One headline near the beginning states, “Michael proposes to Liz,” referencing his close friendship with Elizabeth Taylor. Another pops up soon after that reads, “Michael builds shrine to Liz.” Placing Michael Jackson into the most heteronormative narrative possible certainly sanitizes him. It “answers” the question about his sexuality (never mind the contradiction apparent in the rumors of both asexuality and homosexuality). It portrays his “bad” side as just a product of youthfulness that he can grow out of. It reifies, also, the progression from youthful revelry to responsible manhood, which includes marriage to a woman and instructions on how to treat (objectify) that woman. Certainly this representation of Michael is hegemonic on all accounts. But later we see the headline “Michael to Marry Brooke,” and after that another reading, “Michael Weds Alien.” He is purported to have married three different beings in the video. On top of that, he actually married twice, to Lisa Marie Presley and Debbie Rowe. When all these representations come together in a small amount of space/time, viewers can’t help but wonder which, if any, is true. This bevy of (faux)marriages signal a satirical or caustic attitude towards marriage and all the trappings wrapped up in heteronormative hegemony. It’s not that Michael Jackson is trying to mock marriage as

such; rather, the overblown representations expose as a construct both the story about Jackson and marriage itself.

A similar thing happens with the headline “Michael Confides to Pet Chimp.” It’s readily accepted that a person would talk to his pet, and it’s conceivable, but much less likely, that an eccentric person would get a chimpanzee as a pet. This representation portrays Michael as having gone past socially acceptable boundaries and paints him as a spectacle, mere entertainment to be ogled and laughed at and subsequently discarded. But another headline also makes its way across the screen: “Bubbles the Chimp Bares All About Michael.” This is a satirical flip on the other representation. It creates an image so unconceivable and unbelievable that we cannot help but discredit it right away (as weird as Michael Jackson is, chimpanzees cannot talk). This juxtaposed pair could function to give an audience pause before labeling the man as eccentric, thus preserving his subversions as worth attending to in a serious way.

Finally, there are several headlines dealing with Michael Jackson’s body. The first to crop up says, “Michael’s Cosmetic Nose Surgery,” and a giant nose and scalpel fly across the screen soon after. This headline also tries to turn Michael’s body into a spectacle not worth taking seriously. It is, by almost all accounts, true that Michael Jackson had several plastic surgeries including rhinoplasty. But other headlines about his body are obviously false, like “Michael and Diana Same Person” and “Jackson’s 3rd Eye Starts Sunglass Fad.” These overblown attempts to pathologize Michael’s deviant body have the opposite effect of making all the surrounding representations less spectacular, less bizarre. His body still appears modified and different from “normal” bodies, but the

counter-hegemonic representations open up the space for his body to be an acceptable alternative.

In these examples, the juxtaposition of real(istic) simulacra and outlandish ones can do both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic work: the outlandish can exercise gravity on the realistic, making it seem worse, more aberrant; but the outlandish can also make all the representations seem crazier, more numerous, and less believable—and thus less spectacular. By participating in hegemonic simulation and *overdoing* it (rather than trying to correct it) this video lifts the curtain and shows the machinery of production.

That machinery serves one of the master hegemonic narratives: capitalism. Near the beginning, Michael's hand comes out of a teapot holding a \$20 dollar bill with his face on it, singing. This image reminds us that the production and consumption of these representations of him (including this very video) all revolve around making commodities that will sell. And he is the commodity: he rides his boat towards a set of chomping teeth, a striking meta-metaphor that he, in the form of these representations, is a commodity to be consumed.

Representing the Body as a Simulacrum

Seth Silberman argues that the “real” Michael orchestrated and corroborated the bizarre stories about himself because he wanted to be seen as something unfamiliar, nonhuman (“This is Not It”). To some extent, Silberman's view shows how the simulacra affect the consumer's view of Michael Jackson. But Jackson didn't need a simulacrum to make him look unfamiliar or bizarre: Chapters 2 and 6 detail how his unfamiliar look

expands cultural notions of how bodies “should” look and what they can do. To give a bit more nuance to Silberman’s argument, the simulacra of Jackson take the unfamiliar, nonhuman aspects of Michael Jackson and make them into a spectacle in order to render them less effective. Instead of fighting against this (surely a losing battle), Jackson embraced the process of simulation and orchestrated even more simulacra, which had the effect of rendering each one less potent.

To explain how this counterintuitive process works, Baudrillard draws on a very old idea that shouldn’t be taken too literally, but works as an explanatory metaphor. He entertains Benjamin’s critique of mechanical reproduction (that making mechanical copies removes the “aura” from the work of art) to detail two ways that bodies can be simulated in a technological age. Baudrillard’s “hologram” is a copy of the body but without any physicality, a mirage. In a way, a hologram is the aura without the body (“Holograms”). His “clone,” on the other hand, is the physical body without the aura (“Clone Story”). The clone and the hologram combined might pass as a humanist subject, a cohesive, unified identity .

This outdated metaphor of a unified identity disrupts simulation in the same way as Butler’s theory of performative identity and Brecht’s idea of making visible the means of production. One well-projected hologram is clear to see and easy to believe. But line up fifteen holographic projections all at once and each is rendered opaque and blurry, and hence less “authentic” or convincing. The case is similar with clones: a single clone might appear an “authentic” and believable body. But lining up multiple bodies purported to be the same person makes it obvious that each one lacks the “aura” or “authenticity.”

Right before Michael's boat sails into the teeth, a phone and a camera come out of the water to make media representations of him—clones and holograms that imitate the body in some way (the headlines analyzed earlier are notable examples of this). Inside the mouth is a strange cave that represents Michael Jackson's mind (evidenced by the floating brain and the eventual exit from the ear of a Giant Michael). Present in the brain of the giant body are two somewhat unexpected parties: a smaller version of Michael and several dogs, who represent the media. This scene suggests several possibilities in terms of representation. It's possible that Giant Michael has orchestrated the simulacra by projecting a constructed version of himself (Little Michael) to be recorded and represented by the media. This reading would be congruent with my reinterpretation of Schlotterbeck's comments as well as with my reading of the newspaper headlines in the previous sections—Michael Jackson participates willfully, consciously in the production of simulacra. Another reading could be that the media try to get inside Michael's head to find an "authentic" version of him – but subsequent scenes suggest that the media are more interested in constructing versions of him than revealing the "one true version."

As Little Michael exits the body of Giant Michael, the video shows that the body has an amusement park built over it. The entire video has been essentially a carnival ride of Michael Jackson's life and home. We get the sense that this is all a game as we watch one Michael and the media-dogs ride around on another Michael's body. The defiant, confident tone of the lyrics certify that Jackson has discovered the media's game of exploiting his body ("I found out right away"), and he intends to play along until he breaks it.

The entire amusement park, being constructed all the while by some of the media-dogs, exudes spectacle. From the world's strongest man to the animals with multiple heads, it's a carnival-esque atmosphere that showcases the bizarre and emphasizes deviance. The media-dogs have set up a spectacle of Michael Jackson amidst all these others: near an open newspaper reading "Michael to buy elephant man's bones," we see Bubbles chained up and Michael, in ball and chain, dancing with the Elephant Man skeleton. This representation of Michael casts him as bizarre, but it is identifiable as a clone. Another Michael rides in front of the dancing one and saves Bubbles, placing in front of the clone a duplicate body that is a responsible pet owner rather than an eccentric weirdo. In this scene, there are multiple Michael Jacksons enacting different versions of him and doing different ideological work.

The last line of the final chorus, "Just stop doggin' me around," comes from Giant Michael's head. It turns out to have been a living body all the time, not just a statuesque representation constructed by the media-dogs. The giant's taped fingers start flexing in and out to the beat, and then he raises his enormous arms to start standing up. This embodied action demolishes the amusement park, a metaphor about the power of the body to disrupt hegemonic representation. In the roller coaster car Little Michael and Bubbles pass in front of Giant Michael, who has destroyed the entire amusement park in the process of standing. This final moment is an "enactment of misunderstanding and mis-recognition," to Schlotterbeck's lament and my joy, for it portrays the two "good" Michael Jacksons at once and refuses to identify the "real" one. In this way, the final scene reminds us that the entire video is yet another simulacrum, and that the only way to

disarm the others is not by denying them but by reveling in them and participating in their production.

When seen as constructed rather than “authentic,” the simulacra open up possibilities for consumers to construct their own versions of reality instead of accepting pre-fabricated versions. The hyper-proliferation of representations of Michael Jackson exposes the constructed nature of dominant norms. The more dangerous representations of Michael Jackson become to hegemony (gender, sexuality, and more), the more simulacra come forth to sanitize them; but as more simulacra come into existence, viewers come to doubt the “real-ity” of any of them. The more radical Michael Jackson’s subversions become, the greater the foothold of non-dominant ideologies in society.

To lead into the final chapter of this thesis, I emphasize one last image from this video. While in the cave, we see a dog pounding stakes into the ground to hold down ropes that immobilize Giant Michael’s hand. This metaphorically shows that hegemonic simulation attempts to fix meaning and foreclose alternative possibilities, particularly where bodies and action are involved. Yet at the end when the body comes to life, it defies all attempts to fix it. It breaks down simulation *by moving*. The final chapter shows how bodies, dancing, and movement disrupt cultural reproduction through counter-hegemonic representation.

CHAPTER 6 – “I DON’T KNOW”
BODIES DISRUPTING CULTURAL REPRODUCTION

Jackson ends the *Bad* album the same way he commenced it: with a question. In the same way that it is impossible to answer the question “Who’s Bad?” in any definitive way, the final question leaves us profoundly unsure. “Are you okay?” is sung dozens of times in the song “Smooth Criminal,” and the information is even demanded at times: “Tell us that you’re okay.” But the answer refuses to be pinned down, and the only response available is “I don’t know.” This serves to loosen and fray meaning, calling the fixity of any ideology into question.

The last chapter showed how simulacra try to sanitize Michael Jackson, to repair the ruptures he causes in the hegemonic order. But his body is the one commodity that counters this effectively: it parodies itself and exposes the simulacra, along with the ideological constraints they impose, as constructs. I end this project by integrating the lyrical and corporeal subversions from *Bad* to prove once and for all that pop culture can have a decidedly counter-hegemonic effect. Because of the fluid nature of Michael Jackson’s aestheticized body, any simulacrum created to disarm it automatically creates new counter-hegemonic impulses at the moment of its inception. Any view of Jackson, hegemonic or not, thus forces us to “confront the vulnerability of our own identities” (Scott 180). Jackson’s performances of body, race, sexuality, and gender break open these categories and show that they are constructed. This opens up social and cultural identities to scrutiny and clears space for alterity to be on par with the “norm,” or better still, for the norm to be irretrievably decentered and lost.

Before an analysis of “Smooth Criminal,” a brief review of the discussion surrounding subversion via popular culture is warranted. Michael Jackson’s pop art irrefutably opens up hegemonic norms to critique. But many theorists have drawn an abysmal picture of how much cultural change these subversions can actually do before expiring, being sanitized, or being absorbed into the service of hegemony; in the case of Michael Jackson, Halberstam’s discussion of bodily subversions and Hebdige’s thoughts on stylistic subversions provide particularly pertinent commentary. While they correctly show that the body and style are not, on their own, sufficient to constitute lasting subversive discourse against a hegemonic norm, this analysis of “Smooth Criminal” shows that the two done in concert just might have some staying power.

Dick Hebdige explains that through the material aesthetic of clothing and objects, subcultural style presents a direct, intentional subversion of dominant ideology (*Subculture* 101) in a different way than language can. By putting familiar objects in unexpected new contexts, like wearing safety pins on a jacket, subcultural style “disrupt[s] and reorganize[s] meaning” (105-106) by showing the expected cultural norms to be arbitrary, one among many choices. Wilson also argues that fashion has subversive potential and crosses social boundaries, “making us aware of the masquerade” of gender and “the normative nature of social practices” in general (437-8). Through this norm-defying process of removing a symbol and giving it new context, Hebdige claims that “meaning itself evaporates” (117).

He also argues that counter-cultural style is too easily commodified. When a punk jacket with patches and pins is mass-produced and sold by the thousands in chain retail

stores, it becomes the norm, the expected, and no longer disrupts or reorganizes. The mass consumption ruins the subversive potential of this style (*Subculture* 103). A norm, and thence regulated meaning, are restored. In the case of Michael Jackson, any wardrobe change he makes already takes place in the context of popular culture, not subculture; so according to Hebdige, Michael Jackson's fashion would have no potential to upset dominant norms. Yet I question the applicability of this theory in the context of *Bad*. Jackson starts the album dressed in a punk-biker fusion outfit, and ends it in a dapper white suit, which seems to be a move from rebellion towards conformity. Yet "Smooth Criminal" is even more destabilizing than "Bad" (as explained in greater detail below) precisely because it appears to be conformist on some levels, including the dress.

In regards to Hebdige's concerns about subcultural style, what if a particular stylistic subversion is not reproducible and consumable in a material sense? Michael Jackson's body, for instance, can be captured, reproduced, and commodified as simulacra, as copies, but the body continues moving and changing, not allowing the copies to lock it down, to recapture any evaporated meaning. In this sense, Michael's bodily subversions could be understood as an evaporation, an annihilation, of meaning.

Jack Halberstam theorizes queer genders and sexualities as places for subcultural subversion. He notices the cycle of appropriation Hebdige shows and asks us to "rebel" in more and more radical ways to push the bounds of what pop culture can reabsorb. Halberstam seems dedicated to theorizing these subversions *in subcultures* and *not* in popular, mainstream culture. He views popular culture's attempts at subversion as "fantasies of difference that erupt on the screen only to give way to the reproduction of

sameness” (*Queer Time and Place* 84), essentially throwing up his hands at the inevitability of cultural reproduction in the pop culture space. He sees subcultures as “alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production” (*Queer Art of Failure* 18), undisciplined by the watchful eye of mainstream Ideological State Apparatuses; they are undisciplined, but they remain unseen by most people, and therefore ineffective at creating any sort of change in culture at a systemic level.

These theories present a conservative diagnosis of the effects of cultural subversion, saying it either ends in reabsorption into the mainstream or remains in the tiny pocket it was created for. Michael Jackson’s subversions have already “failed” for both of them, because he operates in the popular culture realm: he has been endlessly commodified, and his queer body has been made publicly visible and spectacle-ized. But when these “failures” happen at the same time, a new sort of pop culture subversion is born. The commodification of a “normal” body, the endless proliferation of it, would be a reabsorption. But he has a decidedly queer body, an ever-changing body. As the commodification of his body continues while his body is physically changing, multiple and distinct versions of a commodified body spring up, purporting to represent the same person or identity. Thus, through its own mechanism of absorbing and sanitizing subversions, hegemonic culture reveals itself as a construct, desperate to maintain itself. What many perceive as Jackson’s “failures” may have been his greatest successes.

But what do these subversions do in culture? Where Hebdige and Baudrillard say that subversion makes meaning itself evaporate, Stuart Hall makes a more careful diagnosis: “There is all the difference in the world between the assertion that there is no

one, final, absolute meaning ... and, on the other hand, the assertion that meaning does not exist” (“Articulation” 137). Meaning-making and meaning-interpreting still happen in the material world despite there being no “one, final, absolute meaning,” which highlights meaning-making “not as a natural but as an arbitrary act – the intervention of ideology into language” (137).

Hall’s distinction enriches the discussion of Michael Jackson’s subversive body. Even though I have shown time and time again that Jackson as a commodity continually destabilizes fixed meanings, this does not *annihilate* meaning or pretend meaning doesn’t exist. Michael Jackson does not simply evaporate or explode hegemonic ideologies. Rather, Jackson’s subversions create an infinite *proliferation* of meaning. He exposes the ideological intervention in language as arbitrary and endlessly proliferates meanings so as to open up previously foreclosed meanings and take from dominant meanings their exclusive or preferred status.

A classic example of the endless proliferation of meaning, “Smooth Criminal” underscores how discontinuous the relationship is between expectation and reality, between a symbol and a meaning. This happens through two major avenues: through bodily demonstrations (in particular, by showing the body doing things it isn’t “supposed to” do); and through an elaborate double-entendre throughout the entire song, forcing a constant misidentification of who the Smooth Criminal is, whether they are actually “criminal” at all, and what constitutes criminality to being with.

The Discursive Body Versus the Dancing Body

Scholars who theorize the body's importance in disrupting hegemonic culture have different theoretical perspectives on how it should be used and what it does, but in general many seem to agree that the body is tied to identity, and that a focus on aestheticism displaces identity. Mario Albrecht asks us to "embrace the potential of *certain kinds of bodies* to transgress, rethink, and reshape these discursively constructed identity categories and consequently render them potentially less rigid and stultifying" (722, emphasis mine). It is true that bodies can do cultural work by pushing against boundaries, but he and I disagree on which "kinds of bodies" do this and what sort of reshaping they do. Aligning "kinds" of bodies with "kinds" of identities simply propagates normative ideals and boundaries rather than eliminating them.

Albrecht thinks of the aestheticized body as a bad thing that serves dominant ideology, whereas the "freakish" body that is not aestheticized has potential to transgress boundaries and break open the normative boundaries that police bodies. He claims that Jackson's body presents "the possibility of offering a transgression away from the disciplining effects" (715) of normative discourse because it "refuses to be aestheticized and subsequently contains the potential to call into question the social power that demands discipline" (714). It is true that Jackson's body calls into question the social power that disciplines bodies, but I disagree that it refuses to be aestheticized. Jackson's body is *purely aesthetic*: it is notable precisely because of its changing cosmetic appearance. It embraces the changeability of the aesthetic, and thence derives its power to legitimately question social discourse. It is not the freakish non-aestheticized body but

the spectacle-commodity body that has this meaning-reshaping potential.

The commodification of Jackson's body is precisely what calls into question the normative discourses and the social power given to those discourses. It is the non-fixity of identity, the performance, the movement in the public sphere that constitutes this power: "Jackson refuses to fix his identity within normative categories and consequently *his performances* evoke uncertainty and anxiety" (Albrecht 711, emphasis mine). A non-aestheticized body can be easily fixed in place, ignored, or stopped in time in a way that a moving and performing body, one that owns its commodity and aesthetic status, cannot. The movement of the body continually shifts away from any ideologically inflected meanings attached to it, carrying all those meanings and none of them at once.

Both Seth Silberman and Mario Albrecht mention a desire to "access the meaning behind Jackson" (Albrecht 708, Silberman), and both see the discourses and artifacts surrounding him as a trail of breadcrumbs. These writers, however, ask a question that has its roots in hegemonic norms, a question that demands a one-to-one correlation between author and work, between identity and body. Instead I ask, what if the discourses and artifacts *are* the meaning? Instead of sorting through them to look for meaning in an elusive "identity" of Michael Jackson, why not take the artifacts, the images, the stories—the commodified body—as meaningful all on their own? They are a product of Jackson's ambiguous body, a polysemous text that refuses to be singularly identified.

Butler says that it is through "disidentification with those regulatory norms...that feminist and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter" (qtd. in Albrecht 716). Moreover,

disidentifications can help us reconceptualize *how* bodies matter. A body that draws attention to aesthetics rather than a subterranean identity is much more *radically* subversive than a body that touts *an* alternative identity. Rather than simply trying to expand which identities are important, Michael Jackson's body renegotiates the level of importance society gives to identities in relation to bodies. Perhaps through Michael Jackson we can grasp the possibility of disidentifying with the concept of unified identity itself, and dispense with all the cultural anxiety about how identity *should* be and how bodies *should* represent that outwardly. This would not merely give social acceptance to a few more "kinds" of identities and bodies, but would instead constitute an infinite, endless proliferation of what kinds of identity / body combinations can exist in society.

It is not only Jackson's changes in physical appearance that give his body subversive power; his dancing and movements inspire awe and make the viewer rethink what is possible for bodies. In his analysis of Jackson's music videos, Julian Vigo says that "the gesticulations of the dancer invoke dialogue by virtue of pure spectacle. ... what he presents is a product of a cultural heterogeneity" (31). Two moves in the "Smooth Criminal" video exemplify Vigo's analysis and show how the aestheticized, commodified body can redefine norms and champion cultural heterogeneity.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the debut of the moonwalk in the "Bad" video and how it defies the "normal" forward motion of the human body. It reappears in "Smooth Criminal," but in a new and perfected form: Michael moonwalks while remaining in the same place on the stage. The mechanics of the move are much more difficult now, as he has to pull back on the ball of his front foot and push forward his rear foot

simultaneously, keeping the weight of his body evenly dispersed between them to ensure equal friction for a smooth-looking glide. Whereas the moonwalk in “Bad” showed that humans can walk in two directions, this move shows that humans can walk without direction as an objective at all. Instead of thinking of movement as an unimportant mechanical act whose only significance lies in questions like “Where are you going? Where are you coming from?” (Deleuze and Guattari 25), Jackson uses the *aesthetic* of the movement itself as the purpose. Life doesn’t just go forwards or backwards toward things for reasons; it can move toward nothing and be beautiful. This is a proliferation of possibilities for not only the way human bodies move but for *why* they move.



Figure 16. “Smooth Criminal” screen shot: moonwalking without direction

In the second important sequence, famously known as “The Lean,” Michael and his troupe pause on the stage standing upright and bend from their ankles 45 degrees forward. It is clearly impossible for the unassisted human body to bend that far forward

without falling over on its face, but the “natural” body never was a deterrent to Jackson’s imagination. He and his costume designers invented shoes that had a mechanism in the heel that could latch onto inconspicuous hooks in the stage to support his weight (Bush 156-162), allowing him to perform “the lean” to live audiences and prove that it wasn’t a mere cinematographic stunt. But when the patent was leaked and it was revealed “how he had been able seemingly to defy gravity on stage,” he lamented to costumer Michael Bush, “It was supposed to stay magical. Why would they ruin it for everybody?” (Fast 73, Bush 162).



Figure 17. “Smooth Criminal” screen shot: the lean

The magic and mystique of the move captivated me before I knew the “secret,” but the creativity involved in inventing the shoes and the execution on stage and in the video still remain just as stunning after finding out. Knowing about the shoes makes no

difference: Jackson proved he could think outside the bounds of what was considered possible and *give* the body new powers it didn't have before. He not only pushed the limits of the natural body, but redefined how those limits are conceived and enforced. It didn't matter what limitations the given surroundings put on him. Just as Stuart Hall said that change becomes possible only when the terms of the argument are up for debate, Jackson opted to change the terms his surroundings placed on him. What can a body do? What should a body do? "Whatever I can imagine it doing," Jackson always answers.

Smooth Criminal as a Double Narrative

In addition to a truly transformative dance performance, the "Smooth Criminal" video and lyrics destabilize any notion of "one true meaning" and thus call into question larger societal constructs that insist on fixed meanings. While more interpretations are certainly possible, this analysis draws a picture of two readings, one in which Michael is a bystander singing about an event of criminality or domestic abuse, and another in which he is actually the smooth criminal and the victims are hegemonic ideologies.

As the video begins Michael enters what appears to be a speak-easy. All eyes are on him and no one moves for several silent moments. When Michael suddenly flicks his hand, several men reach for their guns anticipating a shootout. It turns out that Michael is armed with a coin, which he then flicks into a jukebox on the other side of the room. As the coin falls, the song "Smooth Criminal" starts – and on the second beat of the song Michael uses his hand in the shape of a gun to shoot the man standing closest to him.



Figure 18. "Smooth Criminal" screen shot: the coin-flip as a weapon

This opening sequence orients our attention to the body and the power inherent in it, and also ties this corporeal power to money. The initial coin-flip shows how Michael's body is tied to money in instances of gaining power over others, and this continues throughout the video. This is not simply a capitalistic allegory: the money does not give power here, but rather represents something about the power already inherent in the body. Michael participates in some sort of dance-off with a few men (which he obviously wins) and he takes all their money after winning it. He also throws a stack of cash into the air before jumping onto the stage to do a complex dance sequence. This video actually disrupts the idea that money gives power. Instead, it shows that the commodified body, the one that is valued based on its aesthetics, has subversive potential.

Michael's entrance also highlights the ambiguity of good and bad in the song, including who is actually the "criminal" here, whose violent acts against others are

considered “criminal,” and why. The motive for Jackson entering the club is quite unclear, which leaves open to interpretation whether he is a “good guy” or a “bad guy.” On the one hand, he wears a white suit, and white has traditionally signified purity, heroism, or goodness in Western societies. Yet his suit recalls the mobster style of the prohibition era, so he could be a “criminal” in the sense of bootlegging. Also, he appears to have “trespassed” a zone that “belongs” to the others, so their suspicion of him could be justified. This opening sequence has opened up many possibilities and sets the tone for these equally-ambiguous lyrics from the first verse:

As he came into the window
It was the sound of a crescendo.
He came into her apartment,
He left the bloodstains on the carpet.

The first question with these lyrics is the same question all the patrons of the club are asking about Michael: who is “he”? “He” is likely the smooth criminal referred to in the song’s title, but is it Michael (as the video might suggest), or is it someone else (as the third-person pronoun sung by Michael suggests)? Another less obvious question has to do with sequence: is he leaving blood on the carpet before he strikes down Annie? Has he been hurt, or is this blood from a previous victim?

The lyrics of the song alone suggest a forced entry and aggravated assault situation by an unknown man, or possibly an instance of domestic abuse, with neighbors or friends trying to take care of the victim after the fact:

Annie, are you okay? Will you tell us that you’re okay?
There’s a sign in the window that he struck you a crescendo Annie.
He came into your apartment, he left the bloodstains on the carpet.
Then you ran into the bedroom, you were struck down, it was your doom.

But the video makes us question such a straightforward interpretation. The only person who has done any breaking in is Michael, and the lead female actor seems distressed by his presence, or at least concerned. These observations, in conjunction with the above lyrics, suggest that Michael is the smooth criminal. But if this is the case, would he really implicate himself in domestic violence?

This contradiction can be enlightened (or heightened) by the discussion of the word “bad” from Chapter 2 and the connection in the final chorus of “Bad”: “I’m smooth, I’m bad.” In the interpretation of Jackson as the smooth criminal, the role he takes on must be a continuation of the kind of Bad-ness he claims in the title track (bad as good, bad as non-bad, bad as progress). The tie between “smooth” and “bad” signals that what he does in the “Smooth Criminal” song and video are “good” things, or non-bad, non-criminal, progressive things. Criminality, hence, only has meaning in relation to a law (as that which breaks it); and some laws, the hegemonic in this case, ought to be broken. In short, the smooth criminal may be the protagonist rather than a domestic abuser.

Michael sings to Annie at the end of the chorus: “You’ve been hit by ... you’ve been hit by ... a smooth criminal.” The obvious reading of these lines renders Michael as an innocent bystander recounting events that happened to Annie and the escape of the perpetrator. But to drive home the point of the unfixity inherent in this song, I pursue the alternate reading above: Who is “Annie” in the video? No women are struck (several men are, but mostly by one another and not Michael). Michael strikes the club as a whole—his presence disrupts the normal operation. So “Annie” may not be a person at all, but rather an institution, a construct, society itself, and Michael is the smooth criminal doing

damage to it. A meta-commentary on this interpretation: I am placing primacy on the visual rather than the lyrical content to show the importance of the aestheticized body in disrupting cultural production. This reading takes the visual as if it were the “Real” and then subordinates the lyrics, placing them in the subsequently-logical interpretive positions.

The video and song present a similar moment in two different ways: after the second chorus in the song, a man’s voice on a megaphone yells, “Okay, I want everybody to clear the area *right now!*”; in the video a swat team with guns surrounds the building. Both of these moments signal some sort of police intervention in response to Michael’s “criminality” (again, understood as opposed to a law). Why would the police show up to help a speakeasy or underground operation that runs *contra* them? Michael’s disruption at the club obviously has further-reaching consequences. Police involvement signals an enforcement of cultural hegemony: the club-as-institution (Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus), whose task it is to win the complicity of the masses in the hegemony, has been “struck down” by the smooth criminal; therefore, the police must step in to forcibly sustain the hegemony (what Gramsci explains as a last resort).

Despite police intervention, it is too late for “Annie.” The composition of the club’s patrons has changed—while many remain as they were when Michael entered, several are now dancing with him, an uptake of the counter-cultural (non)norms he offers. The dancers represent a new heterogeneity, spurred by an aesthetic-body-icon who presents to them the subversive possibilities of the body. The institution has not been able to absorb the subversion, a new and welcome change of direction from the assumptions

of Hebdige and Halberstam. When asked, “Annie, are you okay?” the only response the institution can give is a resounding, “I don’t know!”

Michael Jackson is not a Christ figure preaching *a way* to salvation—he shows multiple possibilities pointing in multiple directions. After he fires a machine gun at all the police surrounding the building (a direct attack on the cultural hegemony), another man takes up the machine gun and helps Michael leave the club. Crucially, he and the other patrons continue the battle against the norms that the club and the police enforce even without Michael present. This shows that Michael is not the solution *per se*, but rather what he *does* is the solution. He has impressed a new cultural logic on these people, so they continue dancing and shooting and subverting, perpetually, even after he has left.

Just as in “Bad,” the question (and not the answer) figures as the destabilizer: “Are you okay?” can only be answered, “I don’t know!” many times over. Jackson’s body takes the concept that identity is performative and turns it on its head in a revolutionary gesture: bodily performance and movement are disidentification, they are the way out of identity, the way to resist being fixed or determined by an identity. Performance, it turns out, is a way to *dis*-identify. The aestheticized, commodified body breaks the cycle of sanitation and absorption, disrupts the mechanism of cultural reproduction, and endlessly proliferates multiple, new meanings.

Coda

The key strategy in Michael Jackson's subversions of hegemony is not trying to evaporate or annihilate meaning, but instead to endlessly proliferate it. This more nuanced treatment of the arbitrariness of meaning allows us to understand the mechanics of power distribution. An ideological perspective acknowledges that power is actual and real and here, and that people can grasp it in very specific ways. This perspective respects preexisting material conditions in the world while still retaining hope that they can be rearranged, and power redistributed.

The representations I have shown and analyzed throughout these chapters have been of a very particular nature: they automatically subvert cultural hegemony, and they do it even better when the hegemony attempts to sanitize and reintegrate them via simulation. On the one hand, a viewer can simply accept a representation of Michael Jackson that disrupts dominant cultural expectations: Michael's dancing body doing un-human-like movements and thus redefining what counts as human. On the other hand, a viewer can reject such an interpretation of the subversive event and try to incorporate it into the dominant order: "Michael is just being a weird person at that moment," or "I like 'Thriller' Michael or teenage Michael or little boy Michael better because he looked better back then." But even this rejection implicitly acknowledges, in the very moment of sanitation and reabsorption, that one is choosing between versions of a person, acknowledging the plurality of identity and disavowing a unified identity. Both choices, to accept and to reject Michael Jackson, have a disorienting effect on the game of identity. Michael Jackson radically questions the terms of the argument in order to

“increase displacement in the game, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected ‘move’ (a new statement)” (Lyotard 16). And his unexpected move turns out to be moving in unexpected ways, which displaces and disorients all of us players from the presupposed rules of our cultural game.

I cannot call these moments from *Bad* any kind of prescriptive or formulaic “solution” to the problem of cultural hegemony. Answers as such create stop signs and create stagnant environments (Hodge) by attempting to fix down meaning. This thesis has not been a prescription of what to do so much as a description of what has been done, a look at how the past has shaped and continues to shape the present. So how can we take this lengthy look at *Bad* and apply important principles to keep such cultural subversions coming? We can apply Michael Jackson’s aesthetic politically. His aesthetic ostensibly plays the game of commodity capitalism on the surface, but actually serves to internally disrupt it. I call, then, for an endless proliferation of such destabilizing art, which proliferates heterogeneity and serves the purpose of democratization.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF SOURCES FOR SONGS AND VIDEOS

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