



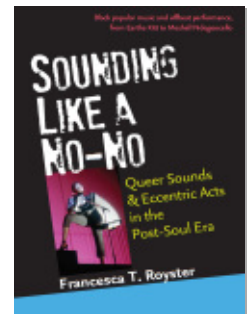
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Four: Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans  
Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age

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## FOUR

### Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age

*Off the Wall* (1979) was the first album I ever bought with my own money. Thirteen years old, seventh grade, size ten feet, finally convinced to wear a training bra only after my gym teacher tactfully suggested it to me after a particularly vigorous game of kickball. Our family moved back to Chicago after eight years in Nashville, and, an Afro-puff wearer in a sea of Jheri curls and Farrah Fawcett press and flips, I was way behind the curve of sophistication. In Nashville, my friends and I competed over our standardized test scores and played with our gerbils. I was the happy-go-lucky-only-black-girl in circle of 4-H Club geeks. Sex was all around me, of course. Lured by the smell of Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific and sun and Bubblicious, I did give up my neon yellow plastic pocket comb to Rebecca Evans for the chance to watch her use it, but those desires were floating, inchoate, and I enjoyed my state of suspension.

Writer Dale Peck says of his own queer thirteenhood:

Desire was still a single urge then, undifferentiated at its core but beginning to ribbon apart at its edges; like an octopus, it reached out in so many directions that it came to seem like several different desires. Though we came up with a thousand different answers, we continued to ask the same question, over and over: What do I want? But we dismissed each answer we came up with—*I want a sandwich, I want to write a story, I want to kiss LaMoine Weibe*—because the one thing we thought we knew was that we didn't have a name for what we wanted. Indeed, we suspected that it might not even have a name.<sup>1</sup>

In hindsight, of course, it seems to me obvious that my own awkwardness that year after our move to Chicago, and my panic at participating in the rituals of heterosex readiness around me: straightening hair, shoplifting lip gloss, endless note passing and rating of boys—was because I was—

am—queer. But are sexualities always so clearly retraceable? Maybe, as Peck says, at thirteen we're all queer; if "Queer was the desire to live in another time, queer was the dream of traveling to another planet, queer was the need to do something."<sup>2</sup>

In *Off the Wall*, I found a soundtrack for those desires that were floating around me, but for which I didn't have a name. Yes, Michael Jackson sang of "dancing into sunlight," "putting that nine to five up on the shelf," and other bright, simple fantasies, but he also spoke to something deeper in the moments when he didn't use words, "ch ch huhs," the "oohs," and the "hee hee hee hee hees," fueled by mysterious elements like "the beat," "the force," "the madness in the music," and "a lot of power." Listening to Jackson at home or at our end-of-the-year dance, boys and girls grinding with determination around me, I ignored the romantic stories of the lyrics and focused on the sounds, the timbre of his voice and the pauses in between. Listening to those nonverbal moments—the murmured opening of "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough" or his sobbed breakdown at the end of "She's Out of My Life," I discovered the erotic, described by Audre Lorde as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings."<sup>3</sup>

Born in the heat of the civil rights movement and coming of age in its transition to the post-civil-rights, postindustrial age,<sup>4</sup> Jackson's ever shifting voice and body provided a model and soundtrack for a generation of Post-Soul children and their desires for an elsewhere: to both claim blackness and being "more than a color," to be both bold on the dance floor and eccentrically shy, to be sexually unreadable, to be neither/nor or both. Michael Joseph Jackson was born August 29, 1958, in Gary, Indiana, one year after the signing of the Civil Rights Act. That same year, hip-hop icon Grandmaster Flash was born, too, as were Madonna and Vernon Reid of the band Living Colour, all arguably Post-Soul trailblazers. That same year Martin Luther King Jr. published his first book, *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, and survived a freak assassination attempt via letter opener. Back in Gary, U.S. Steel slowly began hiring more black workers. Elvis went into the army, Chuck Berry recorded "Johnnie B. Goode," and Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday together recorded *Live at the Newport*.

Jackson's parents, Joseph, a steel worker, boxer, and sometime musician, and Katherine, a housewife with her own interest in country music, had come up to Gary from the Mississippi Delta—Joe from Fountain Hill, Arkansas, and Katherine from Barbour County, Alabama. Whether

as a child or as an adult, Jackson's voice has always had a searching quality, perhaps spawned by his parents' own searching spirits. Like Eartha Kitt's placeless accent and Sylvester's high femme gospel melisma, Jackson's voice takes us from familiar to unfamiliar spaces; he is at once nostalgic and future seeking, combining soul man falsetto and jazz scatting along with his refusal to fully occupy the space of meaning and familiarity. For example, we might link Jackson's falsetto voice to the tradition of the male falsetto in Soul, blues, and gospel music. Singers like Frankie LYmon, Jackie Wilson, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, Al Green, Prince, and more recently D'Angelo all use a high masculine vocal range and yet are often connected to (sometimes) heterosexual masculine seductiveness. In the falsetto tradition, there can be tremendous power, as well as vulnerability—a crack in the macho posture, the expression of need. In Jackson's voice, there were these aspects of the tradition, as well as something else—the suggestion of being on the verge of something we haven't yet heard, a spirit of fugitivity, claiming what Nathaniel Mackey calls “the obliquity of an unbound reference” both forged by and breaking away from histories of black struggle.<sup>5</sup> Jackson's vocal and often highly theatrical embodied performances capture the contrariness and resistance of the eccentric, pushing our expectations of gender and racial authenticity.

For Jackson, *Off the Wall* marks the transition between child performer and adult. Although it was not his first solo album (his first, *Got to Be There*, was in 1972, followed by *Ben* [1972], *Music and Me* [1973], and *Forever Michael* [1975]), it was the first solo album to mark his independence from Motown, his new creative relationship with producer and mentor Quincy Jones, and his increasing artistic freedom in the crafting of his songs. In *Off the Wall*, Jackson takes new creative risks, particularly in his forays into disco sounds, experiments with instrument arrangement and dubbing, and the widening of his vocal range and technique. Yet, while Jackson was twenty-one when he released *Off the Wall*, it still captures the prepubescent mood of his earlier work, which I'll explore later in this chapter. Glimmers of sexual knowledge are there in his sound, as well as in his lyrics, as they were in childhood songs like “Who's Lovin' You” and “Got to Be There.” But those moments still manage to take us by surprise, framed as they are by relatively innocuous romantic situations, like taking a spin on the dance floor. It was this element of suspended sexuality, I would argue, that I found so seductive.

Much has been made of Michael Jackson's Dorian Gray-like evolution of image. Jackson's celebrity, especially as a solo performer, has been

greatly enhanced by his use of music videos to frame each new transition in his image. Writing about Jackson as a figure of becoming in an earlier study, I've suggested:

From the little boy who sang love songs like an adult, to the adult who hangs out with children and animals on Neverland ranch; from his rumored associations with mummification—including his taste for sleeping in oxygen chambers and his collection of the bones of the original Elephant Man—to his alleged experiments with his own visage through plastic surgery, makeup and acid washes for the skin, Jackson, shape-shifter, style-changer, thriller, is the ultimate figure of becoming.<sup>6</sup>

I don't think there has been enough theorization of Jackson's becoming gender as experienced through less material modes like voice, however. Through his cries, whispers, groans, whines, and grunts, Jackson occupies a third space of gender, one that often undercuts his audience's expectations of erotic identification. In this way, his vocal performances anticipate ongoing debates around transgender identity and essentialized notions of desiring bodies.

Voice, because of its link to the theatrical, and because it is both embodied and disembodied, can operate in a way that allows gender transgression and play differently from full body performances. The throat is an erotic space that can both encode and undercut gender. It is the site of performative expression where desire becomes manifest—where desire is transformed into communication. The larynx shapes the air, turns it, warm from our mouths, and shapes it into expression. The larynx is a collaborative part, polyamorous, working with teeth and tongue and diaphragm and lungs, but sometimes it has its own ideas. It can be temperamental. A diva. Many performers treat it as if it has its own mind—coaxing and coddling it after a particularly difficult night. Throats are part of the erotic act, commanding, whispering, swallowing. Like the brain, the throat is a sexual organ that both genders, all genders share. It is not surprising, then, that the throat has been an important site for rituals of sexual identity and the surveillance of gender codes, from Renaissance castrati to Freud's Dora to Linda Lovelace.

Jackson's vocal style betrays an intelligence of the throat's strengths and its limits. His chucks, grunts, clicks, rasps, groans, gasps, and stops, as well as his use of emotional expressiveness, vocal range, volume, and

pitch, provide a depth that often adds layers to the sometimes simplistic lyrics of his songs. Roland Barthes talks about the “grain” of the voice—the aspect of authenticity that speaks of a combination of body (the “muscles, membranes, cartilage,” the rasping of the throat, the state of the vocal cords) and its relationship to the symbolic: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.”<sup>77</sup> While Jackson’s voice conveys the embodied nature suggested by Barthes’s notion of “grain,” it does so in a way that reconstructs our notion of a stable or “authentic” physical self, particularly in terms of age and gender. In this way, Jackson forces us to think about the ways that the grain of the voice can be counterintuitive, and never fully describable or known.

The grain of the voice is not just its physical quality but also the friction of the body against meaning, against language. Cultural critic Kobena Mercer suggests that the grain of Michael Jackson’s voice not only adds a subtext of sexuality to his lyrics but also is ultimately about a larger “eroticization of the body” that “transcends the denotation of the lyrics and escapes analytic reduction.”<sup>78</sup> For Mercer, this eroticization queers traditional notions of black masculinity. In this chapter, I’m particularly interested in the ways that Jackson’s queer erotics extend our notions of gender and age, and the ways that Jackson performs this queering strategically, to complicate his body’s own readability as a child star and afterward. The space of “refusal” that Jackson creates through song and dance, as well as the construction of his star icon, becomes a space of dreaming, the desire to create a place where we haven’t yet been.

If, as Monique Wittig has observed, “the first, the permanent, and the final social contract is language,” bodies as they read and are read are a primary element of that contract. Trans activist and poet Riki Anne Wilchins writes:

Our bodies—as signs in that language—are the first and most permanent element of that linguistic contract, and in order to participate in the social space of language, we agree to be our “selves” as we are seen by others, that is our particular physical selves—fat or thin, black or white, young or old. The most basic part of that linguistic contract to which our bodies are apprenticed is to be sexed, and being sexed in this context does not mean agreeing to mouth the words “I am female” to answer the name, or to mark the box next to Male with an X. It means agreeing to feel and look and act

your sex, to participate in society as a meaningful member within the matrix of expectations that go along with your sex.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, thanks to the work of gender theorists like Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, we know that the body and the gendered meanings it communicates are *not* permanent, and as it is altered, so, too, is our relationship to language. Indeed, transgender theorist Leslie Feinberg describes her gender identity as a “work in progress.”<sup>10</sup>

In trans activist Kate Bornstein’s writing in *Gender Outlaw*, we get the chance to think about what a transgender aesthetic and transgender “voice” might look and sound like. Bornstein uses “cut-and-paste” techniques of the flotsam and jetsam gathered from a life lived on the borders, the baggage from a culture that does and does not see her: bits of theory, songs, passages from novels, unwitting insults from others. These are transformed by her placement of them. She calls this work “sewing sequins onto our cultural hand-me-downs.”<sup>11</sup> She says that she wants her writing voice to capture the process of integration and reintegration that her life has become: “I keep trying to make all the pieces into one piece. As a result, my identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I’ve written in effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Bornstein says, her goal in her writing voice is to make sense of her own life, to perform her “view” of or “take” on the world, and perhaps, too, to create a “transgendered” experience in the reader. She speculates, “Will the identification with a transgendered writing style produce an identification with a transgendered experience?”<sup>13</sup>

While coming from different historical and political trajectories, we might be able to link the transgendered aesthetic of Bornstein’s “sewing sequins onto our cultural hand-me-downs” with the expressionism and “blueing” of music from the African diasporic tradition that we hear in Jackson’s work. Both present an aesthetic of transformation of performer and listener; both attempt to capture the beauty of a lived experience in the body; both counter dominant narratives and makers of meaning. And both can move the reader/listener into a form of transcendence. In the African diasporic musical tradition, singers like Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Sonny Terry, Al Jarreau, and Bobby McFerrin are praised for their ability to imitate the sound of the instruments—the wah-wah of the trumpet, the staccato of the chikere. Musicians are also lauded for their ability to make their instruments sound like the human voice,

sometimes crossing gender boundaries to become male or female, imitate animals, or become spirit. Expressionism, cultural critic Philip M. Royster says, is

The “dramatic” value that prefers vocal and instrumental performances delivered to convince the listener that the performer has actually experienced the content of the performance. This value probably has its source in African religious experiences of spiritual possession, as well as ceremonies involving the periodic return of various spirit entities to the village and in African-American religious experiences in “getting happy,” that is, becoming filled with (or anointed by) the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

What Jackson’s vocal performances offer is a way of extending our understanding of his voice’s transformational quality, to see how its spiritual project speaks to and opens up the possibilities of expressiveness beyond the limits of the secular and spiritual. As a blaxploration project, Jackson’s “trans” aesthetic of expression challenges our notions of where and how and by whom we are moved. It is one of many ways that eccentric performances prove to be collaborative, rather than merely isolated.

In many ways, we might think of Jackson’s “Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough” as a secular expression of “getting happy.” In this song, we can hear aspects of expressionism: Jackson’s voice imitates percussion instruments like the cuica and kalimba, and he alters his voice to create his own “female” chorus, all to create a building energy and persuasive power to get the listener to similarly push the limits of desire, to “get enough.” At the same time, we might think about the cut-and-paste aspects of the production itself as similar to Bornstein’s transgender writing aesthetic. Consider Jackson’s description of his production process.

“Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough” had a spoken intro over bass, partly to build up tension and surprise people with the swirling strings and percussion. It was also unusual because of my vocal arrangement. On that cut I sing in overdubs as a kind of a group. I wrote myself a high part, one that my solo voice couldn’t carry on its own, to fit in with the music I was hearing in my head, so I let the arrangement take over from the singing. Q’s fade at the end was amazing, with guitars chopping like kalimbas, the Afri-



can thumb pianos. That song meant a lot to me because it was the first song I wrote as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

In his description we see that Jackson conceives of his voice as a collaborative or adaptive tool, making the other performers and instruments stretch from their natural or past abilities, even imagining another self with which he collaborates. Jackson combines the deep resonance of the bass with his own mumbles and trembling whispers at the beginning—vulnerability and threat all at once, to create drama and mystery, exploding into the “who” and swirl of strings. He overdubs his voice to become a group with himself, a collaboration with selves, at the same time making the self “other,” heightening the already feminine aspects of his voice. He stretches his own range by fitting his voice “into” or in between the strains of the instruments. And in response the other voices and sounds around him are affected, adapting, becoming something new and not yet defined, so that the guitar moves from melody to percussion, from swirl to chopping, from rock to African kalimba, moving diasporically from present to past and back again.

In *Off the Wall*, Jackson’s performance is at the cusp of expansion that will take his play with identity even further—from gender fluidity to monster, alien, and space dweller, as Victoria Johnson, Kobena Mercer, and Jason King have suggested. We can certainly trace elements of identity play through expressionism in *Off the Wall* that will show up more developed in *Thriller* and *Bad*. For example, we might connect his stylistic use of overdubbing in “Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough” to the use of vocoder in *Thriller*’s “Pretty Young Things,” which transforms his voice into a ET voice, his use of whisper-heightened suspense in the opening of “Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough” expanded on an epic scale and ventriloquized into the body of Vincent Price in “Thriller.” The rebellious “Hee hee hee hee hee” of the “party people” in the opening of “Off the Wall” is also linked to the spooky “Thriller” and that unearthly, androgynous howl—something like what Peter Pan might sound like if he spent the night drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes—that he performs in “Bad,” and the controversial extended end sequence to the video for “Black or White.” Jackson uses his nonverbal voicings to express a state of outsiderhood in songs like “Beat It” and “Bad.” In these songs, in fact, the nonverbal elements act as a kind of bridge between singer and persona, one fueling the other, allowing Jackson to move from the posi-

tion of shy, androgynous observer to interpreter of the power and angst reflected in the dancers and actors around him. In “Bad,” for example, Jackson seems to be split between two voices, performing both the call and the response: the sneering “Bad” braggadocio voice, which makes its claims of toughness, and the intertwining chorus, which encourages with squeals, “whoops,” whip snaps, and, my favorite, “Ch’mon.” Through voice, as well as other forms of performance, Jackson offers the promise of movement, of creating a world with the always-existing possibility for change.

### Jackson’s Queer World Making: Becoming Gender

So much of Jackson’s performative persona has been analyzed as being about either concealment and revelation—the glove, one off, the other on; the surgeon’s mask, the sunglasses, the military uniform, even the crumbling nose, all costumes that signal their artificiality and their potential for being taken off. But the model of becoming tells us more about Jackson’s performances in terms of its imaginative and erotic link to audience. Like me, Jackson himself cites a transgendered performance as marking one of his first realizations of the erotic relationship between audience and performer.

When we did the Apollo Theater in New York, I saw something that really blew me away because I didn’t know things like that existed. I had seen quite a few strippers, but that night this one girl with gorgeous eyelashes and long hair came out and did her routine. She put on a *great* performance. All of a sudden, at the end, she took off her wig, pulled a pair of big oranges out of her bra, and revealed that she was a hard-faced guy under all that makeup. That blew me away. I was only a child and couldn’t even conceive of anything like that. But I looked out at the theater audience and they were going for it, applauding wildly and cheering. I’m just a little kid, standing in the wings, watching this crazy stuff.

I was blown away.<sup>16</sup>

What is it that Jackson learns but doesn’t name in watching this performance? Perhaps another version of what he learns by watching Jackie Wilson or James Brown in the eaves of the Apollo: that perfor-

mances create a magic in excess of the bodies that perform them. Despite the hardness of a man's face, despite the oranges hidden beneath her dress, the performer has transformed both himself and the audience in the act of performing, and creating an effect that might exceed previous expectations of gender. Perhaps Jackson learned that the arithmetic of gender—these clothes plus these gestures plus this genitalia—is not constant, that all bodies exceed their own bodies, despite what he might have been told by his parents or teachers. He certainly got a peek at the underground culture hiding in plain sight—queer subcultures have existed everywhere, including on the Chitlin' Circuit. At the same time, Jackson was sampling a performative practice of gender fluidity far more boldly marked and visible than his own. Cross-dressing has been a long-standing part of vaudevillian performance and minstrel shows. He might have seen the normative response of laughter to gender shifting, but he may have also observed that gender shifting might evoke multiple responses from an audience: shock, wonder, identification, attraction, disgust. Perhaps he also learned the potential of the performance to articulate unspoken desires—to not only entertain but also create a space of freedom. The potential of performance to help one transcend one's lived experience, to create a line of flight, or to say what can't be verbalized will inform Jackson's performances again and again. Jackson's career becomes one in which we are watching his gender—and race—constantly shift, not as either/or but as “both/and.” His gender, as well as his vocal and performance style, is wonderfully supplemental, in excess of historically informed codes of black masculinity (or femininity), speaking to us multidirectionally.

Soul masculinity—as exemplified by Jackie Wilson, James Brown, and Smokey Robinson—continued to be an important touchstone for Jackson throughout his career, but we must acknowledge Jackson's citation of womanly performances, too, Soul and otherwise. On his blog *Blood Beats*, Ernest Hardy points to Jackson's citation of Diana Ross in his vocal introductions, his command of glam, and his diva gaze.<sup>17</sup> I see Liza Minnelli in his wide kohl eyes, his sparkly jacket, the deep bow to his audience, letting his shoulders fall with his hair. Michael cites Rita Hayworth's hair flip (the *Gilda* sequence is even integrated into his performance of “Smooth Criminal” in *This Is It*), and he is very Hayworthian in his skillful command of looked-at-ness. And what about the ways that Jackson's performances, in these very citations, bring out the gender multiplicity contained within these performances: the potential

femininity in Smokey's open, vulnerable falsetto, as well as his mastery of doo-wop cool in "Who's Lovin' You"; the muscularity of Rita Hayworth's shoulders and neck as she masters that flip; Liza's butchness as she commands the space of the stage, sitting wide-legged on her chair. Michael "does" wide-eyed childhood, and the wise old man in a child's body, too. And what about those other productive interactions, where Michael crosses not only gender but also the animal/human and technical divides: his soulful working of the vocoder in "P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)"; the echo of Mickey Mouse's winsome knock-kneed gait in a flash of "Billie Jean"; his own lion cubbyness on the inside flap of *Thriller*; and in "We Are the World," the spirit of ET's glowing, beating heart? Jackson changes the ways that we see and hear these past performances, too. Once the performers are taken out of their context, performed by Jackson in his aesthetic and gender openness, we see the originals as denaturalized and deconstructed.

### Voice and Michael Jackson's Trans-Age Performance as a Dynamic of Gender

As a child performer, Jackson developed a nuanced analysis of the ways that vocal and body performances could capture the attention of his audience in multiple ways, and "blow away" their expectations. Even as we acknowledge the ways that in this culture childlikeness is often associated with the feminine, Jackson's performances complicate what we think of as the child-and-adult voice, whether we're looking at the beginning or the end of his career. Jackson forces us to think about how voice affects the ways that we read the body, and ultimately gender, through the sometimes fluid lens of age performance. His mastery of voice has always had a strong and sometimes disconcerting effect on his audience, and still does, even in death.

In his earliest performances, Jackson's child-adult voice made him the object of fascination, desire, discomfort, and even fear. At Jackson's 2009 memorial, Smokey Robinson recalls the effect of watching young Michael performing his own song, "Who's Lovin' You," and surpassing his own performance, to great effect. Smokey recalls with loving laughter—and perhaps some lingering irritation:

I wrote that song. I *thought* I sang it. [Pause for laughter.] I thought to myself, now they have pulled a fast one on us, because this boy

could not be ten years old. How could he possibly know these things? I quickly went over to him. I didn't believe that someone that young could have so much feeling and love and *know*. You've got to know something to sing like that.

That fateful performance of "Who's Lovin' You," on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1969, brings a youthful vocal openness, playfulness, and vulnerability at play against the vocal and bodily "knowing" of black male cool, drawing from the stylistics of Smokey Robinson, Jackie Wilson, Marvin Gaye, and James Brown, among others. "Who's Lovin' You" was first written and performed by the then young adult Smokey Robinson and the Miracles in 1960. It was shared between many others of the Motown family, including the Temptations and the Supremes, until it was made most famous by the Jackson 5's rerecording in 1969, and then forty years later by Kurdish Welsh child star Shaheen Jafurgholi on the TV talent show *Britain's Got Talent* (testimony to Britain's truly multicultural identity). Shaheen eventually performed the song at Jackson's memorial service at the Staples Center.

Robinson's lyrics capture the struggle for power in the face of melancholy manifest in traditional heterosexual romantic love: the speaker loves then leaves his girl, only to find himself obsessed with what he's lost. There are both regret and paranoia in that refrain, "And I wonder, who's lovin' you." The song's lyrics capture not only the masculine desire to be "on top"—to not be bested by a lover—but also the power of the imagination to move from loss to fear to obsession. It's little Michael's ability to capture the struggle for bravado, and that glimmer of darkness in between the words, that lends maturity and "knowledge" to his vocal performance.

This moment is important, as Michael Jackson burned into public consciousness (and in his immediate circle of Motown) as the "child adult." It also is important as an illustration of his potential to steal the show from his brothers, even while proving the Jackson 5 to be a viable commercial product. This is, in many ways, the dilemma of the eccentric, who wants to be noticed for his or her ability to chart his or her own course, to be recognized, even while using tactics of misrecognition, traveling to the space "past the word's or the sentence's limit," as Moten puts it.<sup>18</sup> In Smokey and the Miracles' version, the song is smooth, soulful, but a little formulaic in its romanticism—the already known quality of doo-wop crooning. When Michael and the Jackson 5 perform it, the song moves between formulaic and unexpected. It begins with a cute

spoken opening: little Michael tells his brothers about a girl he met “at the sandbox,” and a love that blossomed over milk and cookies. His outfit and those of his brothers are psychedelic—*Laugh-In* cool that will soon be fully inhabited in the kids’ worlds of *Sesame Street* and *H.R. Pufnstuf*: purple vest and fuchsia porkpie hat, which pops out as if specially made for the still new color TVs that on which it might appear. His voice and gaze are steady, but he is still a precocious, if soft-spoken, little boy, telling childhood woes to his big brothers that seem a little canned. But with that opening blues chord of the electric piano, and his wringing out of that opening “Wheeeeeeeeeeeen / I met you,” young Michael enters into another space. He is Soul crooner, slow, confident, telling us of the love he mistreated and lost, popping his fingers and swinging his arms in a boogaloo. Lyrically and stylistically, he captures the sense of having seen and felt things, drawing from earlier R&B performances like those of Robinson, Sam Cooke, the Platters, the Ink Spots, and the Temptations. Moving through the song with a steady bop, Jackson has mastered, for those few moments, the mask of cool, accompanied by a voice that is anything but. It is, as Smokey Robinson says, a voice of knowledge, which dips into the well of pain and living that blues singers before him have sampled—Ray Charles, Jackie Wilson, Smokey himself—and gives us a full cup. The performance warms steadily, Michael backed up efficiently by his brothers.

At the same time that Jackson performs masculine virtuosity, he also captures the breakdown of masculine control, and resulting outbursts of feeling: words that stammer with emotion, or when he confesses that he’s “not, not going to make it”; moments of inarticulateness, punctuated by an “ooh” or “ah!” or maybe just “sock it to me now!” The song dramatizes the machismo struggle and then the abandonment to articulate emotion verbally, recasting and rescuing the struggle to remain unaffected by loss through the sometimes pleading falsetto of a child. It’s the voice, along with the body, popping with color and a child’s loose limbs, that makes such a confession plausible. Jackson’s transvocalizations from childhood to adulthood allow for a deconstruction of masculine posturing in romance. Jackson’s vocal movement is timely, too, in a period on the verge of reexamining traditional male and female roles. As Margo Jefferson suggests, Michael’s youthful interventions in the politics of sex roles in dating—the defense of virginity and good reputation (in “The Love You Save”) and schoolyard (or mock schoolyard) seduction in “ABC” (“Teacher’s gonna show you / how to get an A-ay”)—were gob-

bled up by audiences quite comfortable with the movement from pre-pubescent purity to sexual (and gender) knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Jackson's access to nonverbal feeling, conveyed by his cries, and shouts and exclamations of the latest cool phrase ("Sock it to me now!" spinning on the ball of one well-polished Beatles-booted foot), as well as his early skill in the phrasing and coloring of lyrics—his skills as a vocal essayist—added a transformative layer to the history of masculine cool that he's accessing. Indeed, this childlike play with masculine and feminine codes by young Michael enabled the Jackson 5 to move between racial, gender, and age niches: introducing a turned-off young audience increasingly interested in psychedelia and more politically informed protest music back to Motown; crossing over to white audiences on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *American Bandstand*, and live venues in Europe and Las Vegas;<sup>20</sup> and even intervening in the increasingly conflicted relations between the sexes in an age of feminism, as Jefferson suggests from her own experience as a graduate student in her twenties.

My friends and I (graduate students all) found it precious and in no way peculiar. Why would we? We were dancing and dating to his love songs. And he'd become quite a suave little crooner. In "I'll be There" the boyishness becomes a young lover's idealism. "Never Can Say Goodbye" is intense. That pure voice actually conveys emotions that smolder (anguish! Doubt!) as it leaps up a sixth for the first vehement "Don't wanna let you go" and down a fourth for the closing one. In those early years of feminism, when few grown men seemed worth trusting, little Michael was our Cupid.<sup>21</sup>

Relistening to the young Michael Jackson forces us to think transformatively about the impact of age on the ways that we think about gender—here socially acceptable codes of black masculinity. In "Who's Lovin' You" and elsewhere, Jackson's youth gives him a space in which to play the performance of control, loss, and paranoia latent in the love songs of the period.<sup>22</sup>

## Queer World making and the Child Star

At the same time that Jackson complicates gender norms, his transgender and trans-age erotics of openness, emotionality, and movement

might be seen as part of a larger mode of resistance, in the face of control and surveillance of the black, commercialized body, as a child star. Jackson complicates through his own example the image of the child as a (mere) projection of adult desires. In Jackson's autobiography *Moonwalk*, he compellingly conveys his awareness as a child of adult struggles for power and control over his style, his appearances, and his legal standing. If, as cultural critic Ernest Hardy suggests, later in life the adult Jackson fetishizes the notion of childhood as a place of freedom,<sup>23</sup> he does so in spite of (or perhaps exacerbated by) his own experiences, so convincingly recalled and analyzed here in *Moonwalk*.

I remember lots of times when I felt the song should be sung one way and the producers felt it should be sung another way. But for a long time I was very obedient and wouldn't say anything about it. Finally it reached a point where I got fed up with being told exactly how to sing. This was in 1972 when I was fourteen years old, around the time of the song "Lookin' Through the Windows." They wanted me to sing a certain way, and I knew they were wrong. No matter what age you are, if you have it and you know it, then people should listen to you. I was furious with our producers and very upset. So I called Berry Gordy and complained. I said that they had always told me how to sing, and I had agreed all this time, but now they were getting too . . . mechanical.

So he came into the studio and told them to let me do what I wanted to do. I think he told them to let me be more free or something. And after that, I started adding a lot of vocal twists that they really ended up loving. I'd do a lot of ad-libbing, like twisting words and adding some edge to them.<sup>24</sup>

The very aspects of what I've identified as Jackson's transgender and trans-age sound come out of this kiln of control and surveillance of freedom as a child. Despite these struggles for expressive power—ones that echo Stevie Wonder's similar struggles for creative freedom, discussed in chapter 2, one can hear in "Lookin' Through the Windows" Jackson's increasing confidence, handling with verve a sophisticated arrangement that moves from Latin to rock to jazz scat. He sings in a high, clear-as-chimes voice, enunciating the lyrics with intentionality. Jackson carries the song not only with his polychromatic twists of the melody but in his kicky riding of the modified Afro-Cuban beat, hesitating just a bit before



sliding into the downbeat, punctuated by the rasp of the guiro and his brothers' rapid-fire backup. As the song opens to the chorus, Jackson's falsetto rises with the upsweep of strings, reassuring the listener with conviction, "Don't you worry, 'cause I'm gonna stay / right by your side," then settles into a relaxed scat. Jackson's rendering of "Lookin' Through the Windows," borrowing from adult contemporary and Latin Jazz stylistics, is a long way from bubblegum rock. This more sophisticated musical range on the *Looking Through Windows* album is accompanied by more restrained art direction on the album cover, featuring muted colors and fashions, and an unsmiling photo of Michael sporting a worldly cravat. Yet the song still makes use of the vocal and stylistic pliability and range of Jackson's "young" voice.

### Queer World Making in the Post-Soul Era: *Killer of Sheep, Crooklyn, "Ben"*

The state of childhood is, in some ways, a state of having to be extremely aware of one's audience—this is only exacerbated in the life of a professional artist. In his own coming of age, Jackson embraces the space of art/performance as a place to resist, and to create outside of these perimeters of mimicry. Of course, the script of the child star that Michael Jackson experienced is also unlike one in any other era. In that period, from 1969, to the release of *Off the Wall* in 1980, celebrities like Jackson encountered an expanded circulation of the star text, new possibilities for synergistic multimedia advertising—including the first teen magazine marketed to young black people, Cynthia Fuchs's *Right On!*—and unprecedented possibilities of financial freedom. As someone who posted *Right On!* on her bedroom walls, I can attest to the ways that these magazines made the star in his full visual glory a part of everyday life for audiences, a part of private as well as public space, in a way that would only be pushed further with the advent of MTV and the premier of the video for "Billie Jean" there in 1983, the first song to break MTV's unofficial color barrier. This experience of the black child star was further vexed by the contradictions between a narrative of possibility and freedom and the realities of the hardscrabble life that the working-class Jacksons lived at the beginning of Michael's career, and which shaped their tough work ethic. It was also complicated by the contradictions between the discourse of "black is beautiful" and the fact that young Jackson was teased

in his family for his nose and lips. In this pre-BET era, there may have been pockets where the black body beautiful was recognized and praised (those two hours on Saturday mornings with *Soul Train* and Afro-Sheen commercials), but in general, racism and colorism still commanded the airwaves, schools, neighborhoods, and families.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than demonstrating that childhood is supposedly free of the constraints of the body as it was particularly raced and gendered in the period, Jackson demonstrates a consciousness of the body that we might link to a Post-Soul state of black childhood. We see this awareness in one of Jackson's memories of the shift from childhood to adolescence, one particularly painful under the eye of celebrity.

People who didn't know me would come into a room expecting to be introduced to cute little Michael Jackson and they'd walk right past me. I would say, "I'm Michael," and they would look doubtful. . . . Everyone had called me cute for a long time, but along with all the other changes, my skin broke out in a terrible case of acne. . . . I got very shy and embarrassed to meet people because my complexion was so bad. It really seemed that the more I looked in the mirror, the worse my pimples got. My appearance began to depress me. . . . The effect on me was so bad that it messed up my whole personality. I couldn't look at people when I talked to them. I'd look down, or away. I felt I didn't have anything to be proud of and I didn't even want to go out. I didn't do anything.<sup>26</sup>

Jackson demonstrates the ways that kids know, learn, and sometimes stretch the vocabularies of gender, sexuality, and race in performance, and he renders it to great acclaim. This ability to master these tools of communication and improvisation will ultimately provide him with a space of creation, joy, and to some extent freedom, though he acknowledges, too, that some of these lessons will come with pain—linked, in some ways, to the public experience of blackness, gender, and sexuality.

In Jackson's implicit and explicit exploration of his own very public sexualization (in his autobiography, *Moonwalk*, in interviews, and in the performances of the songs themselves), we might see a sharpened example of the potential for queer world making that we see black children practicing in this era, born out of struggle. Post-Soul has meant being caught in between, regardless of class. Post-Soul children were the canaries in the coal mine, the first generation to live out a still imperfectly

integrated life, sometimes being the first black kids on their block, moving between black homes and neighborhoods to white schools, sometimes lying about one's address to be there, code switching all the way, sometimes only traveling out of the world of blackness through popular culture. And sometimes learning how to be authentically black through the messages of popular culture: *Good Times*, *What's Happening*, *Soul Train*, and later *MTV Raps*.<sup>27</sup> These lessons were not just for privileged kids who lived in white towns or suburbs. We all were taught and re-taught the rules of black cool through popular culture, whatever else was happening in our own neighborhoods. Members of the first generation of children after *Loving v. Virginia*, in 1968, Post-Soul kids might have integrated families, integrated friendship circles. And yet, even in these discourses of "newness," we are inheritors of older ideas of racialized, class, sexual, and gendered subjectivity.

In response, we might think of the ways that black children have found routes of escape and resistance through the bending of the rules of gender performance—through the ways they see, hear, and bodily interpret music. This is portrayed poignantly in two black-made films, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994). In *Killer of Sheep*, we watch children who navigate the violent and often economically bleak world they've inherited from adults, including their parents, through music. In one scene, a little girl, listed in the credits only as "Stan's Daughter" sings along to Earth, Wind and Fire's "Reasons" as her mother prepares for her father's return from the night shift at a Los Angeles meat-packing center. The child apparently understands neither the lyrics of the song, which talk about the failure of a relationship, or her own parents' struggles. But she absorbs the heart of lessons of the circumstances around her, despite their hugeness (including poverty and marital strife). We watch Stan's Daughter sing along with the Earth, Wind and Fire album to her white doll, harnessing in her child's way Earth, Wind and Fire's soulful, emotive, sonic expressiveness but using Post-Soul's off-center strategies. She might not get all of the words—indeed, she seems to be making up her own language—but she has the rhythms, even the hand motions, and stares lovingly into the doll's face, crooning to her. The child has been left alone to play in this room, and the doll is all she's got. But somewhere in the performance, the normativity of the love song gets disrupted. The "reasons" that we're here, as the song says, are not so clear. Stan's Daughter's performance with the doll shifts from mother to lover to microphone; she holds the doll close and

away, lifts her arms as the music soars in imitation of live performances of soul crooners. Stan's Daughter is caught in play where the meaning of the performance of a love song changes shape with her imagination. This small moment of lightness and feeling is a brief respite in a film where most of the characters have learned to deaden their emotions: children having a rock fight must learn to mask their pain; a father, working in a meat-processing plant, must stifle his revulsion and weariness; a mother stares at her reflection in the silver lid of a pan, longing and silent.

Likewise, we see tactics of queer world making through music in Joie Lee's semiautobiographical screenplay for *Crooklyn*, directed by her brother Spike Lee. Joie Lee explores black girlhood in the 1970s through her character, Jade. We watch Jade's tactics of childhood identity making, including imitation, obsession, reterritorializing, humor, and revenge to maintain what we might call the "queer time" of childhood, even as the meanings of the larger world threaten to encroach. Lee uses the film's soundtrack to mark moments of Jade's learning and resistance through music—here, not only as a performer but also as one who performs and understands what's otherwise unspoken through music. Through Jade's eyes, we experience the in-between state of many black middle-class people in the mid- to late 1970s. Her parents, clearly shaped by the Black Art Movement in their vocations and politics, are a schoolteacher and a musician; they struggle to maintain their own brownstone in Brooklyn, and sometimes the electricity gets turned off, or they have to resort to food stamps. As in other Spike Lee films, Jade's neighborhood includes blacks, Latinos, and ethnically marked whites, in not quite peaceful coexistence. Joie Lee also shows Jade trying to make sense of multiple versions of black femininity: her fiery, bohemian mother; the prim churchgoing aunt (who encourages wearing a bra to bed); neighbors and friends. In a household of boys, Jade watches her own body, too, at one point stuffing her shirt with tissue to fill a new bra. In one scene, Jade is at the local bodega, buying penny candy. A sight she doesn't seem to fully understand arrests her: an unusually tall, unusually glamorous woman (played by RuPaul) flirting with the store owner. The scene slows down as Jade watches RuPaul dance provocatively with the man to Joe Cuba's Soul-Latin fusion classic "El Pito – I'll Never Go Back to Georgia." Jade is wide-eyed and open-mouthed, absorbing it all: the look of pleasure on the faces of the two dancers, RuPaul's artfully gyrating hips and long arms weaving under, over, and around the man's body, two lovers, brown and black, stealing a moment of pleasure between the aisles to this song, a hybrid of African American and Afro-Cuban Soul. The adults shoo her away. But later

Jade reenacts the scene for her brothers, attempting RuPaul's gyrations and repeating the only words from the conversation that stick, "I keeps my panties clean." Jade's access to the meanings of the dance might be limited, but she gets the heart of the moment, picking up on RuPaul's rhythms, voice, and the body language—incorporating "RuPaul's" queer performance of femininity into her own roster of feminine selves.

Musical performance, then becomes a way for young black performers to flip the scripts of gender, as well as age. In his performance of "Ben," recorded at age fourteen, Michael Jackson gives a heartfelt performance of longing and empathy. The song's melancholy melody and instrumental style, arpeggio guitar, and piano chords over swelling strings, sound something like a 1950s song of star-crossed love—here, an undeniably male someone (if only a rat). And Jackson's voice, singular, unmixed, tremulous with emotion, might be drawing from the pared-down and politicized style of folk. This is a lonely song. (As if to emphasize this loneliness, on an *American Bandstand* performance of it, Jackson stands alone, suspended in space on a neon-red cube, surrounded only by starlight.) But there is danger and also defiance in a voice so willing to stand alone, wearing its heart on its sleeve. And we are reminded that this is the soundtrack to a horror film, in which the sensitive boy hero works with telepathic rats to wreak revenge on their less sensitive human counterparts. Perhaps, in that heartfelt promise that "you" will never be alone, in Michael's defense of his object of love, we might hear not only passion but protest on the behalf of forbidden friendships. As the song swells to its crescendo, and Jackson sings at full voice, "They don't see you as I do," the song moves from loneliness to rage. There is, then, perhaps, the suggestion of very barely contained revolution against the unnamed "they," the possibility of explosion. Jackson swings the 4/4 rhythm of the line, "I wish they would try to," calling out the haters, before moving to that last line, "I'm sure they'd think again / if they had a friend like Ben." Jackson caresses the words "like Ben," trading back and forth with the background voices, extending and sustaining that "n" for four more beats, until he gives one last mellismatic "like Ben"—a sigh, really, a moment of sheer beauty, a pleasure that will help us move on, leave this place, find another, better one. The song reveals and transforms the darker feelings of powerlessness and yearning into the potential for empathy, rebellion, and flight.

In "Michael," his retrospective essay on Michael Jackson, published a few weeks after Jackson's death in *New York Review of Books*, Hilton Als describes the ways that Jackson's vocal and dance performances, caught

between male and female, adult and child, provided important metaphors for his audience—particularly queer audiences—for what could not be said. He includes his own childhood memory of Jackson’s performance of “Ben,” just a fleeting wisp of the song heard coming from the open door of a neighborhood gay bar, which become symbolic of his own yearning.

The female elders tell us what to look out for. Staring straight ahead, they usher us past the Starlight lounge, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, and whisk us across the street as soon as they see “one of them faggots” emerge from the neon-lit bar. This one—he’s brown-skinned, like nearly every one else in that neighborhood, and skinny—has a female friend in tow, for appearances must be kept up. And as the couple run off in search of another pack of cigarettes, the bar’s door closes slowly behind them, but not before we children hear, above the martini-fed laughter, a single voice, high and plaintive: Michael Jackson’s.<sup>28</sup>

What the female elders’ understood, and what Als remembers, is the power and dangerousness of Jackson’s ability to make longing speak, and his ability to make it move across contexts and desires, rubbing up against constraint. Perhaps “Ben’s” queer following would not have missed the fact that Michael Jackson is throwing a bit of shade in his rendering of those last lines of that song. Perhaps, too, in that last sigh, Jackson leaves open the possibility for something else—the presence of an insistent beauty—and the potential for a queer future not yet fully articulable. José Esteban Muñoz theorizes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”<sup>29</sup> This sense of possibility, even in a mournful song like this one, explains why Jackson’s voice could and *has* had such an impact on young and queer listeners, shaping memory, and importantly, leaving room for that something else on the horizon.

### CODA: “Black or White”

When Michael Jackson and his brothers were made into a Saturday morning cartoon, which ran from 1971 to 1973, it was a sign of their

wide appeal and success, and an early example of Jackson's ability to enter and then expand black male identity through the realm of the imagination, the gateway of childhood. Jackson says in his autobiography, *Moonwalk*, that he loved being a cartoon, and in the book's final pages we see Michael's doodles of his own face, nose and lips shrinking until he becomes an androgynous pixie. The most obvious effect of becoming a cartoon would be that you could reinvent your body: skin smoothed, noses, still wide, made piggish and impish, 'fros a simple flower of fluff, movements, always smooth—a transformation that would seem to echo some of Jackson's later real-life bodily experiments. Cartoons also put you out of the real time of the everyday and into the space of fantasy, legislated by the music itself. In *The Jackson 5* Saturday morning cartoon, even if the plots loosely followed the showtime adventures of the Jackson 5—their discovery by Berry Gordy, or their first trip to London—there was always that moment toward the end when a song would be performed, and the bodies and voices of the group would be put into a transitional space created by the songs themselves. The song might begin onstage, with the brothers assembled with their instruments, but then there might be a psychedelic shower of flowers, or patterns of stripes and rainbows. Events from the day would be restructured to fit the rhythm of the song, following their own dreamlike logic. In the hands of producers Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass, Michael Jackson and his brothers shift and move and dance; eyes become simplified beacons of brightness. It is in the realm of make-believe—the idealized realm of childhood—that one might most easily escape, or create one's own logic of living in one's body.

It is this drama of transformation and escape that Jackson restages and relives repeatedly in his career, as an adult.<sup>30</sup> The possibility of escaping one's body or at least reinventing its logic through technology helps Jackson perform the yearnings that his voice has always betrayed, from those Rankin and Bass cartoons of the early 1970s to his zombification in *Thriller* to the infamous "Panther" version of "Black and White" to his own experiments of the flesh, altering skin and muscle, hair and bone. This ability to explore the desire to transform becomes heightened as Jackson reaches megastardom, and as video on TV and the Internet becomes the form of circulation of the star in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Even *This Is It*, the posthumous documentary chronicling Jackson's training and production of what was meant to be his next tour, exposes the ways that technology allows Jackson to enhance, and mystify, his already overwhelming vocal and dancing talent—precisely by letting us see the seams of his stage transformations.

For example, in the 1991 video for “Black or White” Jackson embraces the transformative power of the music video, highlighting the possibilities it brings for travel and the possession of new bodies and new selves, male and female, black and white, animal and cartoon. He does so by combining rage with humor and a little braggadocio.

The extended or “Panther” version of “Black or White” is marked by the occupation of multiple worlds—a sense of geographic and technical mastery in ways that demonstrate Jackson’s heightened access to an increasingly larger public through voice, dance, and Hollywood magic. It proclaims Jackson’s power to inhabit the imagination of “America”—of young white boys and typical suburban homes (typified by *Cheers*’s George Wendt and *Home Alone*’s Macaulay Culkin). The video opens in an unnamed white suburban village. Culkin is loudly rocking out, jumping on his bed alone in his room, outfitted with Michael Jackson poster and huge speakers, while his tabloid-reading parents become increasingly angry. Wendt as the White Father is fairly inarticulate in his rage, a blustering, red-faced, cartoonish revision, perhaps, of the more daunting Joseph Jackson. He screams at his son, “You’re wasting your time with this garbage!” And what “garbage” is it? The power of music, and especially musical performances that cross cultures (black and beyond black, the song wants to suggest), to break things up. The power of guitar, and one hand glove and sunglasses. The power of black style. The power of rebellion. The boy, in typical “Bart Simpson” fashion, tells his parents to “eat this”; wiping his pouty signature Culkin lips with his single leather glove, he puts on sunglasses and literally blasts his father to Africa with the power of a huge stereo speaker. Little Michael Jackson’s loneliness in “Ben” becomes Culkin’s rage, now transferable, now universalized. At the same time, in this ability to project his story onto one of white suburbia, the video demonstrates Michael Jackson’s power to extend himself beyond safe spaces, beyond home, to be, in fact, like Eartha Kitt, placeless in his voice and movements.

This opening sequence explicitly pays homage to Michael Jackson’s power as a megastar, and black music’s entry into white suburban spaces with the power to transform those spaces. It continues and updates the narrative of rock and roll begun with Chuck Berry and Elvis and Little Richard and then taken up by little Michael in “Who’s Lovin’ You” and “ABC”—to move white bodies, to shake them into rebellion, to transform them. But in the video, Jackson is not just one of many performers; he becomes the icon of such transformation, bigger than any one indi-



vidual. In the video, a name on a T-shirt and a barely glanced at poster are enough to signal his power. A quick allusion to Jackson here is imagined powerful enough to blow a hole in the wall, to expose and reverse the voodoo of a white father's secret racist thoughts: instead of sending Jackson back to Africa, the father is sent there, complete with his Archie Bunker-style easy chair.

After this opening sequence, the song "Black or White" properly begins and shifts the video from its initial story of white suburban racial transgression to an argument for color transcendence that at the same time demonstrates global and technological mastery. As the lyrics argue for not spending one's life "being a color," Jackson joins and then borrows from a variety of international and multiethnic/multiracial dancers. Each set of dancers is iconographic, but nonspecific in terms of particular performer, region, and even time. First, Jackson joins some African hunters in the bush, then a female Thai classical dancer, followed by male and female Native American hoop dancers; he meets an Indian woman dancing in the middle of a busy intersection, and then joins a line of Disneyed Russian male folk dancers. In these moments, Jackson is "himself" but also imitative, borrowing from the dancers around him. And the international dancers in turn seem to uncannily mirror Jackson's signature moves, integrating them into their own traditions' dance moves. Jackson's play with the dancers seems to offer the contradictory message of "universalism" and the transnational influence and improvisational power of black style. A Native American dancer flips his hair in a manner à la Jackson as the ghoul in "Thriller." The Indian's dancer's flirtatious neck isolations might remind us of Jackson's neck pops in "Bad." If, in "Who's Lovin' You," Jackson demonstrates his ability to become and then transform the soul man tradition, in this sequence, he moves transnationally, blurring the lines between who is imitating whom—particularly for a young generation of MTV watchers who may not have ever seen these dance styles before. Jackson attempts to both prove himself to be beyond the politics of ethnic and national authenticity—a theme that will be important to the trajectory of his music for the rest of his career—and demonstrate his own influence transculturally. Jackson's yearning to triumph over racial and gendered limits comes to a pinnacle in the ingenious morphing sequence toward the conclusion of the song (directed by Jamie Dixon of Pacific Data Images), where models morph and meld into one another, phenotypes shifting and blurring across multiracial, multigender, and amazingly wholesome and good-looking bodies: from

a bouncy blonde white woman to a black man sporting well-sculpted dreadlocks.

Tonally, video then takes an abrupt shift into fierceness. The camera backs up, and we see, among the mostly white directors and technical people, among abandoned cameras and lights, a black panther. The panther escapes down the stairs with elegance and stealth, and then, in a nighttime abandoned alley, morphs into a crouching Jackson. Jackson's dancing shifts from Fred Astaire's nattiness to a sensual, seemingly abandoned improvisation, where he seems almost lost in feeling. Echoing the video's ongoing motif of freedom and constraint, color blindness and historical sensitivity, Jackson's clothing is a combination of loose and tight—the spangled glove transposed into what looks like a laced wrist guard; the pants, black stovepipes, tight with knee pads, and then loose; flowing black overshirt, which, along with his now flowing hair, gets caught in the foggy wind.

Jackson's dance heats into a frenzy of anger, fed by sensual circlings of his pelvis. This slow heat builds into the release of rage, so that he howls, and breaks windows marked with multiple racist sayings. (On the version contained on the Jackson compilation video, *HIStory*, the windows that Jackson breaks are marked with graffiti, including “Nigger Go Home” and “No Wetbacks.” Notably, though, on the version of the video that aired on MTV, the video's antiracist messages were erased from the footage, so that Jackson's rebellion loses its explicitly political edge.) As the song builds, he no longer needs the trash can or other objects: his screams themselves now have the power to break things. He watches with approval, and a bit of surprise, as one howl makes a florescent hotel sign explode in beautiful sparks, like a Fourth of July display. Jackson rips his shirt, exposing delicate light brown chest and bared arms. Satisfied, Jackson returns again to the leopard body and slinks out into the night.

If a running theme of Post-Soul identity making is the negotiation of post-civil-rights integrationist politics, Jackson insists in this video that the project of assimilation and acceptance (on MTV and elsewhere) must also accommodate his rage and his insistence on being a transformational racial, gendered, and sexual subject.<sup>31</sup> As Jackson shifts from his message of colorblindness in the first half of the video, to animalized black masculinity, in the guise of a leopard, back to Jackson again, this time hand on crotch, his feet madly stamping out a new pattern of assertiveness, he lets out that awkward, if rough-voiced howl. While much

has been made of the accelerated machismo of this video and especially of Jackson's repeated grabbing and caressing of his crotch, I have been most haunted by this cry, and what it refuses to articulate as a full explanation. This moment is an example of where Jackson moves from either/or, and both/and, to refusal. Here, he insists on the importance of the in-between as a space of creation. Here, he illustrates this space of refusal is also a space of movement made literal by morphing technology: trans-racial, transhistorical, transgenerational, transformational.