

Owning the Dance

Michael Jackson's Movement Signature

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Senior Seminar in Dance
Fall 2011
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Acknowledgments

Though not formally cited, I am indebted to a number of people who have talked with me about Michael Jackson and shared their thoughts, suggested sources, asked tricky questions, and generally put me on track. Thanks especially to Paul Scolieri, Kimberly Rubin, Michele Mariotti, and Adrian Calderon III.

I am also deeply grateful to Reece Livingstone, one of the zombies in the original *Thriller*, and to Bonnie Erickson, Director of Educational Programming at the Broadway Dance Center, for taking the time to do interviews and pass on their wonderful insights.

I. Introduction

In the hours following the announcement of Michael Jackson's death, Mashable Social Media reported that an unprecedented thirty percent of the total tweets on Twitter were about Jackson—and that was a “conservative estimate.”¹ Tributes to Jackson came from every corner of the world, as far as the Philippines and as close as his home in Gary, Indiana, each celebrating Jackson's legacy as a performer, and, of course, as a dancer.² Of the many figures who have shaped the landscape of the contemporary dance world, very few have had the global, social, and political impact of Michael Jackson. He defined the pop genre and redefined music videos, and his controversial personal life remained an enigma to his death. At the heart, Jackson was an unparalleled performer whose fame went far beyond any one field. As a performing artist and a dancer, he continues to enchant the public. His moves, like the moonwalk, are legendary, despite the fact that he did not invent the vast majority of them. Nevertheless, it is impossible to think of the moonwalk without picturing Jackson performing it, or thinking of Jackson without seeing the moonwalk. Today, those moves and the way Jackson performed them make up what is known as “Michael Jackson's style,” one that has inspired millions around the globe to imitate it.

Every individual has a pattern of non-verbal communication that is exclusively his own and constitutes his personal movement “signature.” In the field of dance, the idea of a choreographer having a signature style is common vocabulary and has been casually used in reference to choreographers and dancers since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Théophile Gautier wrote in 1834 of Fanny Elssler, the celebrated Romantic ballerina, that her dancing “has

a character all its own that sets her apart from other ballerinas.”³ Here, the idea of a “movement signature” is used to refer to a dancer whose style is so particular that it comes to be acknowledged as uniquely her own. In this paper, I will use a similar definition, but including the stipulation that something in the dancer’s work, whether the movement itself or how it is presented, is new or has not yet been seen before.

Every choreographer has his signature, but the cases that interest me here are those who come to be household names in association with their signature, such as George Balanchine or Martha Graham. This phenomenon is described in this paper as “ownership,” which is the idea that it is not enough for a choreographer/performer simply to have a movement signature, but that the signature is universally acknowledged as belonging to that person. The telltale sign of this is when the average person can identify the dancer after only seeing one movement. In Jackson’s case, one could simply perform the moonwalk, and the viewer will immediately make the association back to Jackson.

Jackson is particularly interesting as a case study, precisely for the fact that he did not create the movements themselves, yet his style is unanimously regarded as belonging to him. To understand the process that led to this ownership, one must first understand the movement signature as an abstract concept: a specific combination of movements and dynamics that come about via conscious creation—the result of artistic choices and rehearsal—and the unconscious expression of the artist’s personal psychology. This latter is a complex idea that can take form in many ways, but in general terms, it refers to experiences that may shape how the artist goes about making and performing movement. Once the vocabulary of the signature is established, the process of ownership can be addressed. In Jackson’s case, this begins with the study of the global impact of his style and the fact that it can be found and is popular in all corners of the world. The

results of these two studies allow the researcher to track the trajectory of the signature to the present day, where Jackson has such complete ownership that it is impossible to dance the moves without evoking the artist.

Following the above research plan, the development of Michael Jackson's movement signature can be traced through evolution of his style, from his inspirations to his professional and personal career paths, as well as the impact of his psychological makeup on the way he approached dance. His movement signature was the manifestation of his neurotic perfectionism and self-perceived isolation, in conjunction with the unequaled clarity of his movement and the brilliant spark that was his stage presence. The commercial distribution of Jackson as a complete entertainment package, the continuity of his style throughout his career, the accessibility of his art, and his unique talent as a dancer and as a performer inextricably linked the movement signature to the man.

A. Methodology

While Michael Jackson is certainly not a novel subject for study, there has been surprisingly little written on his movement signature. Therefore, I have had to piece together my research. I wanted to separate myself as much as possible from sensationalist journalism and speculation about the facts of Jackson's personal life yet suspected from the start that it was essential that I understand the role his personality played in creating his signature. As such, I had to be very careful in what I chose as sources and used exclusively the information that I saw as linked to Jackson as an artist and a performer, eschewing any questions of morality so often connected with discussion of Jackson.

In this quest, I drew almost exclusively from the biography *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* by J. Randy Taraborrelli, and Michael Jackson's only autobiography, *Moonwalk*, written in 1988. I cite the Taraborrelli biography heavily, except for those parts in which the author cites *Moonwalk*, finding it to be extensively and exhaustively researched and reliably documented. In general, most written sources of Jackson, especially biographies, focus primarily on his personal life and musical career, but refer to his work as a dancer simply because it is impossible to separate the man from his dance. Taraborrelli too writes mainly on Jackson's life and music, but occasionally provides specific references to Jackson's dancing. I used my best judgment in sifting through these mentions, looking for general trends or suggestions of what Jackson was trying to accomplish in creating his style. Because what in Jackson's life influenced his dancing the most has never been explicitly analyzed, I had to infer these instances as best as possible from my reading, choosing what I saw as important remarkable experiences and innate tendencies.⁴

Jackson's autobiography was written at the height of his performing career and thus has no mention of the more controversial incidents of Jackson's life. *Moonwalk* skims over certain tense experiences and relationships present in the Taraborrelli biography, which suggests that the autobiography was heavily edited. At the very least, Jackson chose, for whatever reason, to not be perfectly honest. Despite this, Jackson's tone clearly comes through in the writing and implies to me that he was the primary author. I found the work to be primarily useful in explaining his influences, especially his impressions of his Jackson 5 days in the 1970s, but he does not often discuss his own dancing. He also describes his method of working, which I found to be instructive in understanding what in the signature could be a result of conscious creation. The

autobiography does, however, only present Jackson's personal opinion, and therefore I often turned to the Taraborrelli biography for a more complete picture.

In order to articulate Jackson's specific signature, I first had to discover a way of discussing movement in clear terms. I am currently studying Laban Movement Analysis, a system outlined by Rudolf Laban in the 1940s, but I am not fluent enough in the system's vocabulary to be able to conduct an analysis based on it, aside from using some of its basic vocabulary in thinking about the movement.⁵ My overall guidebook was an article by Martha Davis called "Hitler's Movement Signature." Although it focuses on the spoken word and not dance, it addresses the "choreography" of Hitler's motions in his speeches and more importantly, outlines a system of analysis based on observation, which I have used here.⁶ This system revolves around the recognition of patterns in very short, complex sequences taken from one characteristic example. I watched as many music videos as possible to get a large sample of movement from which to choose, as well as filmed concert material and live performances, such as Jackson's performance at the 1993 Super Bowl and the 1995 Video Music Awards. In the end, I decided to focus in particular on short sequences from Jackson's performance of *Billie Jean* at the Motown twenty-fifth anniversary concert in 1983 and the 1987 music video *Smooth Criminal*. Following the progression laid out in the Davis article, I watched each sequence several times, and gradually began to note details and patterns that, in conjunction with my readings, seemed to contribute to the overall Jackson signature. Video readings were thus my second main source.

In some cases, I found I could best conceptualize what the signature was by studying what it wasn't, that is, studying the movement of other dancers in direct comparison with Jackson himself. I watched as many videos as possible of people dancing his moves, from the

most amateur to professional imitators, in order to reach a consensus on what in particular they were borrowing from the signature and how it differed from Jackson's own movement, thus gaining clues on what made it essentially "Michael Jackson's." Much of this material I found on YouTube, which, while not a scholarly website, was very useful in giving a large sample size of imitators from a wide variety of sources. Most helpful was studying the dance breaks in Jackson's music videos and closely studying the backup dancers. For this, I extensively studied sequences from *Smooth Criminal* and *The Way You Make Me Feel* (1987). Again drawing on Davis' analytical methodology, I watched each sequence until I was able to detect the smallest differences in the movement.

B. Background

The elucidation of movement signatures demands an entirely new vocabulary in order to discuss the movement in and of itself, which is perhaps the reason it is so new as a field of research; dance historians and analysts have simply lacked the terminology required to articulate movement in language. The earliest attempt to create a system of notation was commissioned by King Louis XIV of France with the idea of preserving dances.⁷ The system was used during the first half of the eighteenth century, but it did not provide a concrete basis for comparing movement on a complex level.

One of the most comprehensive systems of movement analysis to date was developed by Rudolf Laban, first articulated in 1928 in his book *Grundprinzipien der Bewegungsschrift* (Fundamental Principles of Movement Notation).⁸ Using four basic categories of movement—Space, Body, Effort, and Shape—Laban's system "encompasses the analysis of both quantitative features of movement (that is, what body part moves in which direction and with what timing)

and qualitative features (that is, with what dynamics).”⁹ Called Laban Movement Analysis (hereafter LMA), the system is especially useful because it does not rely on music or outside references, seeking to explain the movement itself as a separate entity. A movement signature in LMA refers to the each individual’s particular use of the four basic categories. Because movement is such a complex phenomenon, no movement analysis system is infallible, as with any system of analysis. The context of a movement is extremely important to understanding its significance, and its interpretation depends on the observer. However, what I have taken from my studies of LMA is the idea that the movements, in themselves and exclusively within their own framework, can be analyzed for meaning.

II. From the Jackson 5 to the King of Pop

A. Watching from the Wings: Jackson’s Inspirations

Michael Jackson’s entire childhood life was fused with the sensational group The Jackson 5 and was extremely influential on his dancing, one reason being his constant exposure to already-established artists. Jackson’s three older brothers, Jermaine, Tito, and Jackie, were already working as a singing group when their younger brothers, Michael and Marlon, joined them in 1962. Michael was five years old at the time. Under the harsh tutelage of their father, Joseph, the group began to attract attention by performing in talent competitions and clubs around their home in Gary, Indiana, later branching out and going as far as Chicago. By the time Jackson was eight, the self-titled Jackson 5 were performing in variety shows on the “chitlin’ (as in chitterling) circuit: two-thousand-seat theatres in downtown, inner-city areas,” mainly playing to African American audiences.¹⁰ During these shows, Jackson received what he called his

“education,” standing in the wings to watch the top performers onstage, taking note of “every step, every move, every twist, every turn, every grind, every emotion, every light move.”¹¹

According to Taraborrelli, Jackson was soon repeating routines and “*schtick*” (also known as showboating) from the top performers on the same program as the Jackson 5.¹² Jackson greatly admired the tap dancer James Brown and added Brown’s spins, splits, and slides to his movement vocabulary. On how to “*work* an audience,” Jackson said he “might have learned more from watching Jackie Wilson than from anyone or anything else.”¹³ He revered Fred Astaire, to whom he dedicated his autobiography, as one of the greatest showmen of his time.¹⁴ Jackson was also strongly influenced by the woman who supposedly “discovered” the group at Motown, Diana Ross.¹⁵ Ross, with whom Jackson briefly lived, exposed him, for the first time, to life outside the rehearsal room, and especially to art. Jackson responded with his undying affection and loyalty, remarking in *Moonwalk*, “I’m crazy about her. She was my mother, my lover, and my sister all combined in one amazing person.”¹⁶ Taraborrelli adds, “Michael got not only a sense of style, but [also] an appreciation of power” from Ross, and “he’d observed how people reacted to her when she walked into a room. She was revered...He liked that.”¹⁷ As a solo performer later, Jackson would aspire to command that same attention and power.

Jackson’s well-documented perfectionism was a quality he picked up from his father, Joseph Jackson, and Berry Gordy, Producer and Founder of the Motown recording label. Joseph drove his sons constantly. In his autobiography, Michael recalls the rigors of their rehearsal schedule, from right after school to very late at night, but adds that this instilled a professionalism and discipline absolutely essential to the success of the Jackson 5.¹⁸ In a different way, Gordy too was a perfectionist. When cutting the tracks for the Jackson 5’s records, Gordy demanded that a track be cut again and again until it was exactly right. Jackson was not

unaware of the lessons he could learn from this and remarked, “I observed every moment of the sessions where Berry was present and never forgot what I learned. To this day I use the same principles.”¹⁹ Exposed to such disciplined professionalism from the time he was a very small child, Jackson became the same demanding perfectionist as an artist.

B. Fame and Isolation: Jackson's Psychological Influences

As one of the youngest members of the Jackson 5, Jackson was exposed to fame and all its caveats at an early age, creating a lasting—and sometimes damaging—impression on him that was later manifested as a clear divide between Jackson the person and Jackson the artist. By 1970, the Jackson 5 was so popular that mobs of fans swarmed them at performances and at hotels, the brothers only barely escaping with the help of the police. Jermaine Jackson reflected that “Michael was scared to death” by this, but it remained a constant during the Jackson 5 tours.²⁰ Fans barricaded hotels, stormed the stage before the concert finished, and accosted the brothers at the airport. Jackson was still very young and was profoundly uncomfortable with these scenes, admitting that “being mobbed by near hysterical girls was one of the most terrifying experiences for me.”²¹ Jackson was much more sensitive to this phenomenon than his brothers, soon developing an impression of the outside world and the “normal people” as frightening and out of his control.²² On the stage, however, things were different because there Jackson felt he could control the entire outcome, i.e. fix what was wrong. As a solo artist, he demanded control over the entire production, or at least the appearance of control, a desire that he kept until the end of his life. The behind-the-scenes features of *This Is It*, a documentary about the creation of Jackson’s final and ultimately unperformed concert series in London for summer 2009, show Jackson involved in all areas of the production, from musical direction to special effects.²³ This perfectionist drive directly influenced his movement style.

Early on, Jackson was singled out from the larger group because of his talent as a dancer, singer, and performer. This isolation, later evolving into a deliberate separation, became a recurring theme in his life, allowing him to cultivate a consistent and singular artistic identity. From the very beginning, Jackson's singing and dancing ability, along with his stage presence, set him apart from his brothers. As much as Joseph Jackson tried to market the brothers as a group, unhappy with Michael being singled out as "better," there was no stopping it.²⁴ On the group's first national television appearance, Diana Ross introduced them as "Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5."²⁵ Motown soon began giving Jackson solo records and asking him to record solo tracks in the studio separately from his brothers. The brothers were good, but Jackson was a standout. Despite his love of performing, Jackson was uncomfortable with this isolation. According to his biographer, "being made to feel different...had a deep impact on Michael. He began to show signs of a deep insecurity, even inadequacy."²⁶ Already at the age of fourteen, Jackson was beginning to retreat from the world. His retreat would only get worse with the onset of acne as the cute little boy of the Jackson 5, whom people hardly recognized anymore, became a "gangly adolescent."²⁷ Jackson was so humiliated by his acne that he was unable even to look at people. He remarks in *Moonwalk* that he was "subconsciously scarred by this," even going so far as to claim, the "effect on me was so bad that it messed up my whole personality."²⁸ The divide between performance and real life grew: onstage, covered in makeup and washed in lights, Jackson was free, but offstage, he still had to deal with the face reflected in the mirror.²⁹ The acne vanished, but Jackson's insecurity, especially in relation to his image, remained. He was never truly satisfied with his appearance, always attempting to fix it with makeup, skin-bleaching creams, and plastic surgeries.³⁰ These constant modifications suggest that his image, and his control over it, was singularly important. This desire for control unconsciously

manifested itself in the complete control he maintained over his body and his obsession with the perfect realization of his steps.

However isolated Jackson may have felt as a child and a teenager, he felt the need to prove himself different from his family, both physically and artistically. He had long wanted to win his independence from his father, Joseph Jackson, due to the abuse he inflicted on Michael in rehearsals. Joseph “believed in the value and impact of brute force as a disciplinary tool,” and while his relentless pushing brought the Jackson 5 to stardom, his physical abuse of Michael terrorized the young boy, who once said in an interview that merely the thought of his father was enough to make him vomit.³¹ By 1979, when he was nineteen years old, Jackson was building his own business team, and by 1983, with his solo career already thriving, he had severed all remaining professional ties with his father, ties that, in many ways, also connected Michael with his brothers. This second separation had been brewing for some time; as early as 1978, Jackson felt limited by being part of a group, feeling as though he had “stopped growing professionally.”³² After recording his first solo album and beginning to write his own music, Jackson was no longer interested in working with his brothers professionally. In fact, the brothers had to struggle to get Michael to join them for their 1984 reunion tour. As a teenager, Jackson was uncomfortable with being singled out, but now he actively hungered for it, having already admitted to his lawyer, John Branca, that he wanted to be the “biggest star in show business.”³³ It is not unreasonable to assume that his desire to be the best applied to his dancing as well.

These varied experiences indicate that there was a distinct split between Jackson the person and Jackson the performer. The performer was created as a reaction to the often traumatic experiences he had as an individual. Jackson developed, and harbored throughout his career, a constant drive to be better, especially with respect to his dancing. It seemed to those who worked

with him that his own dancing was never good enough for him.³⁴ He was even frustrated with his iconic performance of *Billie Jean* at the Motown twenty-fifth anniversary concert for the simple reason that he “didn’t stay on [his] toes as long as [he] wanted.”³⁵ As a result of this driving perfectionism, his movement signature featured pinpoint control and clarity in body and movement. The isolation of fame, talent, and insecurity gave the stage an almost mythical importance for Jackson. The stage, and performing, was where he felt—and looked—like he belonged. Jackson was certainly aware of this, remarking in an interview with Taraborrelli in 1978:

“When I’m not onstage, I’m different...I’m addicted to the stage. When I can’t get onto a stage in a long time, I have fits and get crazy. I start crying, and I act weird and freaked out...I start dancin’ ‘round the house...It’s like a part of me is missin’ and I gotta get it back, because if I don’t, I won’t be complete. So I gotta dance and I gotta sing...I have this craving. Onstage is the only place I’m comfortable. I’m not comfortable around...*normal* people. But when I get out onstage...whatever is happening in my life doesn’t matter...I am *unlimited* onstage. I’m number one. But when I’m off the stage...I’m not really...happy.”³⁶

Jackson said in his autobiography that he believed he was one of the loneliest people in the world, but that never seemed to matter onstage; there, he was safe and adored.³⁷ A huge part of that performing space was devoted to dance, and Jackson was utterly at home in his moves, one of the reasons he was the only who could perfectly perform his signature.

C. Learning the Moonwalk: Creating Jackson’s Movement

Throughout his career, Jackson worked with a number of choreographers and directors whom he held in high esteem and who helped him shape his ideas into clear movement. Jackson often asked people to work with him whose work he admired and thought would fit with his own vision. For example, he “had been so impressed with [John Landis’] horror-fantasy film *An*

American Werewolf in London that he employed Landis to repeat his directorial duties” on the *Thriller* video.³⁸ As for *Thriller*’s movement, Jackson knew what he wanted, but not how to make it, and for that, he turned to choreographer Michael Peters. In a 1999 interview with MTV, Jackson recalled that he was worried that monsters and zombies dancing would be “comical,” and said that he and Peters “collaborated and we both choreographed the piece and I thought it should start like that kind of thing and go into this jazzy kind of step, you know.”³⁹ With no formal dance training, Jackson clearly lacked the vocabulary to articulate his ideas, which Peters offered. This working relationship was similar for all Jackson’s videos and dances, and while credit is always given to the artistic team, Jackson’s name is attached as a collaborator.

It must be noted that Peters and the many other choreographers who worked with Jackson were creating dance specifically for him, dance that would fit a movement style already articulated in Jackson’s 1983 performance of *Billie Jean* at the Motown twenty-fifth anniversary concert. This was performed before the first of Jackson’s famous “short films,” and the choreography was Jackson’s, created by putting together various steps he had learned elsewhere and wanted to try. In his autobiography, Jackson describes his creation process: “The night before the taping, I still had no idea what I was going to do with my solo number. So I went down to the kitchen and played ‘Billie Jean’ . . . I pretty much stood there and let the song tell me what to do. I kind of let the dance create itself.”⁴⁰ As mentioned, the movement vocabulary Jackson drew upon in *Billie Jean* were not movements of his own invention, nor does he claim them to be. His most famous move, the moonwalk—which he publically debuted in this performance of *Billie Jean*—he credits as being “born as a break-dancing step” and that “these three kids taught it to me.”⁴¹ Taraborrelli more specifically tracks the movement to *Soul Train*, an American television program in the early 1980s. The movement was in fact called the

“backslide” and was taught to Jackson by the sixteen-year-old Geron ‘Casper’ Candidate and his friends.⁴² Candidate recalls being thrilled that Jackson was interested in learning the move and was proud to be the one to have taught him the step.⁴³ This seems to be the pervasive attitude of the choreographers and directors who worked with Jackson. They were more than happy to collaborate with Jackson, who certainly didn’t lack ideas but needed help translating them into comprehensive choreography within a dramatic framework.

III. “Nobody Dances Like MJ”: Michael Jackson’s Movement Signature

Simple enough in theory but extremely complex to articulate, the movement signature as a concept can be broken down into three complementary layers: the basic composition of movement, the physicality with which its performed, and finally the performer’s stage presence. The base layer is concerned with the movements themselves: that is, what is the body actually doing? At this point only the “what” of the movements is considered and not the “how.” In the case of Michael Jackson, this first layer is fairly simple, as his fundamental movement vocabulary (his signature moves) was remarkably limited. In the simplest terms, his movement is based upon intricate steps, mobility and separation of the torso, and expressive additions of the arms and hands. The movements are best described as pulses that travel through the body, arriving at another area and continuing the beat. Joan Acocella, journalist and dance critic for the *New Yorker*, cites Jackson’s sources of movement as break dancing, “hip-hop, sock hop, ‘Soul Train,’ disco, and jazz dance, plus a little tap and Charleston,” and defines his main moves to be “the gyrating hips, the bending knees (reversing from inward to outward), the pivoting feet (ditto), the one raised knee, the spins, and, above all, the rotated or raised heel, which is what he gets around on.”⁴⁴ Judith Hamera, Professor in Performance Studies at Texas A&M University,

tracks the history of the movements further, remarking that Jackson's "extensive use of what Andrea Kraut labels the classic Charleston 'monkey knees,' and his electric slides and standing struts, gesture back to Josephine Baker, the chitlin' circuit, and further to African American vernacular dance."⁴⁵ Not to be forgotten in Jackson's movement vocabulary is the famous moonwalk, crotch-grab, and the toe stand, as well as the countless "lovely, light-footed walks, struts, jumps, and runs" that Jackson incorporates constantly.⁴⁶ His choreography included countless other movements, but the basic vocabulary remained unchanged throughout his career.

The next layer is concerned with how the movement is produced: that is, the quality of the movements.⁴⁷ It is here that Jackson's movements gain their individuality. As Hamera points out, "it is not that [Jackson's] moves are difficult in and of themselves," and eloquently goes on to say that his dancing "is not a battle with technique that looks like a battle...or one in which the technique is so over matched by the performer that he makes the impossible look easy."⁴⁸ She suggests that Jackson's virtuosity lies in the precision of his movements, coupled with their speed and pacing.⁴⁹ In fact, the two qualities that writers refer to consistently as Jackson's most stunning qualities are his quickness and control; he adds in steps between the musical beats so swiftly they can scarcely be seen and yet maintains full control over his body—all while maintaining a consistent flow. Hamera calls the dance "liquid and percussive," Reece Livingstone "fluid yet disjointed," but either way, critics agree about the sharp attack of the movement that somehow manages to remain fluid.⁵⁰

One example of Jackson's speed and control are the opening movements of Jackson's performance of *Billie Jean* at the Motown twenty-fifth anniversary concert "Yesterday, Today, Forever." The movements have become well known, as Jackson often re-used them in later productions or live performances of *Billie Jean*. Here, I will focus only on the kick sequence,

which occurs directly after the opening pelvic pulses and roughly ten seconds after the music begins. Facing stage left, Jackson kicks the right leg (the “raised knee” move) in front of him and holds it up for a moment, then taps it with his hand, places it down and taps the ground once before pivoting the ankles twice, finishing with the body facing upstage and his weight settled into the right hip. During this time, the hands add separate embellishments, finishing with the index, pinky, and thumb fingers extended and pointing to the ground, the left arm extended and the right hand against his stomach. The whole sequence lasts barely two seconds. On the kick, the leg actually fully extends but does so quickly enough that one registers only the bent knee, raised and held at ninety degrees, demonstrating Jackson’s ability to fully complete each movement no matter the speed of the movement itself.⁵¹ One might suspect the embellishments and tapping to be improvised or added to regain balance, only Jackson repeats exactly the same sequence in the other direction. Every move is perfectly controlled, executed at blinding speed and with perfect musicality, characteristics that defined all his movements and played such a role in his signature.

Despite the rigid control, Jackson attacks each movement with intensity and commitment, which comes across as unmatched clarity and efficiency.⁵² The easiest way to see this is by comparing his dancing with that of his backup dancers, such as during the silhouette sequence of *The Way You Make Me Feel*. The phrase comes at the end of the music video (roughly one minute from the end depending on the source). It is the second full sequence of the dance break. Jackson is framed by four dancers, and they are only visible in silhouette. I will compare Jackson and the dancer on his left (the right from the viewer’s perspective.) The sequence begins with the body in profile stage left. The dancers jump forward with the feet together to finish with the lower body in profile with the torso facing front and the arms swinging overhead in a circle with

closed fists (a move Jackson often employed). They jump again to separate the legs, finishing with the right leg behind on demi-pointe and the knee bent, holding the weight of the body, while the left leg remains straight. The body is still in profile; the right arm is held to the body with the elbow held parallel to the ground and the left arm straight to the side. The pose is held for a split-second; then, the right knee drops to the ground and the left swings around to join it, so the body is facing the upstage right diagonal, arms by the sides. The knees open and close under the body three times. The differences between Jackson and the dancers are subtle, but telling. For example, during the split-second pause before the right knee drops, the dancer next to Jackson never comes to a complete stop. His right leg displays a very slight movement in preparation to go to the ground, a compensation to remain balanced. This preparatory movement is absent from Jackson, who arrives at the pose and comes to a complete stop before moving on. As the knees open and close under the body, the dancer pulses his shoulders, using them to gather his knees underneath him or embellish the movement. Jackson's shoulders move very minimally, so the movement of the knees is unmarred by any other movement in the body. The cleaner movement creates a more startling visual effect. In analyzing other similar sequences of Jackson and his backup dancers, the others consistently display these subtle preparatory movements or add slight embellishments. These are not obvious, but the lack of them in Jackson's body creates the impression that movement simply explodes from it without being forced. It is a characteristic that defines all Jackson's movements.

The same effortless quality is, along with the unparalleled sharpness of quick movements, one of the most significant aspects of Jackson's movement signature. In the forward to *Moonwalk*, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis wrote that Jackson was a dancer who "seems to defy gravity," something that can especially be seen in his moonwalk, struts, and glides.⁵³ A good

example of this phenomenon is in *Smooth Criminal*, one of the few times when one can see other dancers performing a moonwalk with Jackson, in this case the slow circling moonwalk.⁵⁴ The moment happens roughly two-and-a-half minutes before the end of the film (around seven-and-a-half minutes into the video depending on the source). The effect of floating can be seen in all of the dancer's upper bodies, but the telling differences are found in the feet. In very general terms, the move is accomplished by turning in the right foot and taking the weight on the ball of the foot, while the left slides backwards to join it. For the other dancers, the left foot slide is heavier and the circle traced by the feet is much smaller than Jackson's. With the other dancers, there is always the slight betrayal of shifting weight, in a bending knee or a more sudden step. Jackson, on the other hand, gives no hint whatsoever of which foot is carrying the weight. As a result, neither appears to have it, and he simply floats around the circle. All his struts, spins, and of course, moonwalks, reveal this effortless, weightless quality.

The idea that Jackson's dancing seemed to transcend the laws of physics is perhaps the best way to sum up what made it so particular to him. His dancers are remarkable in their own right, but never quite as clear, as quick, as sharp, or as effortless as Jackson. He arrives fully at each new pose before moving on, taking each movement to its full potential, so that movements that are not technically difficult appear technical but are executed without any apparent effort. He is perfectly controlled, yet his dancing is visceral, wild, and explosive. What is so remarkable is that Jackson himself is the only one who can perform these moves in this way. Although the moves are not "his," his ability to perform them in a unique way allows the spectator to view them as though they were Jackson's own composition. One way to see this is by studying Michael Jackson impersonators, people who have dedicated much of their lives to replicating the quality of Jackson's movement signature. The best come close, but they are always betrayed by

the smallest visible changes in weight, taking the movement past the line (instead of exactly to it as Jackson does), not coming to a full stop of motion, or simply losing, for a second, the attack of the movement omnipresent with Jackson.

The third layer of the movement signature is the most difficult yet to analyze, as it deals with Jackson's stage presence, which is not communicated on a conscious level and thus almost impossible to put into language. Detecting it is particularly complicated because it can't necessarily be seen on video. Jackson is hardly the only performer to have this spark, star power, or charisma. It was, however, one of his defining characteristics, and by all evidence, he seems to have been born with it. One needs only remember how he stood out from his brothers from the very beginning of the Jackson 5, picking up dances quickly and easily, winning immediately the lead vocals, and attracting public adoration. Some have attempted to describe the idea by calling it a "spark" or an "internal blaze."⁵⁵ Audiences responded to him with unbridled enthusiasm, men and women alike screaming and crying.⁵⁶ Yet it wasn't only audiences that responded to the spark; those who worked with Jackson sensed it as well. Reece Livingstone noted that during the shooting of *Thriller*, the spark was especially noticeable in how it separated Jackson the performer from Jackson the person. Between takes, Jackson kept to the side, shy and reserved, but the minute the director said "picture's up," it was "like a button had been pushed," and the performer would appear. He would even "walk to position in a different mode, like he couldn't hold the energy back."⁵⁷ In the special features for the film *This Is It*, Live Show Audio Supervisor Michael Durham Prince contests that "you could put a spotlight on him with a piano and it would be riveting."⁵⁸ Whatever it was, there was something about Jackson's presence onstage that made him irresistible to watch and completed the package of remarkable talent that made up his movement signature.

III. Branding Michael Jackson: The Process of Ownership

The ownership of Jackson's signature occurred due to a simple progression: the deliberate creation of the marketable performance package that was Michael Jackson; the distribution of that package to the world; and lastly, its widespread acceptance and popularity. Ownership was tacitly confirmed as a result of conscious marketing decisions made by the professionals with whom Jackson surrounded himself. From the beginning of his solo career, Jackson was produced by CBS Records and his business team as a full entertainment package, the persona, music, and dance all fusing into one star image. Jackson's revolutionary approach to music videos, calling them "short films," is proof of this, as it incorporates all of these elements. His artistic team helped shape and refine the videos into high-quality, professional products in which Jackson's dancing was showcased. As such, dance was an integral part of the whole package that was Jackson the performer. Jackson was unusual in that his dancing was so particular to him; Madonna had arguably equal success worldwide as Jackson, yet there is no particular movement signature connected with her. There was a quality in Jackson's movement that had never been seen before, yet despite its virtuosic nature, i.e. the control and practice it demanded to do well, there was also a certain accessibility to all of Jackson's work that was vital to its marketability. Judith Hamera puts it well, saying Jackson is universally recognized as having "the ability to appear path-breakingly original in a way that is completely obvious" and thus suggesting to the layman viewer that he too can repeat the movements he is seeing.⁵⁹ The proof of this can be seen in the sheer number of home videos on popular video-hosting websites such as YouTube, in which amateurs, professionals, and Jackson impersonators attempt to replicate the movement. Besides the dance, Jackson's music was simple and catchy enough that everyone from small children to adults could appreciate it, a deliberate choice on Jackson's part.

This accessibility added to the signature's marketability, as no part of it alienated a certain public, allowing it to be very widely distributed.

The commodification of Jackson as an entertainment package happened very quickly. Already beloved from the Jackson 5 days, Jackson was an instant superstar after *Thriller* was released. Before he even began working on his short films, *Thriller* had broken the all-time sales record. The album's enormous success was due in large part to Jackson's business team, at the center of which were three figures: producer Quincy Jones, attorney John Branca (who negotiated all recording and publishing deals), and the head of promotion at CBS Epic Records, Frank Dileo, who would later become Jackson's manager.⁶⁰ The world tour of *Bad*, managed by Dileo, exposed Jackson to an international audience. Yet it would be a mistake to suggest that Jackson himself was not involved in this endeavor, as his drive to go above and beyond contributed hugely to his global success (and thus the exposure of his dancing). He was deeply invested in his own career, and much like his perfectionism when it came to dance steps, he was always determined to top himself professionally. In fact, Jackson fired Frank Dileo in 1989 in part because, according to Taraborrelli, Jackson felt that Dileo was taking too much credit for his success.⁶¹ While Dileo's role cannot be downplayed, the story indicates Jackson's involvement in his own self-promotion. Taraborrelli reports when Branca was in negotiations with CBS Records for the *Decade* album, Jackson bluntly told him that he wanted to make more money than anyone else.⁶² Jackson was equally demanding from his directors and choreographers, working closely with them to ensure that their product fit with his vision. The drive was a characteristic that Jackson never lost, not even at the end of his life. In the special features of *This Is It*, the crew describe how Jackson wanted this last concert series to be like nothing a live audience had ever seen before and was involved in every aspect of its design to make sure that

happened.⁶³ The resulting “ownership” from this commercialization was not Jackson’s original goal, but it was a consequence of his determination—and success—to be the biggest star in the business.

One of the main reasons that Jackson’s signature was so recognizable, to the point that he is regarded as owning it, was its stylistic continuity. Choreographers and artists often go through many stages in their careers, developing pieces that may be completely different from previous work due to collaborations or changing inspirations. Jackson, however, retained his own pure voice throughout his career. He focused primarily on becoming the most perfect representation possible of that which he did, in music and dance. His directors and choreographers collaborated with Jackson to shape his artistic vision, clarifying what he was unable to express as opposed to imposing their own ideas and creations. As such, the “Jackson aesthetic” was continually reinforced through Jackson’s career. The mass distribution of his work constantly added to the consciousness of what Jackson’s dance looked like, to the point that the style was absolutely inseparable from the performer.

IV. Conclusion

This idea of a performer owning their personal movement signatures can be visualized through a simple thought experiment of two questions. Using Jackson as a case study, the questions are: 1) If a dancer spent a thousand hours practicing the moonwalk in the studio, would he, at the end, be able to perfectly recreate the moment when Jackson first performed it? 2) If Jackson himself walked into one’s living room and was able to harness the energy of that performance, could he perfectly recreate that moment? Intuitively, one answers no to the first

and yes to the second, with no particular reason as to why this should be the case. While there is absolutely no way to test this intuitive hypothesis, the subject for investigation in this paper is the reason why this answer is what it is.

In the specific case of Michael Jackson, the ownership of his movement signature began in the development of Jackson the performer, whose experiences and reactions formed his personality as a perfectionist on a mission to be the biggest star in show business. The accessibility, continuity, and marketability of the signature allowed it to be brought to such a wide audience that soon it could not have been associated with anyone but him. Joseph Jackson's pushing of the Jackson brothers put Michael into a place where he had the opportunity to be a star and instilled in him from the beginning a driving work ethic and focus. This perfectionism was only accentuated by Jackson's insecurity with the outside world. An exceptionally sensitive human being, Jackson found refuge from the world and his father in performing, demanding control, and success to the highest degree in that arena. His movement signature was an expression of this demand, only translated to his body. Jackson's ability to dance as though ungoverned by normal laws of physics reflected his desperate desire to create his own fantasy world where reality could not find him, one version of which was the stage. Another expression of this was his constant desire to continually top himself, and that, along with the indispensable contributions of his team, was the driving force behind the widespread distribution and fame of Jackson's star image, soon inextricably linked to his movement signature.

The path to the ownership of a movement signature is complicated, and Jackson's is only one case among many. It deals with only a single performer and his reforming of already-created movements into a style and quality of movement that was all his own. Jackson's path to ownership is certainly not the only that exists. One can ask how this occurs, for example, when

the artist is not a performer, but a choreographer with a personal creative agenda, unlike those who worked with Jackson. An example of this is Bob Fosse, whose style is unmistakably and widely recognized as his, despite the many dancers who perform it. Yet despite the central difference that Fosse created his own movements and Jackson did not, there was a similar process of development and marketing of an image that inextricably linked Fosse to the movement, even though he himself was not dancing it. This also brings up the question of how collaboration fits into ownership, especially between the choreographer and the dancer. Fosse was known for creating dance for a specific person, much like Balanchine. His muse was transferred from dancer to dancer—specifically women—across the years, yet each is said to be dancing Fosse’s style. How much did each woman influence the dance, and why does only Fosse seem to come through? Yet despite the many differences in Fosse’s and Jackson’s paths, some general conclusions can be reached. With all dancers and choreographers who have come to be widely associated with a specific movement signature, one sees certain commonalities: a rare mix of ground-breaking and iconic movement coupled with fame.

Another common factor in this process of ownership touches on the ineffable and the poetic, particularly pervasive in a milieu where communication is not based on language. In searching for ways to articulate the process of ownership, one hears the word “soul” come up time and time again. In his autobiography, Jackson says multiple times that he puts his whole soul into his work.⁶⁴ Trying to articulate what he saw on the set of *Thriller*, Livingstone remarked, “there was always so much of him (his soul?) in his expression, his movements.”⁶⁵ Bonnie Erickson suggested she saw Jackson’s dance as “visceral, from his soul.”⁶⁶ In a scholarly paper, such explanations are frustratingly vague and undefined, yet intuitively attractive. Many agree that Jackson’s dance simply seemed to fit who he was as a performer, and that is

explanation enough for why he should be the one to own the signature. One must ask if language can truly explain this phenomenon, or if it is inevitably inadequate? Could one possibly argue that Martha Graham's signature was an expression of her soul? Or Fosse's, his? In placing his work on other dancers, was he giving them movements, or a bit of himself?

One implication of the questions raised in this paper is the blurriness of the line between choreography and performance. In the case of Michael Jackson, it is almost impossible to distinguish. To return to the opening example of the moonwalk: as noted, it was not Jackson's invention—it had already been performed on television with *Soul Train*—yet these days the two cannot be separated. Somehow, the act of performing this particular move in the particular way he did made it his; his own creative force coming through in the movement at the moment when he performed it. At that instant of creation in performance, the answer to the question “Who created the moonwalk?” is remarkably ambiguous. The same question can be raised for all choreographers. How much of the signature is defined because of the way it is performed, and who really controls that? The central problem throughout this is simple to articulate and maddeningly difficult to resolve: *who*, exactly, is in the movement signature and because of what circumstances?

Beyond the thought and theory, the larger question of how ownership is assigned and accepted is certainly not simple or straightforward, and raises more issues than it solves. All the same, it leads to a deeper understanding of the incredible complexity that is the interaction between the artist, the movement, and the world at large.

Notes

¹ Adam Ostrow, "Michael Jackson's Massive Impact (on Google, Facebook, and Yahoo)," Mashable Social Media, June 26 2009, <<http://mashable.com/2009/06/26/michael-jackson-web-impact/>> (27 October 2011).

² Nicholas Graham, "Philippines Prison's Michael Jackson Tribute," The Huffington Post, 29 June 2009, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/29/philippines-prisons-micha_n_222169.html> (6 November 2011).

³ Theodore Gautier, Gautier on Dance, trans. and ed. Ivor Guest (London: Dance Books: 1986). 15-16

⁴ By "remarkable experiences," I mean those that seemed to shape or influence Jackson the most.

⁵ Vera Maletić, "Laban Principles of Movement Analysis," The International Encyclopedia of Dance. Laban's system is further articulated in the Background section.

⁶ Martha Davis, "Hitler's Movement Signature," TDR: The Drama Review 36, no. 28 (1992): 158.

⁷ Régine Astier, Sun King: The Ascendancy of French Culture during the Reign of Louis XIV, ed. David Lee Rubin. (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library; London/Toronto: Associated University Presses, 2000). 95.

Louis XIV's preferred choreographer, Pierre Beauchamps, created the new system, but Raoul Feuillet received the patent, and thus it is commonly called Feuillet or Feuillet/Beauchamps notation.

⁸ Maletic, "Laban Principle."

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ J. Randy Taraborrelli, Michael Jackson : the Magic and the Madness, rev. ed. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003). 27.

¹¹ Michael Jackson, Moonwalk, Forward by Jacqueline Onassis, (New York, Doubleday, 1988), 48-49.

¹² Taraborrelli, 66.

¹³ Jackson, 48.

¹⁴ In his autobiography, Jackson says that when Astaire called him following his performance at the Motown 25 concert, it was the greatest compliment he had received in his life. (Jackson, 213).

¹⁵ Taraborrelli, 49. The Jackson 5 had in fact already been signed to a contract with Motown before Ross introduced them.

¹⁶ Jackson, 69.

¹⁷ Taraborrelli, 67.

¹⁸ Jackson, 11, 41.

¹⁹ Quoted in Ibid., 77.

²⁰ Taraborrelli, 77.

²¹ Jackson, 90.

²² Taraborrelli, 92.

²³ This Is It, dir. Ortega. 111 min., Sony Pictures, 2009, DVD.

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- ²⁴ Ibid., 64.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 63.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 94.
- ²⁷ Jackson, 96.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 96. Taraborrelli also quotes Katherine Jackson as saying “the changes [the acne] wrought in him became permanent.” (159).
- ²⁹ Ibid., 97.
- ³⁰ Taraborrelli contests that Jackson was diagnosed with two separate skin diseases, vitiligo and discoid lupus, both of which cause lightening of the skin – for the latter, because skin bleaching creams are part of the treatment. As far as the surgeries, Jackson only admits to three in his autobiography, two on his nose and one to add the cleft in his chin, though Taraborrelli points out that “it does not take a cosmetic surgery expert to see that cheek and chin implants and all sorts of other work, including on his eyes and lips, are not beyond the bounds of possibility,” (435-7).
- ³¹ Ibid., 23, 20.
- ³² Ibid., 181.
- ³³ Ibid., 191.
- ³⁴ This impression from Reece Livingstone, a dancer in the original *Thriller* music video.
- ³⁵ Jackson, 211.
- ³⁶ Taraborrelli, 177. The emphasis is Taraborrelli’s.
- ³⁷ Jackson, 162.
- ³⁸ Taraborrelli, 271.
- ³⁹ Shaheem Reid, “Michael Jackson’s Life and Legacy: Global Superstar (1982-86),” *VH1*, 6 July 2009, <http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1615220/20090702/jackson_michael.jhtml?rsspartner=rssMozilla> (4 December 2011).
- ⁴⁰ Jackson, 210-11.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 210.
- ⁴² Taraborrelli, 244.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Acocella, Joan, “Walking on the Moon,” *New Yorker*, 27 July 2009, 76.
- ⁴⁵ Judith Hamera, “The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Performing “Work”” (Plenary Paper prepared for the American Society of Theatre Research: Texas A&M University, 2011), 7.
- ⁴⁶ Acocella, 76.
- ⁴⁷ The LMA term here would be Effort, which to describe how the body performs various actions, centering around four basic qualities of Time, Weight, Space, and Flow. With these four categories, one can describe the dynamics of the movement as well as its expressive quality. I do not use the specific vocabulary, but the idea.
- ⁴⁸ Hamera, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid..

⁵⁰ Hamera, 7.

⁵¹ Hamera, 8.

⁵² Thanks to Bonnie Erickson at the Broadway Dance Center for the excellent word choices of “intensity” and “commitment,” qualities she says faculty constantly try to instill in their dancers.

⁵³ Onassis, forward to Moonwalk.

⁵⁴ This is, according to Taraborrelli, the ‘real’ moonwalk, whereas that which Jackson is most famous for is in fact the ‘backslide.’ The correct terminology has been lost, a further example of how tied Jackson is to his movements. (243).

⁵⁵ Livingstone.

⁵⁶ Screaming and crying fans were not unique to Jackson, of course, but these were reactions seen primarily for the biggest stars in the entertainment business, such as The Beatles or Elvis.

⁵⁷ Livingstone.

⁵⁸ This Is It.

⁵⁹ Hamera, 1.

⁶⁰ Taraborrelli, 299.

⁶¹ Ibid., 412.

⁶² Ibid., 427.

⁶³ This Is It.

⁶⁴ Jackson, 220, 184.

⁶⁵ Reece Livingstone, personal e-mail to the author, 11 November 2011.

⁶⁶ Bonnie Erickson, director of Educational Programming at the Broadway Dance Center, was informally interviewed by the author in New York, 10 November 2011.

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