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This Is It

Eringa, Fardo Ine

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This Is It

**The worldviews and fandom of female
Michael Jackson-pilgrims and their journeys
towards living Mike-Like**

By
Fardo Ine Eringa

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university of
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This Is It

The worldviews and fandom of female Michael
 Jackson-pilgrims and their journeys towards
 living Mike-Like

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
 University of Groningen
 on the authority of the
 Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga
 and in accordance with
 the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Thursday 7 October 2021 at 12.45 hours

By

Fardo Ine Eringa

born on 25 September 1991
 in Leeuwarden

Supervisors

Prof. M.W. Buitelaar

Dr. M. van Dijk

Assessment Committee

Prof. T.H. Weir

Prof. S. Coleman

Prof. I. Stengs

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change*

Michael Jackson (Man in the Mirror 1988)

Most of us listen to music, whether we actively seek it out or not. The radio is a backdrop. It's there in taxis, in shops, in workplaces. But for some that's not enough... These are people who care passionately about an artist. Following a band gives their world order. It gives their life meaning. They feel that these musicians are their friends, their strength, their solace, their saviours.

Barry Divola (1998: 11)

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Acknowledgements

As long as I can remember, my grandfather sometimes bursts out the word: “Tatoem!”. It is usually a way to kick-start something or an expression of approval underlining a moment (“well-done, that’s the spirit”), but my grandfather also says it when he presents a cup of coffee or a piece of cake. As a child, I once asked him “why do you always say tatoem?”. He never gave me an answer. When I recently visited him, he explained that the word should remain unexplained. One should simply *sense* its meaning. Describing it, or even writing it down – which I am now guilty of twice – diminishes its meaning.

I stand behind the statement that not everything needs to be explained. This thesis has made me realize that we have to be careful to not destroy what we investigate. Case in point are the awakening-stories of the women in this study. From the start, I was eager to find out what had caused their change of heart. However, throughout our conversations, I noticed that my quest to explain (captured by the question “why?”) was not harmless. The women stated that they did not know what had instigated their awakening. As my research progressed I came to question whether the fans would want an answer and realized that it was not my place to find it out for them, taking away the “magic” of their experience.

I have also learned to take a step back. It is my job to interpret and reflect on the stories of my interlocutors on a meta-level, as both of my supervisors have pointed out to me endless of times. I want to express my gratitude for the attentive and patient supervision of prof. dr. Marjo Buitelaar and dr. Mathilde van Dijk. I know some of my chapters were infamously long-winded and both of you have soldiered on and offered me extensive feedback every time. Your untiring enthusiasm has encouraged me to go the extra mile. During the writing process Marjo and Mathilde helped me to structure my thoughts and supported me with invaluable input. I very much enjoyed our collaboration. I also want to thank professor Jeffrey Kripal and professor Anthony Pinn for the time they have invested in our meetings and their many reading-suggestions. My visit to Rice University has broadened my horizon both academically and personally. It has shaped my thinking around the topics of charisma, race, the ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’-movement and has helped me make sense of the fans’ subjectivist interpretation of Jackson.

With warm feelings I look back on this adventure for which I am much obliged to the Michael Jackson pilgrims who have contributed to this study. By participating in this research, these women have dared to make themselves vulnerable. I appreciate and admire their willingness to open up to me and I find their personal stories truly inspiring. I especially want to thank the women who have welcomed me in their travel group during Michael Week 2018 and 2019. You have opened up my heart to new points of view. Our many philosophical conversations have made me more aware of my own responsibility to contribute something positive to the world.

No matter how small, it's the effort that matters. Moreover, I never would have imagined having so much fun during my fieldwork. The memory of throwing a toilet paper roll through the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas still puts a smile on my face. My visit to Rice University and my fieldwork during Michael Week would not have been possible without the (financial) support of Fulbright and The Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds. These grants have contributed greatly to the quality of this research.

Last but not least I want to thank my dear family for their belief in me and for the many brainstorm sessions. I am grateful to my parents who have always encouraged me to be curious and follow my interests. My father gave me the best example with his own passion for doing research; your unwavering optimism and enthusiasm have nurtured my own positive disposition. My mother inspires me with her creativity and philosophical knowledge; you are a champion for reading the whole first draft of my thesis and giving me your detailed notes. I have integrated my mother's art in this thesis as a tribute to her work. My sister is my greatest cheerleader and one of the few people in my life who understand me without words. Etta, I admire your courage and strength and I could not do without your sense of humor. To Jan I want to express my special love. You bring color to my life. You always make me laugh and you make me look forward to each new day. Thank you for being my home.

Tatoem!

Introduction: This is It

Betty's second coming out

50-year old Betty told me that her awakening to Jackson after his death marked the beginning of a journey that would change her life profoundly. When we spoke, Betty self-identified as spiritual. Her childhood was strongly colored by a strict Christian upbringing and a dominant father. "I was raised with the God of thunder and lightning", she said, "I was not encouraged to reflect on things myself". At seventeen, Betty moved out of her parents' house, no longer able to endure her overstressed father. This is one of the reasons she empathizes with Jackson: "I feel there is a similarity between how Michael interacted with his father. That sensitivity was not recognized. Not with him, not with me." Betty described herself as an activist at heart, someone who was "up there on the barricades", prompted to be so by coming-out as lesbian in her environment. But somewhere down the line, she lost sight of this part of herself. Betty used the metaphor of sleeping: although she lived her life, she was not really there. On paper she had much to be grateful for – a great job, a house, a cat – yet Betty felt "empty" inside and described her former self as "dealing with life".

It was her emotional response to Jackson's death that shook her up. She had never regarded herself a fan although she remembered the impact *Thriller* had on her. Out of curiosity she started researching Jackson and found out that: "he was a humanist, or actually an angel on earth, sent from heaven by God." Today, Betty sees herself as a follower of Jackson, which to her represents the ideal of trying to emulate the popstar's efforts to heal the world. She pointed to her bracelet and read out loud what was written on it: "what would Michael Jackson do", I always wear that. Without it I feel naked. You used to have "what would Jesus do" (laughs) it is some kind of reminder." After her awakening, a quote from "Man in the Mirror" became Betty's slogan: "If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make that change". The slogan embodies her answer to the meaning of her existence: "to spread love in the biggest way possible, a way of life". Betty jokingly called the moment she went public with her love for Michael "a second coming out". She found it "earth-shattering" that her friends did not feel the same way. Although she did not lose people because of her revelation, she keeps pretty private about her feelings. "Michael fans are often not taken seriously", she explained. Luckily, Betty found likeminded friends on Facebook with whom she has daily contact.

Betty finds she has become "less cynical and sarcastic" as a result of her spiritual connection to Jackson. Her family and friends have noted her transformation. Betty's focus on making a change also encouraged her to lose weight, stop smoking and forgive her parents. In her everyday life there are different ways in which she mediates a closeness to 'her' Michael. She has been a loyal participant in the online Major Love Prayer (a monthly meditation in honor of Jackson that I will discuss in chapter one). Betty also frequently reads from Jackson's book of poems and reflections *Dancing the Dream* (1992), which she jokingly called "a good start of a new Bible".

Above all, listening to Jackson's music and creating art allow her to experience Jackson. "When I am painting, there is contact", she explained. She often plays Jackson's music when she is painting. She chooses a song in line with her mood or stands before her cd collection and decides intuitively which album is needed. "I used to read the Bible in that way", she said smiling, "ending with my finger on a certain verse. I now do that with his music." Following "Man In the Mirror", Betty uses her art to protest. She leaves cards that depict her artwork with "love-quotes" from Jackson wherever she goes. Betty hopes her cards contribute to creating a better world: "that I plant a seed that gets people thinking. My cards and paintings are the packages of the word."

Betty's¹ story illustrates the theme of this thesis, in which I explore the cross-fertilization of religion and popular culture in present-day society in the fandom and worldviews of middle-aged and senior female MJ-pilgrims. These are women between their forties and seventies who have committed themselves to following Michael Jackson. I examine how these fans draw upon the singer's artistic and humanitarian legacy for introspection and meaning-making. I focus on the commemorative rituals they appropriate and create – like pilgrimage, prayer, and music-listening – to express and strengthen their (group)identity and lifestyle in day-to-day life. Jackson's death marks a turning point in the biographies of the fans in this study.

They were not the only ones who were impacted by this moment. In March 2009 Michael Jackson proclaimed his come-back tour *This is It*. The tour included 50 concerts in London that were sold out in record time. On 25 June 2009, on the eve of his come-back, Jackson suddenly died of a cardiac arrest in response to an overdose of tranquillizers. Millions of fans worldwide responded in disbelief to The King of Pop's unexpected passing and were overwhelmed by grief. Jackson's sudden death was a media event and the posthumous release of the documentary *This Is It*, that displays the preparations for Jackson's show, fed into the media frenzy. Based on a poll by the Pew Research Center in late June 2009, sixty percent of the American news coverage was devoted to Jackson's death, his life story and his legacy.² The event triggered so much online activity that Twitter crashed and the search engine Google confused the explosion

¹ The names throughout this thesis are pseudonyms.

² Pew Research Center, 'Coverage of Jackson's Death Seen As Excessive', (1 July 2009) <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2009/07/01/coverage-of-jacksons-death-seen-as-excessive/> (accessed 24 November 2020).

of search requests with a potential malware attack.³ In the week after Jackson's death, his page on Facebook grew from 80,000 fans to over seven million, generating the largest response on a Facebook page until then.⁴ Political sociologist Paul Hollander recalls that: "it was impossible to turn on the television without getting yet another discussion of his immense and imperishable contributions. His death overshadowed and pre-empted all other news, domestic and foreign."⁵ Indeed, professor of American Studies and Art History Nicole Fleetwood writes that the grieving became the subject of debate itself: "how much importance and public space should be afforded to memorializing and emoting over a singular icon, in particular such a vexed individual whose public and private worlds were so unsettling?"⁶ Jackson's memorial service was broadcasted live and had a combined average of 31 million at-home viewers and another 4.4 million live video streams in the United States. The service attracted a global audience of close to one billion people.⁷ Hollander expressed his annoyance about the reminiscences that overlooked the shady parts of the artist's life, such as the allegations of child abuse: "it was not sufficient to worship Jackson as a great entertainer, he had been also transformed into a veritable saint and tragic figure."⁸

Within the MJ-fan community there exists a phrase to describe a fan's investment and obsession with Michael Jackson: "I am 'Michaeling'." Minister Barbara Kaufmann, who helped fans process their grief after Jackson's demise, defines 'Michaeling' as:

The activity of spending hours on You Tube watching Michael Jackson's performances, listening to his interviews, checking popular sites for the latest news, visiting numerous Michael sites and tributes, spending countless hours on fan social forums and grieving hard over the loss of someone who obviously was/is more than a cultural icon and touchstone.⁹

This research highlights three expressions of 'Michaeling' that appeared in the aftermath of Jackson's passing, namely the online Major Love Prayer (MLP), the grassroots MJ-memorial in

³ Brian Stelter, 'Blowout Ratings for a Farewell, Online and Off', New York Times (8 July 2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/business/media/09rating.html> (accessed 14 May 2020); Pew Research Center, 'Media Swing from Protests in Iran to the Passing of the King of Pop', (29 June 2009) <https://www.journalism.org/2009/06/29/pej-news-coverage-index-june-22-28-2009/> (accessed 17 November 2020).

⁴ Stephanie Busari, 'Michael Jackson is Facebook's most popular', CNN (7 July 2009) <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/07/07/michael.jackson.popular.facebook/index.html> (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁵ Paul Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture', *Culture and Society* 47:2 (2010) 147-152, 147.

⁶ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011) 208.

⁷ Nick Allen, 'Michael Jackson memorial service: the biggest celebrity send-off of all time', The Telegraph (7 July 2009) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/michael-jackson/5771156/Michael-Jackson-memorial-service-the-biggest-celebrity-send-off-of-all-time.html> (accessed 10 September 2020).

⁸ Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult', 147.

⁹ Barbara Kaufmann, 'Making That Change', <https://www.innermichael.com/making-that-change/> (accessed 3 February 2021)

Munich, and the annual pilgrimage to Michael-places during Michael Week: the week before Jackson's death day. These three commemorative practices were established by fans in honor of Jackson as ways to cope with their loss and express their dedication. Although the initiatives were created separately, they overlap in focus and intention. All case studies exemplify a flux of faith and fandom: the fans in this study shape their everyday lives by mixing tradition, popular culture and modern media. The act of making a pilgrimage dedicated to Jackson is one of the most striking manifestations of 'Michaeling' and it is this practice that initiated this research. A significant part of this study rests on the self-narratives of 26 MJ-pilgrims.

This study fits a trend in contemporary religious studies, particularly in anthropological studies, which approaches religion as practiced and experienced on the ground, moving beyond a strict dichotomy between 'religion' and 'the secular' or between 'ritual' and 'daily behavior'.¹⁰ Such an approach aims to understand the meaning and complexity of religion from the perspective of individuals. A central argument in the thesis is that 'Michaeling' should be comprehended within the context of what philosopher Charles Taylor has called the massive 'subjective turn'. Taylor has demonstrated that Western contemporary culture has seen a cultural shift that presents itself in a focus on one's inner self and the individualistic ideals of self-exploration, self-fulfillment and self-expression. This shift has also affected contemporary religion and spirituality. Modern Western society shows a decline of traditional religious institutions and a growing number of people who self-identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). People who belong to this category commonly refuse to identify as (only) religious and devalue (patriarchal) authority. Instead, SBNR-adherents aim to explore and express *their* belief, which often centers on a direct, personal experience of transcendence.

The internet has facilitated exploration and self-expression as it allows people to take charge of their own spirituality and offers new ways to mediate and express the transcendent. The web furthermore provides a new form of social infrastructure as it connects people around the world in self-initiated communities that offer a sense of belonging and purpose, thus also challenging established forms of institutional authority.¹¹ The freedom to choose your own path within a globalizing world is not always easy. The abundance of options can result in uncertainty that feeds into a longing for stability and guidance. Arguably then, it is the same subjective turn that creates a situation where people are receptive for the message of a charismatic leader. This study proposes that Michael Jackson embodies this role. Following Jackson as a leader does not imply a passive stance; I argue that the fans in my research appropriate Jackson as a tool for their own self-actualization and autonomy.

¹⁰ Cf. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press Scholarship Online 2008).

¹¹ Heidi A. Campbell and Paul Emerson Teusner, 'Internet and Social Networking', in: John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur eds., *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2015) 154-168, 163.

I combine perspectives, concepts and methods in this study from a range of academic fields, including pilgrimage studies and fan studies. I pick and choose different theories and approaches that I deem useful tools to enhance our understanding of the commemorative practices discussed and the experiences of the fans in this study. I predominantly apply a contextual, narrative approach to analyze the multiple aspects of fandom and worldview and how these interweave in the women's practices and the meanings they attribute to them. The study of religion and popular culture used to be situated at the fringes of Religious Studies. In recent decades, however, the realization that religion and popular culture mutually influence each other has resulted in an increased interest in how the emergence of new ways of being religious are influenced by trends in Western popular culture. In turn, popular culture shows a "transmission of the sacred" – the use of religious concepts to describe aspects of mundane life.¹² The emergence of new mix-and-match ways of 'doing' religion challenges classic (European) theories of secularization, which predicted that modernization would necessarily lead to a decline of (traditional) religion.¹³ Although modernization has had some secularizing effects – for example the weakening of certain forms of traditional religion – in the words of the sociologist of religion Peter Berger "the world today is as furiously religious as it ever was."¹⁴

Religion, then, is not disappearing but changing, with globalized media providing new practices and resources.¹⁵ Modern society is characterized by a confluence of secularization, religion and spirituality¹⁶ – a situation that philosopher Jürgen Habermas has referred to as the 'post-secular'.¹⁷ The acceptance of the mutual existence of religion and (patterns of) secularization affects our understanding of the religious present and future in the West. Contemporary

¹² Willem Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen* (Nijmegen: SUN 1998) 37; Christopher Partridge, 'The Modern Western World', in: Christopher Partridge ed., *New Religions: a Guide: new religious movements, sects, and alternative spiritualities* (New York: Oxford University Press 2004) 357-418, 359-360; Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group 2010) xi, 5-6.

¹³ Philip S. Gorski and Ates Altinordu, 'After Secularization?', *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:1 (2008) 55-85, 56. Cf. The three ways in which Jose Casanova uses "secularization": Jose Casanova, 'Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Study', *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2006) 7-22.

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in: Peter L. Berger ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (The Ethics and Public Policy Center Washington, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999) 1-18, 2-3.

¹⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80:1 (2012) 64-93; Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, 'Introduction', in: Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas eds., *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2003) 1-16; Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Religion and the Internet', *Diogenes* 53:3 (2006) 67-76.

¹⁶ Cf. Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture Volume 1* (London: T&T. Clark International 2004) 4; Kenneth Thompson, 'Secularization and Sacralization', in: Jeffrey C. Alexander and Piotr Sztompka eds., *Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces and Ideas at the end of the Twentieth Century* (Unwin Hyman London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 1990) 161-181.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25:4 (2008) 17-29; Gorski and Altinordu, 'After Secularization?', 56.

individuals like MJ-pilgrims adapt (components of) religion to their life-styles, thus compiling a personal spiritual package that uses tradition and other (spiritual) sources in a variety of ways. However, religious studies scholars like Linda Woodhead and Gordon Lynch warn for a too trivial, one-dimensional interpretation of modern, Western people as autonomous, reflexive “spiritual consumers”. They argue that, on the contrary, people’s lives are always *embedded in* and *negotiated through* networks of relationships and they are limited in what spirituality they “pick” by their contexts.¹⁸

Studying worldview today thus requires both an alertness to sources and practices of meaning-making beyond self-evident religious contexts and a regard for the pervasiveness of these same traditions.¹⁹ With regard to the fans in this study, I combined these insights into the following main research question:

What does the case study of ‘Michaeling’ tell us about the ways in which contemporary people use fandom, religious cultural heritage and new media as sources to negotiate a worldview, sacred forms and an ethical self?

I operationalize this central question in the following sub questions:

1. What practices and motivations constitute ‘Michaeling’ (i.e. the MLP, the MJ-memorial in Munich and Michael Week?)
2. What makes Michael Jackson an apt figure to synthesize popular culture and religion?
3. What makes the fans receptive to follow Michael Jackson as an ethical leader and how do they appropriate (their awakening to) Jackson to fit their life stories?
4. How are the fans influenced by the subjective turn and the Spiritual But Not Religious-movement and in what ways do their stories deviate from common interpretations and expectations of these trends?
5. What sensational forms do the fans create out of fandom, faith and new media and how do these make them recipient for an experience of the sacred and the transcendental in their everyday lives?
6. What sacred forms underlie the everyday lives of MJ-pilgrims and how are these constitutive and formative of a (group)identity and a meaningful existence?

¹⁸ Gordon Lynch, ‘Object theory’, in: David Morgen ed., *Religion and material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2010) 40-54, 42. (Italics added by FE.) Linda Woodhead, ‘Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-differentiation: the British Example’, *Soc* 53:1 (2016) 41-46, 45.

¹⁹ Nancy T. Ammerman, ‘Introduction: Observing Modern Religious Lives’, in: Nancy T. Ammerman ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) 3-18, 8; McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 67; Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, ‘Introduction’, in: Steven Sutcliffe and Marian Bowman eds., *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000) 1-13, 7.

The nature of this ethnographic study is exploratory. My goal in the research is to map and develop a better understanding of how a particular group of fans interprets the influence of Jackson in their daily lives. The theories that I bring forward in this introduction will guide me throughout the chapters of this book. Each chapter has its own thematic focus and a complementary methodological approach and analytical concepts. Instead of presenting one extensive theoretical chapter I have chosen to introduce new analytical concepts by means of gradual release. This means that I will discuss relevant literature that help me unravel and shed light on the different layers of the women's fandom and worldviews as the different strands of my argumentation unfold.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, this thesis consists of four chapters. The first three chapters each present a case study that illustrates a particular way in which fans try to connect with Jackson and appropriate him as an ethical leader in their quest for a meaningful existence. Chapter one discusses the virtual Major Love Prayer (MLP): a faith-based monthly prayer that urges its participants to internalize, continue and spread Jackson's "healing love energy" through meditation. This case study explores how the fans use prayer/meditation, in combination with music-listening, to enable and reinforce an experience of Jackson, 'the beyond' and the global fan community. Chapter one exemplifies how the internet as a digital environment facilitates both fan practices and the performance of beliefs, thus demonstrating the potential power of online contact and ritual. Chapter two presents the case study of fan activities at the grassroots MJ-memorial in Munich. This MJ-shrine is preserved by the German non-profit organization MJ's LEGACY. This fan group feels responsible to continue and promote Jackson's artistic and humanitarian legacy and aims to clear the popstar's name from "false allegations". I investigate how MJ's LEGACY appropriates a statue of Orlando Di Lasso in the city center of Munich as an MJ-shrine and discuss the power-conflicts related to this appropriation. The fans actively campaign for issues they associate with Jackson. I therefore also use this case study to reflect on fandom as the basis for civic engagement. Moving on to, arguably, a prime example of the influence of the subjective turn, chapter three zooms in on the ritual of pilgrimage. This chapter examines the event of Michael Week and the pilgrimage-experiences of my 26 interlocutors. The meaning of a 'Michaeling'-journey varies for different fans; some experience it as an enjoyable social trip, whilst for others it is part of an individual, spiritual quest. Often a combination of motivations, practices and feelings constitute the pilgrimage experience. In this chapter I make use of theories from pilgrimage studies and apply these to my interview-data and my ethnographic observations during Michael Week 2018 and 2019. Besides giving insight into the meaning and function of the format of pilgrimage in contemporary society, this case study again underscores the constitutive importance of the internet for the expression of fandom and faith.

After discussing these three case studies, I go one step further to obtain a deeper

understanding of the foundation that lies at the basis of this novel synthesis of fandom and religion. Chapter four centers on the fandom and worldview of the 26 female MJ-pilgrims whose stories also informed chapter three. I will reflect on the women's 'becoming-a-fan-stories' and how their (sometimes lifelong) fan attachment ebbed and flowed throughout their lives. I study the fans' interpretation of Jackson as a sensitive, pure, charismatic person and examine how they deal with the allegations of child abuse and the controversy that stick to the artist. This chapter shows how the women's understanding of Jackson intertwines with their belief system. Most of my research participants identify as "spiritual but not religious". I will discuss the SBNR-trend in Western society and contextualize this take on life in Taylor's 'subjective turn'.

The different data that I present in the upcoming chapters complement each other and together offer an in-depth knowledge about the dynamics of the fans' life "with" Jackson. In the conclusions I take stock of my findings in the separate chapters. In the remaining part of this introduction, I will outline some key concepts of this research, which will be further embedded and expanded on in the subsequent chapters. After my presentation of the theoretical and methodological framework, I will introduce the fans who participated in this research and give some background information on the life and career of Michael Jackson.

Worldview and sacred forms

In this study, I follow anthropologist André Droogers who approaches worldview as created in the process of raising and answering five ultimate questions about what is beautiful, good, significant, true and authentic.²⁰ The answers to these existential questions can be informed by different sources, including religion, spirituality, ideology and the secular – which do not necessarily exclude each other. Contemporary Western society is characterized by various worldviews and sources for meaning from which people can draw inspiration to construct a personal worldview. People are commonly socialized within a dominant worldview, but worldviews are inevitably subject to change and personal circumstances. However, there are limitations to the range of choices available to people as their lives are always contextualized.²¹

I chose the term worldview because the majority of the fans in this research does not identify as religious, instead favoring the term 'spiritual'. I am aware of the fact that my understanding of religion in this study has a Western bias. When I use the term, I mean institutional religion that is centered on a belief in and adherence to a transcendent authority (God) that governs life

²⁰ André Droogers, 'The World of Worldviews', in: André Droogers and Anton van Harskamp eds., *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies* (Sheffield: Equinox 2014) 17-42, 24. Droogers here refers to Ellen Hijmans and Adri Smaling, *Kwalitatief onderzoek en levensbeschouwing* (Amsterdam: Boom 1997) 17.

²¹ Idem, 24-26.

on earth and is given shape in a church-based system of scripture, doctrine and ritual. More precisely, I assume Christianity as the model for religion because it corresponds most closely with the dominant worldview that most women in this study were socialized in – passed on by family and/or the influence of Christian cultural heritage in the West. In the chapters to follow, I will demonstrate the ways in which the fans draw from – mostly – Christian cultural heritage for their worldview as shown by their practices and vocabulary, while simultaneously opposing an authoritarian image of God that many grew up with.

The emergence of new forms of meaning-making that fluctuate between categories – such as ‘Michaeling’ – has triggered various academic strategies to capture and describe them, resulting in labels such as ‘implicit religion’, ‘hyper-real religion’, or ‘authentic fakes’.²² Although such terms make it possible to study religion and spirituality in non-religious contexts, the problem is that they try to fit the phenomena in the realm of religion by stretching definitions of religion, facilitating a predetermined wish to find religion in unexpected places.²³ This carries the risk of a false interpretation of the experiences of the people who are researched. It is not my intention to test whether ‘Michaeling’ qualifies as ‘real religion’ – or ‘real pilgrimage’ for that matter – because I do not think this does justice to the complex, multifaceted experiences of MJ-pilgrims. Taking the above conception of worldview as a point of departure, I chose the concept of ‘the sacred’ as applied by the sociologist Gordon Lynch to explore what essential moral realities underlie the stories and behavior of the fans in my study and how these are constitutive and formative of meaningful, moral lives and worldviews.

Lynch’ theory is rooted in a critical reinterpretation of Durkheim’s approach to the sacred as heterogeneous forms through which a community celebrates itself.²⁴ Lynch defines the sacred as that “what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life.”²⁵ Lynch argues that individuals tend to orient their lives around multiple ‘sacred forms’, which he understands as particular, historically contingent instances of the sacred. Modern society is shaped by the coexistence of multiple sacred forms, which are believed to be *essential to life itself*: they are the guidelines in people’s lives and people identify with them. Sacred forms can range from the nation, human

²² Edward Bailey, ‘Implicit Religion’, in: Peter B. Clarke ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press 2009) 801-816; David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2005); Adam Possamai, ‘Introduction’, in: Adam Possamai ed., *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Leiden; Boston: Brill 2012) 1-22.

²³ Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, ‘The Post-Secular in Question’, in: Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, Johan Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen eds., *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York; London: New York University Press 2012) 1-22, 7. Cf. Michael Jindra, ‘Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon’, *Sociology of Religion* 55:1 (1994) 27-51.

²⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translation by Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin 1915).

²⁵ Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press 2012) 29; Gordon Lynch, *On the Sacred* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2014) 32-33.

rights, nature, to child care. From this follows that sacred rituals – actions that draw us into contact with sacred realities and produce sacred thoughts, emotions and communities – can be very diverse: for example reading a newspaper or listening to particular kinds of music.²⁶

Although the adherents of a particular sacred form believe it to be a non-contingent foundation for their life, this does not mean that the sacred is, in itself, good. Sacred forms provide a particular source of moralization and communion, but can also legitimate acts of violence to defend them. The multitude of sacred forms create a complex interplay: sacred forms can complement each other but they can also conflict and battle for dominance.²⁷ Lynch integrates ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’ opposition of Durkheim’s theory but specifies the division. Instead of representing the everyday world, Lynch defines the profane as the specific form of evil that threatens to destroy the sacred, as the term profanation indicates. If the sacred is violated or “polluted”, adherents of this sacred reality will look for restitution. Lynch clarifies this with the example of the sacred form of the care for children, which is profaned by the sight of children starving to death on our television screens, thus demanding a Live Aid concert. For the logistics, emotions, practices, and aesthetics of everyday life, Lynch uses the concept of ‘the mundane’.²⁸

What makes Lynch’ cultural sociological approach to the sacred particularly helpful for my research is that it takes us beyond a binary opposition between the religious and the secular: the sacred finds expression in both religious and non-religious beliefs and draws on both religious and secular sources. Lynch argues that although many modern sacred forms have a significant religious past, the wider range of sacred forms that are present in contemporary society cannot be easily categorized as religion. Likewise, religion should not be equated with the sacred. Lynch argues that discourses and symbols of religion circulate through contemporary culture in ways that do not necessarily have normative significance or draw together a community of adherents in similar ways that sacred forms do.²⁹ A focus on ‘the sacred’ is useful for my study to identify and disentangle the different sacred forms – whether ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ – that simultaneously shape the worldviews and morality of the fans in my focus group. As I will argue later on in this introduction, popular culture is a location *par excellence* to investigate people’s ideals and take on life. My interlocutors consciously try to shape their own knowledge, emotions, and sensibilities in accordance with the moral guidelines they attach to Jackson. I posit that, in this way, the fans portray Jackson as the embodiment of sacred forms. The theory of Lynch allows for the inclusion of fandom as one of the major sources that shapes the lives of contemporary people, without beforehand labeling the fans’ emotional investments a religion.

²⁶ Lynch, *On the Sacred*, 25-28.

²⁷ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 15, 18, 133-136.

²⁸ Idem, 18, 28, 47-49. Cf. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 299, 317, 324.

²⁹ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 5-6, 17

This thesis demonstrates the importance of (embodied) performance for the experience and expression of worldview. I suggest that the fans create ‘sensational forms’ out of fandom, faith and new media, which make them recipient for an experience of the sacred in their everyday lives.³⁰ The case studies illustrate the ways in which the fans try to connect with Jackson, to each other and sometimes to the transcendental. Moreover, I contend that the fans use their fandom and lifestyle to nurture a moral disposition.

Learning by doing: the power of performance

The way the fans in this study aim to cultivate a moral self is reminiscent of how anthropologist Saba Mahmood approaches ‘ethical self-formation’. Mahmood’s study *Politics of Piety* regards Muslim women in Egypt and their performance of the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). Mahmood shows that routine day-to-day practices are very important for the cultivation and strengthening of the desire for moral conduct and for the development of the values of particular moral codes.³¹ She argues that a focus on the way people live the codes they deem most important provides insights in the ways “what one is, what one wants, and what kind of work one performs on oneself in order to realize a particular modality of being or personhood.”³² I find Mahmood’s insights helpful to explore and explain how the women in this study try to live ‘Mike-Like’. I will demonstrate that especially the practice of listening to Jackson’s music functions as an incentive to steer behavior in the ‘right’ direction.

Following the argument of anthropologist Charles Hirschkind that the body can be ethically disciplined by the practice of listening, I hypothesize that the fans’ interaction with Jackson’s music enables them to hear ‘with the heart’ – as Hirschkind’s research participants who listened to audiotaped sermons of popular Muslim preachers aptly put it. ‘Listening with the heart’ captures the situation where “one is capable of hearing the sermon in its full ethical sense only to the extent one had cultivated the particular modes of sensory responsiveness that that discourse demands.”³³ The fans in this thesis demonstrate that they have developed a particular moral sensorium that enables them to be moved by Jackson’s music in a way that would escape a person who has not internalized the same moral physiology.³⁴

³⁰ Birgit Meyer, ‘Religious sensations: Media, aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion’, in: Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell with Anna Strhan eds., *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2012) 159-170, 160.

³¹ Saba Mahmood, ‘Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, *Social Research* 70:3 (2003) 837-866, 847-848.

³² Idem, 846.

³³ Charles Hirschkind, ‘The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt’, *American Ethnologist* 28:3 (2001) 623-649, 638.

³⁴ Cf. Hirschkind, ‘The Ethics of Listening’, 638-639.

The key here is that this sensorium is not a given; it has to be developed. Besides the importance of day-to-day practices for the cultivation of an ethical disposition, the practices of the fans in this study indicate that they also need certain rituals to prepare their bodies and minds for an experience of Jackson. This is where the concept of ‘sensational forms’ is particularly useful. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer coined the term which she defines as: “relatively fixed, authorized modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations.”³⁵ For Meyer, ‘sensation’ has a double meaning: feeling and the inducement of a particular kind of excitement. The concept of sensational forms allows to investigate how religious experience is transmitted and shared. An example of a sensational form is collective prayer, but Meyer also applies it to “the ways in which material religious objects— such as images, books, or buildings— address and involve beholders.”³⁶

Meyer describes sensational forms as “authorized” and argues that they play a central role in modulating religious individuals and communities within the context of particular religious organizations.³⁷ This marks an important difference with my research. Fitting the subjective turn, the majority of the fans in my study stays away from submission to God and searches for a personal spiritual connection with Jackson and the transcendental. What makes the case study of ‘Michaeling’ so fascinating is that, even though there is no established religious authority, the fans have created some form of canon and there is group formation around particular sacred forms with Michael Jackson as central orientation. The fans build on a particular reading of Jackson that they hold as foundational and that they affirm in each other’s behavior. What is more, there are individuals within the fan community who put themselves forward as leaders who create guidelines for the correct performance of rituals. Their authority is confirmed by followers who express the added value of such guidelines and communal ritual for belonging and for an experience of Jackson. This research thus illustrates an exciting intertwining of fandom and religion. The fans invent powerful new ways – like the Major Love Prayer – that mediate a (communal) experience of the transcendent.

To get a notion of the (aspired to) life-worlds of MJ-pilgrims and their consumption of Jackson for ethical self-formation, I apply a narrative approach. This means that I focus on the stories of the fans and aim to unpack how they understand and describe their relationship with Jackson, their worldview, and fandom in the broader context of their lives. In my choice for a narrative approach I have been inspired by anthropologist Marjo Buitelaar who, in her

³⁵ Meyer, ‘Religious sensations: Media, aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion’, 160.

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Birgit Meyer, ‘Mediation and immediacy: sensational forms, semiotic ideologies and the question of the medium’, *Social Anthropology* 19:1 (2011) 23-39, 29-30; Meyer, ‘Religious sensations’, 167. Cf. Meredith B. McGuire, ‘Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance’, in: Nancy T. Ammerman ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford Scholarship Online 2007) 187-200, 197-198.

research on the hajj, uses a combination of Hubert Hermans' Dialogical Self Theory and Dan P. McAdams' biographical interviewing.³⁸ A narrative approach assumes that identity is constructed through telling stories about how one has come to be the person one is today. Life stories are complex: the way a story is told is bound to a particular social, cultural and historical context, but also to the life phase one is in.³⁹ These stories that we construct to make sense of our lives are:

fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large.⁴⁰

In their life stories, people configure and reconfigure their past experiences, interpreting from their present vantage point. Self-narratives form interesting data for the investigation of worldview: "through narrative, we come in contact with our participants as people engaged in the process of interpreting themselves."⁴¹

According to Hermans modern identities have become plural and hybridized and the self includes a highly dynamic multiplicity of I-positions. The self is continuously in dialogue and interaction with her surroundings and vice versa. Consequently, the I fluctuates among different positions as it adapts to the dynamic context. The self has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. The I in the one position "can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, challenge and even ridicule the I in another position".⁴² Buitelaar explains the function of a narrative method for a thorough understanding of identity as follows:

Individuals always belong to several groups and categories at the same time. In response to these encounters people construct a series of alternative – often inconsistent – self-

³⁸ Cf. Marjo Buitelaar, 'Stepping in the footsteps of Hajar to bring home the hajj. Dialogical positioning in Asra Nomani's memoir *Standing Alone*', in: Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Viola Thimm eds., *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond. Reconfiguring Gender, Religion, and Mobility* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2020).

³⁹ R. Ruud Ganzevoort, 'Introduction. Religious Stories We Live By', in: R. Ruud Ganzevoort, Maaik de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath eds., *Religious Stories We Live By. Volume 19: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: Brill 2013) 1-17, 3. Cf. Amy Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies* (London: Sage 2003) 11-12, 28; David Yamane, 'Narrative and Religious Experience', *Sociology of Religion* 61:2 (2000) 171-189, 173, 175-176, 183.

⁴⁰ Dan P. McAdams, 'Personal Narratives and the Life Story', in: Oliver P. John, Richard W. Robins and Lawrence A. Pervin eds., *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (New York: Guilford Press 2008) 242-262, 242-243.

⁴¹ Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, 'Introduction', in: Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich eds., *Interpreting Experience: The Narrative Study of Lives* (California Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: Sage 1995) ix-xiii, ix.

⁴² Hubert Hermans, 'The Dialogical Self: Toward a Theory of Personal and Cultural Positioning', *Culture & Psychology* 7:3 (2001) 243-281, 248-249.

representations. Depending on the actual or imagined I-positions from which self-narrations are told, actors may tell different stories about their past, present and future. Through self-reflection and storytelling, they bring different experiences and views together in a composite whole.⁴³

The narrative approach is a suitable method to investigate meaning-making and self-formation in everyday life. Regarding the women in this study, it helps to dissect how they make sense of Michael Jackson in relation to their self-understanding and worldview and how they understand the meaning and function of sacred rituals to their place and purpose in society. The narrative approach leaves open the possibility that pilgrims tell different stories about their experiences, each with its own combination of motives, events and feelings, depending on context. The narrative approach directs the attention to the interaction between different personal and collective ‘voices’ that speak to and from the fans as they inhabit and move between the various I-positions that undergird their motivations, practices, experiences and identity processes and the influence of different sacred forms on their lives.⁴⁴ A narrative approach allows these different voices to exist simultaneously without contradictory voices being theoretically problematic.

This study highlights popular culture as an important source of inspiration for the narrative construction of a worldview and self. In the next section, I will discuss the relationship between religion and popular fan culture in academia.

Religion and popular fan culture

The strong response to Jackson’s death and the emphasis on purification of his dubious private life in his memorial service are elements of what scholar of religion Christopher Partridge calls ‘transfiguration’: the construction of a mythic narrative, which transforms the celebrity into an object of devotion. Partridge sees a strong correlation between celebrity cults and medieval saints, but he is critical of a too easy equation of fans and devotees.⁴⁵ Likewise, media and cultural studies experts Cornel Sandvoss and Mark Duffett warn their colleagues in their respective studies against the interchangeable use of fandom and religion. Sandvoss poses that with regard to the

⁴³ Marjo Buitelaar, ‘Dialogical Constructions of a Muslim Self through Life Story Telling’, in: R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaïke de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath eds., *Religious Stories We Live By, Volume 19: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Leiden: BRILL 2013) 143-156, 148.

⁴⁴ Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser, ‘Introductory chapter: history, main tenets and core concepts of dialogical self theory’, in: Hubert J. M. Hermans ed., *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012) 1-22, 2-3, 8.

⁴⁵ Christopher Partridge, ‘Fandom, Pop Devotion, and the Transfiguration of Dead Celebrities’, in: Franziska Metzger and Elke Pahud de Mortanges eds., *Orte und Räume des Religiösen im 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co. KG Paderborn 2016) 169-183, 170-171, 173; Partridge understands ‘myth’ as a sacred story that makes sense of existence.

use of religious symbols in forms of representation or practices, it is important to acknowledge the difference between references *to* religion in fandom and fandom *as* religion.⁴⁶ Duffett stresses that instead of assuming that fandom is a religion because it looks like one, scholars should aim to analyze, contextualize and compare fans' own accounts of their experience.⁴⁷

Most of the studies that explore religion and fandom nevertheless argue that specific types of popular culture are like religion or they discuss in what ways fandom replaces religion.⁴⁸ I find such a starting point problematic because it assumes that religion and fandom are mutually exclusive. The hypothesis that fandom replaces religion furthermore tends to ignore fan claims that their experience of fandom is not akin to religion.⁴⁹ Even if fans use religious terminology to describe their experiences, this should not automatically be taken as proof of a religious experience: fans could also appropriate religious discourse metaphorically or because these are the only words available to adequately describe their experiences.⁵⁰

The reason why it is so appealing for scholars to connect popular culture and religion is because popular culture is so meaningful to people.⁵¹ Popular culture is about identity, notions of a just society, and *Zeitgeist*.⁵² As with many concepts, the definition and use of the term 'popular culture' varies widely. What popular culture means depends on the context of use and a chosen definition always implies the exclusion of other conceptual categories.⁵³ I follow the interpretation of popular culture as a "way of life", an approach originally distinguished by academic Raymond Williams.⁵⁴ This broad understanding focuses on the *use* and *experience* of popular cultural resources by particular people in the context of their everyday lives. It explores

⁴⁶ Mark Duffett, 'False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture', *Popular Music and Society* 26:4 (2003) 513-522, 519-520; Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Cambridge Polity Press 2005) 62, 100.

⁴⁷ Duffett, 'False Faith or False Comparison?', 513.

⁴⁸ See Andrew Crome's overview of the academic study of religion and fandom: Crome, 'Reconsidering religion and fandom: Christian fan works in My Little Pony fandom', *Culture and Religion* 15:4 (2014) 399-418, 400-402.

⁴⁹ Idem, 400.

⁵⁰ Cf. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-experiences* (New York: Penguin Group 1964) footnote 1 page 5. It is common within fan cultures to use theological discourse metaphorically: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2002) 117-130, 117; Partridge, 'Fandom, Pop Devotion, and the Transfiguration of Dead Celebrities', 173. Cf the Springsteen-fans in Cavicchi's study: Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998) 44.

⁵¹ And "much of sociological theorizing about religion has taken "meaning making" as a starting point": Nancy T. Ammerman, 'Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52:2 (2013) 258-278, 269.

⁵² Lynn Schofield Clark, 'Why study popular culture? Or, How to Build a Case for Your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department', in: Gordon Lynch ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris 2007) 5-20, 9.

⁵³ Cultural studies expert John Storey even goes as far as arguing that the term 'popular culture' is "an empty conceptual category": John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction Seventh edition* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2015) 1. See for different approaches to popular culture: Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2005) 3.

⁵⁴ Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 2, 46.

both the individual and social function of popular culture, and studies how individuals draw from it to communicate about who they are, what they believe and do, and why.⁵⁵

As active consumers of popular culture, fans form a concrete case study to investigate the role of popular culture connected to identity and meaning-making. Fandom can provide insights into what people find important in terms of belonging, meaning and transcendence – symbolized by the popular cultural practices or resources of choice.⁵⁶ Sandvoss defines fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text.”⁵⁷ Popular texts can be books or music, as well as popular icons and stars. Early academic studies into fandom tended to (mis)portray fans as superficial passive victims of modern mass society.⁵⁸ Fandom, they argued, compensated for “a lack of intimacy, community and identity”.⁵⁹ Especially celebrity-focused fandom has a history of not being taken seriously and up to this day struggles with biases. Celebrity ‘worship’ still evokes lamentations about superficiality and is taken as proof of the ‘weakness’ of the fan, who, manipulated by the entertainment industry and mass media, is helplessly steered into the path of consumerism.⁶⁰

The fan-star relationship, however, is more complex than has previously been acknowledged. A case in point is the research of scholar Bethan Jones who has demonstrated that celebrity-fans can become catalysts for change when they respond to positive attributes ascribed to a celebrity and bring those into their own lives for the benefit of themselves and others.⁶¹ In this thesis I will show that this is also the case for MJ-fans. The women in my study model themselves on Jackson, as the artist speaks to them about issues that they deem important. Fortunately, the portrayal of fans as socially isolated and apathetic recipients is nowadays outdated. This is due partly to fandom having become a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life, and partly to academics who have shifted from an interpretation in terms of passivity to one focusing on agency.⁶² Contemporary studies of fandom argue that fans are *performers* and that fandom is part and parcel of the reflexive identity construction of modern people. Moreover, scholarship has

⁵⁵ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 15-16, 164; Schofield Clark, ‘Why study popular culture?’, 11.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington, ‘Introduction: Why Study Fans?’, in: Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington eds., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press 2007) 1-16, 9-10; Gordon Lynch, ‘Introduction’, in: Gordon Lynch ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris 2007) 1-4, 1; Jennifer Porter, ‘Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: the Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities’, *Implicit Religion* 12:3 (2009) 271-280, 271.

⁵⁷ Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 8.

⁵⁸ Paul Booth, ‘Fandom in the Classroom: a Pedagogy of Fan Studies’, in: Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis eds., *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2012) 174-187, 175; John Fiske, ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’, in: Lisa A. Lewis ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 1992) 30-49, 30. Cf. Joli Jensen, ‘Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization’, in: Lewis ed., *The Adoring Audience*, 9-29.

⁵⁹ Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 2.

⁶⁰ Cf. Paul Hollander’s critique of celebrity fandom: Paul Hollander, ‘Why the Celebrity Cult?’, *Symposium: Celebrity in America Today* 47:5 (2010) 388-391, 388.

⁶¹ Bethan Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

⁶² Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 3.

shown that fandom can provide insights into how people create and maintain communities.⁶³

Despite a new scholarly interest in fandom, only few studies have explored the connection between fandom, everyday routines and morality. Moreover, there is a neglect in studies of older audiences, both regarding lifelong fandom and the question what happens when people become fans in later life. The women in this study are all over forty, most of whom are somewhere in their fifties or sixties. By focusing on the experiences of middle-aged and senior female music fans, this study aims to remedy the gap in our knowledge about (older) women within the fields of fan studies and ethnomusicology. The bulk of research in these fields focuses on young fans, rooted in the notion that “people’s heaviest personal investment in popular music is when they are teenagers and young adults.”⁶⁴ This supposed common knowledge poses a disadvantage for the study of more mature fans. It typifies fandom as something owned by teenagers, which results in the underlying assumption that fandom “will later be abandoned, or only nostalgically revisited.”⁶⁵ The lack of knowledge concerning older audiences often comes with a worrying stereotyping of aging music-fans: those who are approaching midlife and ‘hold on’ to their fandom are often portrayed as has-beens, immature or as wishing to reclaim their youth.⁶⁶ Sociologist Andy Bennett is one of few scholars who focus on older audiences and how they produce their ageing identities through everyday engagement with popular music. Bennett claims that for ardent fans music is not only about where they have been but also about where they are going. In fact, he states that music may take on a heightened level of importance through a person’s longstanding immersion in musical texts and the ways in which these intersect with their life course.⁶⁷ My findings support Bennett’s argument. As I will show in the following chapters, the fans in this study consciously interact with Jackson’s music to enrich their current life phase.

The stereotype of the teenage girl or young woman as ‘groupie’ who is swept off her feet by a male entertainer might be another reason that accounts for the lack of scholarship on mature female music fans.⁶⁸ Expert of gender and popular music Rosemary Lucy Hill argues that this misrepresentation of women’s fandom relies upon “ideas about women as guided by their bodies

⁶³ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York; London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2013); Joli Jensen, ‘Afterword: Fans and Scholars – A Reassessment’, in: Mark Duffett ed., *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2014) 207–215, 211; Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 96.

⁶⁴ Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Abingdon; Hampshire; Burlington: Ashgate 2007) 267.

⁶⁵ Matt Hills, ‘Patterns of Surprise: The “Aleatory Object” in Psychoanalytic Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom’, *Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom* 48:7 (2005) 801–821, 804. Cf. Laura Vroomen, ‘Kate Bush: Teen Pop and Older Female Fans’, in: Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson eds., *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (TN: Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2004) 238–253, 243.

⁶⁶ Andy Bennett, *Music, Style, and Ageing: Growing Old Disgracefully?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2013) 14.

⁶⁷ Idem, 2, 4–5, 32, 42, 47–48. Andy Bennett, ‘Punk’s Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans’, *Sociology* 40:2 (2006) 219–235, 221.

⁶⁸ Rosemary Lucy Hill, *Gender, Metal and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers 2016) 5; Charlot Railton, ‘The Gendered Carnival of Pop’, *Popular Music* 20:3 (2001) 321–331, 328.

and emotions, and unable to make reasoned judgements.”⁶⁹ The fact that mature adults and seniors are dismissed as serious subjects for study illustrates the persistence of negative connotations that stick to fandom. This is unfortunate, because studying people who have committed themselves to a life-long fan-lifestyle can teach us about the impact of fandom on identity-formation and the evolving relationship between fan and the object of fandom. Also, the focus on older fans sheds light on how life transitions and major life turning points – such as retirement – can allow for new types of fan-performance.⁷⁰

In their conversations with me and with other fans, the women in this study kept returning to the importance to them of Jackson’s music and lyrics. Through daily interaction with his songs, they draw closer to the popstar and let themselves be inspired to become better and more loving. In the next section I will reflect on the power of music for everyday meaning-making.

Music Matters: the role of music in everyday life

“Music matters” is a popular saying among scholars who investigate the meaning of (self-chosen) music. Of the wide range of cultural resources, music has a special power because it is so intimately entwined with emotion and one’s self, whilst it also brings people together.⁷¹ Most research in the field of music and identity has taken an essentialist approach, deducing music’s power from the music itself (content analysis of lyrics) or from the musician’s motivations.⁷² The philosopher Theodor Adorno is known as one of the first great thinkers in the twentieth century who took the effect of music on identity seriously. However, Adorno was not a great fan of popular music. He warned of its shallow and dangerous effects, which, as a production of the culture industry, he believed to be manipulative and undermining of critical thinking.⁷³ Although scholars in the field of music owe much to the academic, Adorno’s work has been heavily criticized, especially for his separation between supposedly ‘serious music’ and ‘superficial’ pop music, as well as for his assumption of the passivity on the part of the listener.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Hill, *Gender, Metal and the Media*, 160.

⁷⁰ C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, ‘A life course perspective on fandom’, *International journal of Cultural studies* 13:5 (2010) 429-450, 437, 441.

⁷¹ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) 16-17; Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 306; David Hesmondhalgh, *Why Music Matters* (Hoboken: Wiley ProQuest Ebook Central 2013) 1.

⁷² DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 22; Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 294; Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 117-120; Christopher Partridge, ‘Popular Music, Affective Space and Meaning’, in: Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell eds., *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2012) 182-193, 183.

⁷³ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 1-2; Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis 1998; ebook 2005) 1-3, 7, 15.

⁷⁴ Adorno also did not provide a ‘machinery’ for viewing his hypotheses and testing the ways that music actually works for and is used by its recipients, instead he found evidence for the effects of music in the music itself. This essentialist approach shows a theoretical shortcut, which has been addressed in more recent research on ethnomusicology. Cf. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 2, 22.

The current assumption within sociomusicology is that music listeners are reflexive performers.⁷⁵ Ethnomusicologist Evert Bisschop Boele distinguishes three reasons why people connect to music:

First, it gives, expresses, or changes your personal musical identity. Second, it gives you opportunities to interact with the world. With others, with matter and with time, with the present and the future, with histories and geographies, with God, the devil, the inner self and the domain of beauty and ugliness, and with yourself as a worldly person. And third, it enables you to regulate your life and the lives of others. Each person does that in a unique way. Deeply and emotionally anchored in his or her biography. That includes the cultures he or she has been raised in. The family he or she comes from. The learning he or she has done throughout his or her life.⁷⁶

Sociomusicologist Simon Frith has been an important propagator of shifting the focus in sociomusicology to a study of how one's interaction with popular music shapes identity and creates and constructs an experience. Frith argues that music listeners have the power to mold their moods and identity through the routinely use of music, for example through listening and dancing.⁷⁷ As was illustrated by the quote of Bisschop Boele; present-day research elaborates on the idea that the listening experience, as well as the meanings and effects of music, are dynamically shaped by the listener (plus his/her memories and associations). Contemporary studies furthermore underline the influence of the song itself (that is bound to compositional conventions) and the context in which the music is listened to.⁷⁸ Sociomusicologist Tia DeNora calls this 'human-music interaction'.⁷⁹ DeNora argues that at the level of daily life music may influence behavior:

Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel – in terms of energy and emotion – about themselves, about others, and about situations.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Cf. Partridge, 'Popular Music, Affective Space and Meaning', 183; Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 197-207, 203, 205, 293. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 17.

⁷⁶ Evert Bisschop Boele, 'Audience and Performer Relations - On Musicians and Audiences': Introduction to the topic of audience engagement for the meeting of AEC's Pop and Jazz Platform (Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance: London, UK 2017) 1-3, 2. Cf. Alexandra Lamont, Alinka Greasley, and John Sloboda distinguish three similar main functions of music connected to identity and emotion, namely: 1. Reminiscence, 2. Mood management, and 3. Presentation or confirmation of social identity: John Sloboda, Alexandra Lamont, and Alinka Greasley, 'Choosing to hear music', in: Susan Hallam, Ian Cross and Michael Thaut eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology* (2 ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) 431-439, 435.

⁷⁷ Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 197-207, 294.

⁷⁸ Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (Oxford Scholarship Online 2014); Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 48-49.

⁷⁹ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 33.

⁸⁰ Idem, 17.

Because music in everyday life is related to mood management, identity and worldview, the study of popular music has the potential to have particular significance in scholarship on contemporary religion and society. Yet, Lynch observes that:

the sociological study of the interlocking trends of the decline of traditional religious institutions, the rise of alternative spiritualities, and the mediatisation of religion have tended to neglect the significance of music in these processes in favour of focusing on other media, such as film, television, and the internet.⁸¹

Indeed, little is known about how people use popular music as a medium for shaping and expressing their worldview. Only recently the first comprehensive analysis handbook of religion and popular music was published, edited by the beforementioned Christopher Partridge and sociologist of religion Marcus Moberg.⁸² With this study I aim to contribute to this still neglected area of study by exploring how the fans who participated in my research use Jackson's music in their day-to-day lives to mediate a spiritual experience. However, as I mentioned before, the meaning of a particular piece of music is not separate from its creator. Boele calls music a two-way process: it is a meaningful meeting between the musician and the listener.⁸³ Even though most of the fans in this study have never seen Jackson perform live, it is still vital to apply an author-focused approach to their interaction with his music.⁸⁴ In my case this means that I will reflect on Jackson's biography and self-portrayal and consider how the fans appropriate his (ethical and religious) views and stances. In this thesis, I will develop the argument that the fans project 'sacred forms' onto Jackson, which they try to develop in themselves. I will show that the fans' emancipatory reading of Jackson greatly influences the way they interact with his music.

Having set out my theoretical and methodological backbone, the next and final sections of this introduction will give some background information on my research participants and their object of fandom: Michael Jackson. I will first describe how I became acquainted with the women whose voices are central in this study.

Finding Michael Jackson pilgrims

My search for MJ-pilgrims started in 2015 when I was looking for informants for my MA-thesis. At the time, I did not intend to focus exclusively on female fans. It just so happened that my

⁸¹ Gordon Lynch, 'The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45:4 (2006) 481-488, 482.

⁸² Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2017).

⁸³ Bisschop Boele, 'Audience and Performer Relations - On Musicians and Audiences', 2.

⁸⁴ Cf. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 111-134.

gatekeeper, Miranda, was a 57-year-old American woman, who introduced me to her inner-circle of, mostly, middle-aged female friends.⁸⁵ Straight away, Miranda was quite willing to recruit fans for my study, but she warned me beforehand that: “Many are skeptical... since there are some out there trying to belittle Michael and His followers.” Miranda was right; getting in contact with fans proved to be more difficult than I had expected. The fact that I had to look for people online made it more difficult.⁸⁶ From the outset I was clear in identifying myself as a researcher and a fan. My initial contact with fans was based on a precarious trust. Some women who initially agreed to participate in my research, withdrew at the last moment. Nonetheless, there were also those who were excited from the start. The openness of these women after only a few introductory e-mails back and forth was remarkable.

When I started my PhD research, I renewed contact with the eleven fans who had participated in my MA-thesis research. I hoped to meet these women and ideally accompany them on one of their ‘Michaeling’-journeys. Since I had only corresponded with the fans through email, this was a big next step in our rapport. I was so bold as to ask fans Ava and Erica in a videocall if I could join them in their 2018-pilgrimage to Michael Week. I was relieved when the women responded with a wholehearted “yes” and in 2018 (and again in 2019) for two weeks I traveled with their group to visit Michael-places in Solvang, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. During these Michael Weeks I met more fans who were willing to be included in my study.

In total I collected the self-narratives of 26 female MJ-fans through 12 oral interviews, 10 email interviews, and 4 written narratives. In the case of the oral interviews, I walked the women through my interview format. I encouraged my interlocutors to talk freely about their fandom, worldview and pilgrimage experiences. I recorded the oral interviews and fully transcribed them. For my email-interviews, I sent the fans a Word-document with open questions and an introductory page that included the terms and conditions of the interview. Four women granted me permission to use a written narrative that they had previously published in a book or on a private blog or forum. In addition, I went through public blogs and Facebook accounts to get a notion of the type of community that my interlocutors belong to. There were also women in my research group who had printed compilations of stories in which fans in their environment shared their experiences. They gave me these books, which also greatly contributed to my understanding.

In addition to the data collected through the interviews and participant observation during the Michael Weeks of 2018 and 2019, this study is based on a survey that I conducted among

⁸⁵ Miranda and I got acquainted in February of 2015 when I commented on a blogpost she wrote about her book in which she explores Jackson as a divine messenger of God.

⁸⁶ I found Page and Zoe on an Amazon forum, which has been taken offline since. Most fans have moved to Facebook. I found Nicole through her website for the book that she had written about Jackson. I found Bea through the website of the fan community MJ’s LEGACY.

Major Love Prayer-participants and fieldwork in Munich that I discuss in chapters one and two. I processed all data anonymously and applied the software ATLAS.ti for analysis. To this purpose, I applied a combination of inductive and deductive coding. I have given the women in this study pseudonyms and left out information that might reveal their identity. Some women explicitly asked me to use their real names. They explained that they were not ashamed of who they are, nor of their lifestyle. Nevertheless, I have decided to anonymize their stories to protect these women, as they cannot control the way I interpret and analyze the interviews. I hope I will still do their stories justice and that they will be able to recognize their voices throughout this study.

The ages of the fans in this study vary between 43 and 69 years old, with an average age of 58 years. I will look into the appeal that Jackson has for this particular group of women who are his contemporaries. Many of my interviewees asserted that most members in their fan network are women. My observations confirm that the more ardent ‘Michaeling’-travelers tend to be female. This seems to correspond with the statement of anthropologist Willy Jansen that, although gender rates may vary significantly depending on context, there is a predominance of women visiting shrines.⁸⁷ The fans I studied often distinguished between “average fans” – those who “just” enjoy Jackson the artist and wish to have a good time – and “serious fans” – a category to which my informants belong, who admire Jackson the human being and approach his art as a medium to him and his (divine) message. What also distinguishes this group of fans from “casual fans” is that they have visited Michael-places or expressed the wish to embark upon a ‘Michaeling’-journey in the near future. Furthermore, the women stood out for their willingness, sometimes even eagerness, to share their stories with me. All of my interlocutors expressed feeling responsible to pay Jackson’s humanitarian legacy forward in one way or another. This might also explain why many create, ‘fan works’: they write, paint, and maintain websites – all to honor Jackson and spread awareness of him.

Most of my 26 interlocutors are North-American, white, and middle-class. Four fans come from Europe, Sandra lives in Australia and Elena is South-American. Jennie is the only African-American fan within the group, which is not representative for the larger MJ-pilgrim community, let alone Jackson’s global fan-community, which comprises fans from all cultural backgrounds, ages and ethnicities.⁸⁸ While the women come from different countries, and sometimes different continents, their fandom, worldviews and vocabulary show remarkable similarities. This can partly be explained by the fact that most women belong to the same social circle. Half of the women who participated in the research is married, the other half is single, of whom four are

⁸⁷ Willy Jansen, ‘Old Routes, New Journeys’, in: Catrien Notermans and Willy Jansen eds., *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 1-18, 8.

⁸⁸ Cf. Sylvia J. Martin, ‘The Roots and Routes of Michael Jackson’s Global Identity’, *Culture and Society* 49:3 (2012) 284-290; Joseph Vogel, *The Man in the Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson* (New York: Sterling 2011) 68.

divorcees. Most grew up in a Christian home. The women furthermore have an educational level that is above-average.⁸⁹ Nearly all work or have worked – 12 are retired. The women (have) work(ed) in very different occupations, including that of music teacher, entrepreneur, priest, psychologist and radiologist.

From the start of my research, my desire was to get to know and understand these ardent fans. While I did get to meet and join such fans on their trips, my goal was not always a straightforward journey. During Michael Week 2018, for instance, I noticed that although I am an MJ-fan myself finding my way as a researcher was not always easy and sometimes resulted in wariness on the part of fans. I will reflect on my position as an insider's outsider and its implication for the production of knowledge on 'Michaeling' in the next subsection.

Understanding MJ-pilgrims as an insider's outsider

When I sat next to Vera during a fan party and told her about my wish to understand MJ-pilgrims, she promptly responded that there was no way I could ever understand her if I did not experience a spiritual connection with Jackson myself. In a similar way, Sasha – whom I chatted with a couple of times at Forest Lawn (Jackson's burial site) – wrote me in a private Facebook message that she would not tell me her Michael-story because it was “too intimate and too personal” to share. Sasha explained that she based her decision on prior negative experiences with people who – like me – do not experience a spiritual connection with Jackson. Vera's and Sasha's response show the patience and tact that are needed to gain the trust of the particular group of fans that I examine in this study. I soon realized that my wish to become ingrained in the community I was studying was naïve.

Nevertheless, in this research I depart from the phenomenological approach in anthropology and follow the notion that “‘religions’ or religious experiences do not have to be ‘explained’, but simply ‘understood’ as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider.”⁹⁰ Ideally, this approach allows one to “make the cut”, as religious scholar Jeffrey Kripal calls it:

Making the cut means taking all experiences seriously, however strange or impossible they may seem to a particular psyche, and without immediately jumping to a moral or intellectual conclusion about what they mean or point toward.⁹¹

⁸⁹ 17 women have completed a 4-year tertiary degree or higher – of whom two hold a PhD degree. Two women have a 3-year degree higher professional education. One fan has a secondary vocational education.

⁹⁰ Kim Knibbe and Peter Versteeg, 'Assessing Phenomenology in Anthropology: Lessons from the Study of Religion and Experience', *Critique of Anthropology* 28:1 (2008) 47-62, 48.

⁹¹ Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Super Natural: Why the Unexplained is Real* (New York: TarcherPerigee 2017) 47.

During my participant observation I accompanied Ava's and Erica's small travel group, which included Hellen in 2018 and 2019 and Elena in 2019. Fortunately, the women soon treated me as part of their group. Initially, I was worried that they would experience me as an intruder during their pilgrimage. The women, however, kept repeating that it felt like "a great gift" that I documented their journey which they interpreted as an opportunity to get academic recognition for their perspective on life. Our big age difference – ranging between 24 and 40 years – probably contributed to the warm, protective way in which the women approached me. Elena, for example, frequently pet named me her daughter. I was amazed by the openness of the women; I was included in all aspects of the trip and was even allowed to record many of our group-conversations.

Even so, as a 'non-believer', it was sometimes a challenge for me to relate to the beliefs of my travel companions and their friends. Especially in the beginning, I sometimes struggled to find a balance between perceiving things from my own perspective and my wish to fully participate with the fans. The women I traveled with noticed my hesitance and jokingly called me skeptical. As our journey progressed, however, the intimacy within our travel group grew and my stance shifted towards, what anthropologists Kim Knibbe and André Droogers have termed, 'methodological ludism'.⁹² I was able to open myself up to experiencing the fans' way of viewing reality and let myself get carried along in the 'Michaeling'-journey. I even experienced some 'Michael-moments': moments that the women describe as orchestrated by Jackson. Traveling in the company of women during their pilgrimage to Michael Week thus allowed me to feel first-hand what it is like to participate in 'Michaeling'.

In spite of the amiability of my travel companions, I found myself both an insider and an outsider. As an MJ-fan, I share their excitement for Jackson as an artist. I know the lyrics and music videos and I clearly remember where I was when I heard that Michael Jackson had died. This knowledge and experience benefitted me in the sense that I could relate to the people I was studying. I also picked up on their subtle references to Jackson. Moreover, I am an insider because I am a woman, like most of my research participants. However, I am not a spiritual follower of Jackson, and as a researcher my aim was not only to participate but also to observe the fans I accompanied on their journey – sometimes literally by taking a step back. I also generally looked like an outsider, not wearing Michael-clothes or Michael-related accessories. This outsider-position will inevitably have caused some fans to carefully select and present their stories in a specific way, or even refrain from sharing them, as the explicit statements by Vera and Sasha illustrate.

The insider-outsider dilemma is a matter of heated discussion in both religious studies

⁹² Kim Knibbe and André Droogers, 'Methodological Ludism and the Academic Study of Religion', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23:3 (2011) 283-303, 286, 290.

and fan studies.⁹³ Both perspectives come with their own advantages and disadvantages. Being an insider facilitates quick access, and it can be easier to talk to people if you share the same religious faith or if you are a fellow fan. The bottleneck of being an insider is generally the issue of ‘objectivity’. Academics are supposedly rational and should not get caught up in “the passions and commitments” of those they are studying.⁹⁴ The advantage of the outsider-perspective is that it allows one to see and reflect on a worldview, or fandom, to gain certain insights that are generally not available to those who have internalized the languages and behaviors of that particular tradition. The key, argues Kripal, is to move back and forth between insider and outsider perspectives to learn to adopt a reflexive stance which allows being able to empathize with both sides.⁹⁵

One of the ways in which the emic/etic perspectives become visible in this thesis is in terminology. My interlocutors loosely mixed terms like the sacred, magic, spirituality and the divine. When I asked them to clarify the meaning of such terms, they generally answered that it was a “feeling”. In this study I will indicate when I cite fans and when I use a term as an etic concept. Some of the fans I quote used capitals to refer to Jackson (e.g. “His”, “Him”) in their written statements. With such subtleties these fans pointed to Jackson’s divine status. To facilitate the fans in telling their stories, I invited them to speak in their first language, this included Dutch and German. For non-native English speakers I translated the original answers into English for the reader’s convenience.⁹⁶ Throughout this dissertation, when I use the word ‘focus-group’, I refer to the 26 women whose stories I have analyzed. When I mention my ‘travel group’, I mean the group of women with whom I traveled during Michael Week 2018 and 2019.

Now, let us move on to Michael Jackson. In the next section I focus on the singer’s biography, including what are highlighted by fans as his artistic and humanitarian accomplishments. I will also address the popstar’s conflicting self-portrayal; both in his art and in his personal life Jackson displayed an indeterminate mix of the human and the supernatural, inviting those who listen to his songs to be part of his global mission to “Heal the World”.

⁹³ Cf. Matt Hills, ‘Introduction: Who’s Who? Academics, fans, scholar-fans and fan-scholars’, in: *Fan Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2002) xvii- xxxviii; Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, Incorporated 2014) 103.

⁹⁴ Hills, ‘Introduction: Who’s Who?’, xix-xx. However, especially within anthropological research, you cannot take yourself out of the game. The research outcomes are based on the researcher’s selection of data and interpretation, which makes it an inherently personal job.

⁹⁵ Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 103-105. Cf. Evert Bisschop Boele, ‘Etnografisch onderzoek: het perspectief van de ander’, *Cultuur + educatie* 17:50 (2019) 85-93, 89.

⁹⁶ Only Elena, whose native language is Spanish, answered in English, because she is a professional English translator.

Michael Jackson's self-portrayal as tormented redeemer

Michael Joseph Jackson was born on 29 August 1958 in Gary, Indiana. Money was tight in his family: his father Joe worked in a steel mill and his mother Katherine worked part-time in a department store. In his autobiography *Moonwalk* Jackson recalls that music was an escape from reality and a source of entertainment that kept the big family of nine children together.⁹⁷ Jackson was only five years old when he joined his older brothers in the *Jackson 5*. His charismatic stage-performance resulted in him soon being promoted to the position of bandleader. The young Michael stood out for his professionalism and maturity on stage. Only eleven years old, he sang 'Who's Loving You?' at *The Ed Sullivan Show* with "an impeccable performance of a grown man's heartfelt remorse over lost love, made the more touching as it emerged from a tiny, adorable innocent."⁹⁸ Jackson's confidence, flawless performance and James Brown-like dance moves gave him the presence of an adult. Growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, the singer attended church on Sundays and also went 'Pioneering': the term used for the missionary work that Jehovah's Witnesses do. In *Moonwalk* Jackson writes about his mother as an important figure in the formation of his faith:

She instilled in me a love of Him that I will always have. She taught me that my talent for singing and dancing was as much God's work as a beautiful sunset or a storm that left snow for children to play in. Despite all the time we spent rehearsing and traveling, Mom would find time to take me to the Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses, usually with Rebbie and LaToya.⁹⁹

Under the guidance of Motown the *Jackson 5* grew enormously popular. However, in the mid-seventies Jackson came to feel restrained in his creativity. Coupled with the wish to develop his own sound, he decided to leave the group and start for himself at the age of 21. Under the guidance of record producer Quincy Jones he created the albums that would set off his unsurpassed global popularity, starting with *Off the Wall* (1979), and followed by the Grammy award winning album *Thriller* (1982), which up to 2018 was the best-selling album of all time. After the great success of *Thriller*, Jackson's faith came to be under tension. His fellow Jehovah's Witnesses found his work too "worldly" and by 1987 Watchtower – the Jehovah's Witnesses monthly magazine – formally declared that Jackson was no longer considered to be a member.

⁹⁷ Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk* (New York: Doubleday 1988) 2.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Warwick, "'You Can't Win, Child, but You Can't Get Out of the Game': Michael Jackson's Transition from Child Star to Superstar", *Popular Music and Society* 35:2 (2012) 241-259, 248.

⁹⁹ Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 12-13.

Nevertheless, Jackson continued his pioneering work until 1991.¹⁰⁰

In the late eighties, Jackson befriended the New Age self-help guru Deepak Chopra. Chopra's influence can be found in Jackson's book *Dancing the Dream* (1992) in which the artist time and again "turns to the themes of universal and timeless consciousness out of which we come and into which we return."¹⁰¹ *Dancing the Dream* opens with an introduction written by Elizabeth Taylor in which she calls Jackson an "unearthly, special, innocent, childlike wise man".¹⁰² Taylor's celebration of Jackson as an "unearthly" performer fits the artist's self-characterization as a visionary with God-given talents. An excerpt from *Dancing the Dream*, in which the King of Pop describes his worldview, displays a pantheistic inclination that closely resembles how the SBNR-fans in this research approach their own spirituality:

For me the form God takes is not the most important thing. What's most important is the essence. My songs and dances are outlines for Him to come in and fill. I hold out the form, She puts in the sweetness. (...) for me the sweetest contact with God has no form. I close my eyes, look within, and enter a deep soft silence. The infinity of God's creation embraces me. We are one.¹⁰³

Throughout his career, Jackson would continue to portray himself as a spiritual mediator who used his gift from God to make a change. In an interview with the magazine *Ebony* in 1992 the singer explained that he considered it his purpose on earth to create with his art "the union between the human and the divine".¹⁰⁴ Ten years later, Jackson again said: "I'm representing the higher being. I'm not saying I'm God, but I'm saying heal the planet, heal the world, save our children, save the forest. There's nothing wrong with that. Right?"¹⁰⁵

Over time, Jackson became one of the most important pop icons of the 20th century. The artist did not conform to one music style, but borrowed and mixed from all sorts of genres, including rock, funk, disco and R&B, to create his own unique musical base.¹⁰⁶ Jackson's narrative-based videos introduced the world to his extraordinary dancing abilities. In 1983 the music

¹⁰⁰ Michael Jackson, 'My Childhood, My Sabbath, My Freedom', Beliefnet (December 2000) <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/2000/12/my-childhood-my-sabbath-my-freedom.aspx> (accessed 21 March 2019)

¹⁰¹ Susan Fast, *Dangerous* (New York; London: Bloomsbury 2014) 105-107

¹⁰² Elizabeth Taylor, 'Introduction', in: Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream: Poems & Reflections written by Michael Jackson* (Ealing: Transworld Publishers 1992).

¹⁰³ Jackson, *Dancing the Dream* 69.

¹⁰⁴ Robert E. Johnson, 'Michael Jackson: Crowned In Africa, Pop Music King Tells Real Story Of Controversial Trip', *Ebony* (May 1992) 34-43, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon Reveals His Soul in Intimate Conversation* (New York: Vanguard Press 2009) 167.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, 'Michael Jackson's Postmodern Spirituality', *American Culture: Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993) 35-60, 43; Susan Fast, 'Michael Jackson's Queer Musical Belongings', *Popular Music and Society* 35:2 (2012) 281-300, 282; Tamara Roberts, 'Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23:1 (2011) 19-39, 20.

video network MTV played the hit song “Billie Jean”, which was an important turning point, considering that the channel had excluded black musicians until that date.¹⁰⁷ According to scholar Joseph Vogel Jackson “literally embodied the music. (...) He mediated it through every means at his disposal – his voice, his body, his dances, films, words, technology and performances.”¹⁰⁸ The 1980s and 1990s were the decades of the singer’s greatest popularity. Speaking to a global audience, the King of Pop became the epitome of “crossover” success in American and global popular culture.¹⁰⁹ ‘Michael Jackson’ became a brand. Vogel writes the following about, what he calls, the ‘Jackson-mania’ in the early eighties: “everywhere one looked, Jackson’s presence seemed to be found in commercials, video’s, magazines, posters, T-shirts, or even replica dolls.”¹¹⁰ In 2009, Jackson was the most downloaded artist of all time and *the Guinness Book of World Records* named him the most successful entertainer in history.¹¹¹

Besides his artistic and commercial success, Jackson acquired the reputation of being a great philanthropist. Over his lifetime the singer donated an estimated \$300 million to dozens of charities.¹¹² When on tour, Jackson was known to visit hospitals and orphanages. He often voiced feeling greatly affected by the wrongs in the world, which he wanted to “heal”. In *Dancing the Dream* the artist wrote:

those problems aren’t “out there,” not really. I feel them inside me. A child crying in Ethiopia, a sea gull struggling pathetically in an oil spill, a mountain gorilla being mercilessly hunted, a teenage soldier trembling with terror when he hears the planes fly over: Aren’t these happening in me when I see and hear about them?¹¹³

Jackson’s struggle against injustice came to the fore in his art in which he addressed issues of poverty, racism, and environmental degradation. Examples of famous songs with an activist

¹⁰⁷ Ethan Goffman, ‘From the Blues to Hip Hop: How African American Music Changed U.S. Culture and Moved the World’, *ProQuest Discovery Guides* (November 2010) 1-12, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Vogel, ‘The Misunderstood Power of Michael Jackson’s Music’, *The Atlantic* (8 February 2012) <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/02/the-misunderstood-power-of-michael-jacksons-music/252751/> (accessed 10 September 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Philip Brian Harper, ‘Synesthesia, “Crossover,” and Blacks in Popular Music’, *Social Text* 23 (Autumn – Winter 1989) 102-121, 110. Harper describes on page 102 the term “crossover” as: an act’s achievement – specifically the success by black artists within “mainstream” culture – of a high degree of commercial success due to its appeal across racial boundaries considered to divide the general popular music audience; Martin, ‘The Roots and Routes of Michael Jackson’s Global Identity’, 285.

¹¹⁰ Vogel, *Man in the Music*, 68.

¹¹¹ MTV, ‘Michael Jackson Is Most Downloaded Artist Of All Time’, (29 August 2010) <http://www.mtv.co.uk/michael-jackson/news/michael-jackson-is-most-downloaded-artist-of-all-time> (accessed 10 September 2020); Worldrecordacademy, ‘Most Successful Entertainer of All Time- Michael Jackson sets world record’, (27 June 2009) http://www.worldrecordacademy.com/entertainment/most_successful_entertainer_of_all_time-Michael_Jackson_sets_world_record%20_90258.htm (accessed 10 September 2020).

¹¹² Guinness World Records, *Guinness World Records 2000* (Bantam 2000); Joseph Vogel, ‘Michael Jackson’s Forgotten Humanitarian Legacy’, *Huffpost* (24 September 2017) https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michael-jacksons-forgotten-humanitarian-legacy_b_59c7c8d3e4b08d661550436a (accessed 28 September 2020).

¹¹³ Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, 143-144.

undertone are: “We are the World” (1985), “Heal the World” (1991), “They Don’t Care About Us” (1995), and “Earth Song” (1995). Through his music, Jackson appealed to his fans – whom he called his “soldiers of love” – to dream, love and make a change. African Studies expert Dawn-Elissa Fischer sees the messages of Jackson’s songs as a major factor in the dedication of his fans: “his influential musical metaphors call for people to hope, cope, and endure in times of struggle. Jackson’s songs invite people to actively engage life and its challenges”.¹¹⁴

Jackson described the world as “wounded” and its inhabitants as “alienated” from each other and from the environment. According to the artist the cause for this alienation is a disconnection with one’s inner child. Jackson presented innocence as a solution, which he interpreted as an ideal disposition of trust and openness without judgement, a stance he saw embodied by children.¹¹⁵ In *Dancing the Dream*, Jackson writes that he wants his work to help people rediscover the child that is hiding in them by bringing “mystery, magic, wonder, and excitement”.¹¹⁶ Sociologist Michael Eric Dyson wrote in 1993 that Jackson articulated powerful religious truths and moral themes in his art:

Jackson is driven by a desire to en flesh this spirituality, to enable others to perceive the vision that energizes and empowers him, and in the process to transform people’s lives with his art, with the stories that he sings and “tells” (...) Jackson’s art then, is intentional and goal oriented, and self-consciously related to the spiritual roots that have nourished its beginning.¹¹⁷

Dyson’s academic reflection on Jackson’s art and stage performance during Jackson’s heyday is a rarity within American and English scholarship.¹¹⁸ At the time, Jackson *was* critically discussed by German scholars who, it seems, were mainly concerned – to put it mildly – with the artist’s “messiah complex” in his music videos and live concerts.¹¹⁹ Theologians Uwe Böhm and Gerd Busschman argue that Jackson’s self-representation is double-sided: on the one hand he performed the strong, super-natural redeemer, on the other hand the artist presented himself as a suffering victim, who sacrificed himself to give mankind his music.¹²⁰ According to musicologist Peter Schatt it is exactly this dual self-characterization

¹¹⁴ Dawn-Elissa Fischer, ‘Wannabe Startin’ Somethin’: Michael Jackson’s Critical Race Representation’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23:1 (2011) 96-107, 97, 100.

¹¹⁵ Jackson, *Dancing the Dream*, 58.

¹¹⁶ Idem, 80.

¹¹⁷ Dyson, *American Culture*, 40. Dyson poses that Jackson examines in his art the nature of good and evil and the power of peace, love and justice for transforming the self, human nature, and society.

¹¹⁸ Up till Jackson’s death, very little had been written in academia about his art, given his impact on popular culture. Cf. Elizabeth Amisu, *The Dangerous Philosophies of Michael Jackson: His Music, His Persona, and His Artistic Afterlife* (Santa Barbara: Praeger 2016) 9.

¹¹⁹ Uwe Böhm and Gerd Buschmann, *Popmusik –Religion – Unterricht: Modelle und Materialien zur Didaktik von Popularkultur* (LitBerlin: LIT Verlag Münster 2006) 113; Rolf Tischer, „Heal the World“. Religion in der kommerziellen Rock- und Popmusik am Beispiel Michael Jackson’, *Archivbericht* 7 (Berlin 1997) 41-48. They were not alone, especially when “Earth Song” was released, critics disapproved of Jackson’s messianic self-portrayal. During Jackson’s performance of the song at the 1996 BRIT Awards Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker famously invaded the stage to protest against what he perceived to be Jackson’s “offensive” performance as a Christ-figure.

¹²⁰ Böhm and Buschmann, *Popmusik –Religion – Unterricht*, 117.

that makes it possible and appealing to identify with Jackson: as an idol and redeemer the star offers orientation, but simultaneously he presents himself as yearning for love and orientation.¹²¹

Michael Jackson's Performance of 'Earth Song' during the Brit awards (1996) - Photo Credit: Getty Images

The understanding of Jackson as a modern day messiah stands in stark contrast to the controversies that stick to how the popstar is remembered. After *Thriller*, Jackson's unparalleled popularity went hand in hand with media-attention directed to his eccentric life. The artist explicitly identified with Peter Pan, adopted a pet chimpanzee and built his own theme park Neverland. His fluid identity and unconventional lifestyle, that had once contributed to his iconic image, started to trigger agitation. Jackson seemed to mix too many normative codes: race, gender, sexuality – he even negated the category 'adult' vs 'child'.¹²² Art historian Kobena Mercer assigned Jackson's sexual and racial ambiguity to artistic expression, comparing him to white male stars like Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Boy George. In presenting himself thus, Mercer argued, Jackson questioned dominant stereotypes of black masculinity.¹²³ Likewise, professor of black popular culture Mark Anthony Neal states that Jackson consciously displayed his safe image of the "asexual black male" to counter the stereotype of the "black male brute (...) that lies submerged in the subconsciousness of white America".¹²⁴

¹²¹ Peter W. Schatt, 'Michael Jackson: Erlösung dem Erlöser? Zum neuen Ethos des Musikerlebens', *Musik und Bildung* 25:3 (1993) 58-61. Quotes in this chapter are from the revised manuscript (2017) 1-5, 4-5.

¹²² David Brackett, 'Black or White? Michael Jackson and the Idea of Crossover', *Popular Music and Society* 35:2 (2012) 169-185, 180; Susan Fast, 'Difference that Exceeded Understanding: Remembering Michael Jackson (1958-2009)', *Popular Music and Society* 33:2 (2010) 259-266, 261.

¹²³ Kobena Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's "Thriller"', *Screen* 27:1 (1986) 26-43, 42-43.

¹²⁴ Mark Anthony Neal, 'Michael Jackson's Hidden Accuser: Racism', <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jun-10-oe-neal10-story.html> (accessed 15 May 2019).

Whatever Jackson's intentions might have been, his changing appearance, mysterious sexuality, unorthodox behavior and personal relationships with children made him the target of ridicule and suspicion. In the press the emphasis shifted from his art to his personal life.¹²⁵ In 1993, and again in 2005, Jackson was accused of child abuse.¹²⁶ Although Jackson always vehemently denied the allegations and was acquitted of all charges, the popstar would never be able to get rid of suspicion. The charges also affected his fans, who in turn were depicted as "wacko", emotional, and irrational.¹²⁷ In 2019, ten years after his sudden death, the four-hour long documentary *Leaving Neverland* was released which centers on the testimonies of two men who allege to have been sexually abused by Jackson as children. Jackson's family refutes the men's claims, but the documentary has redrawn the public's attention towards the shadow side of Jackson's imago.

The fans in this study are convinced of Jackson's innocence and have made it their life's mission to defend him and his legacy. In their eyes, the popstar was persecuted out of sensationalism, greed, and jealousy. This thesis focuses on their experiences: I will demonstrate the strength, inspiration and friendship that these women draw from their fandom, but also the hardship and conflict that comes with defending a man who has been profaned by public opinion. Because I find it important to centralize the self-representations of the fans I have interviewed, I have chosen to start each chapter in this thesis with one story of a woman, whose experience I deem representative for the larger group. In the next chapter, I explore the online ritual of the Major Love Prayer (MLP) starting with the experience of MLP-administrator Donna.

¹²⁵ John Nguyet Erni, 'Queer figurations in the media: Critical reflections on the Michael Jackson sex scandal', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 15:2 (1998) 158-180, 159-160; Nikki Sullivan, "It's as plain as the nose on his face": Michael Jackson, modificatory practices, and the question of ethics', *Scan: journal of media arts culture* 1:3 (2004); Vogel, 'The Misunderstood Power of Michael Jackson's Music'. See for an example of an article that critically discussed Jackson's controversial imago: David D. Yuan, 'The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson's 'Grotesque Glory'', in: Rosemarie Garland Thomson ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press 1996) 368-384, 368.

¹²⁶ The first accusation was withdrawn after Jackson reached a financial settlement.

¹²⁷ Cf. Matt Hills, 'Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? "Documenting" Emotivism and Fandom in Wacko About Jacko', *Social Semiotics* 17:4 (2007) 459-477.

CHAPTER 1

Sending out a Major Love:
the divine mission of the Major Love Prayer

Michael as the soundtrack of life

48-year old Donna grew up in a liberal Christian household in a white suburb in the middle of North America. Her family were active members of the church, but they weren't, what Donna called, "hyper-religious". "We were allowed to question, theorize and wonder", she said. At age 12, Donna "fell in love" with Jackson after seeing him perform on television at the American Music Awards. She bought *Thriller* and "never stopped listening". Jackson's music became "the soundtrack" of her life and his cd's are woven through her biography: the *Bad* album marking her high school years, the *Ultimate Collection* symbolizing her wedding and honeymoon. Looking back, Donna described her fandom as "a fantasy-world retreat". Being on the brink of becoming a teenager with still a lot of magical imagination, she connected to Jackson's child-like fantasy. She remembers feeling an affinity with him because she felt a bit of an outsider and "he seemed to feel that way about himself despite being this huge star." The word fan does not capture Donna's feelings for Jackson: "A fan is someone who likes a singer and buys an album", she explained. But based on reading lots of interviews, she came to understand Jackson and grew to love him. She felt "extremely close" to him "almost closer than family, like a part of yourself." Donna, though, stressed that, besides her infatuation with Jackson, she had a "normal" life too with boyfriends and jobs.

Growing up a teenager, Donna had Jackson up on every wall of her bedroom. In her environment it was quite something that she "put up posters of a black man". It made her aware of racial differences and racism: "If there was someone who used the N-word or something towards someone, they were calling Michael that too. He put that in front of the spotlight for you." Donna thinks that Jackson's fans are particularly sensitive to his messages. She herself experienced how loving Jackson made her *listen* to him more, thus becoming more receptive to the meaning of his songs. One of the highlights in her life was seeing Jackson in concert when she was sixteen years old. She called it "a religious experience" after which she felt filled with love. Donna recalls thinking "what if Jesus was Michael?". She laughs: "it sounds crazy and maybe it is some kind of projection of growing up as a Christian... But, if messengers and prophets were sent by God, it does not make sense that God would stop sending them, because it is not like humanity figured it out."

It has always been clear to Donna that music is a natural way to reach people because it crosses all boundaries. She also senses that Jackson infused his art with spirituality. It follows that the artist could be a prophet "but not of a particular religion", she added, "(a prophet) of the higher religion: love."

Donna continued that she does not want to turn Jackson into a deity. She believes he is a human being with whom she experiences a spiritual connection. Although she is “pretty private” about her feelings, Donna told her mother, sister and some of her close friends about her feelings for Jackson. They are “totally fine” with it and try to understand. Donna has been fortunate to find her partner on an MJ-forum who shares her spiritual interpretation of Jackson. When they decided to get married, they sent Jackson a wedding-invitation.

Over the years, Donna extended her childhood faith to include a broad spiritual palette. When she prays she now addresses: “God, Christ, Jesus, Krishna, Buddha and beings of higher planes”. An event similar to a near death experience gave her a very personal experience of God. Donna realized that “God, whatever and whoever you want to call it, includes everything” and that by extension “everything is sacred” and all are one in love. Donna’s ideal is to always be present in this awareness and express it all the time. But it requires effort and being “in the right place inside myself”. Her fandom of Jackson helps her get there and get her values straight. Donna told me she purposefully uses Jackson’s music to strengthen or change her mood: “Michael is powerful. He put so much passion and soul into whatever he was singing, that the energy/message/feeling is readily available if you’re not just listening passively.” Donna continued that Jackson has “modulated” her personality, making her see that everything is love and that all are one in spirit.

Throughout her life, Donna kept track of Jackson, which has not always been easy. “Being a long-time fan, we went through all the hell of, you know allegation against him in ’93, we went through the trial, we went through jokes about him, people not taking him seriously, to the point where you almost don’t want to mention him to anybody because somebody was gonna say something nasty.” Looking back on the trial in 2005, she remembers there was a fear: “what if they came back and they said ‘guilty’, I mean gosh, you didn’t even want to think it! Who is gonna play his music again? Who wants to play music from a convicted paedophile?” The *This is It* tour in 2009 symbolized a fresh start for Donna. She had tickets and was looking forward to show Jackson “that we love him, after everything that had happened.” But life took a different turn. Jackson died and 2009 became “a very emotional year”. Donna reflected: “It was like I fell apart into a million pieces (...) Like the whole world should just end now.”

At the time, Donna had not yet experienced losing close family members. In our conversation she wondered hesitantly whether that would have the same affect. After a year

of mourning, her mother expressed worries about her. Donna had a couple of experiences where she heard Jackson's voice and told her mum about it. She laughs: "I had to like reassure her that I am not losing grip on reality." But Donna was not the only one having extraordinary experiences. In the aftermath of Jackson's death she remembers a "wave of people" who were writing that Jackson was like the messiah. All these people had visitations from Jackson and were mind-blown trying to piece it together. Reading books about the early Christians helped Donna make sense of the impact and the communal grief: "I mean, we come up with those ideas because that's what we know." Although it helped her, Donna also struggled with these parallels: "you have like the fears that you have been taught you know, blasphemy or heresy. And that's challenging."

Since Jackson's death, Donna experienced an "explosion" of creativity: she made pictures of Jackson, wrote poems and articles, and sends these to Forest Lawn. She sees a similar creative productivity among other fans: "we all wanted to find ways to do something for Michael, in his name, in his memory, continuing the main mission in his heart. (...) We always wanted him respected as a human being." Donna expressed feeling like Jackson wanted her to do something bigger, like there was some job for her in all of this to not let his message be lost. After having participated in something that was called a "major love prayer", Donna knew what she had to do. She set up a website for the initiative to make sure the prayer would persist and reach more people.

Introduction

Since September 2009, on the 25th of every month MJ-fans around the world unite online to "Send out a Major Love". This chapter explores this so-called Major Love Prayer (MLP) that originated among fans on an MJ-forum as a way to express grief and share experiences after Jackson's sudden death. Donna was one of the first participants and decided to turn the initiative into an official website to help spread Jackson's message and keep it alive. During the MLP, participants try to heal the world – inspired by Jackson's message – through communal prayer. Shortly after its official establishment, the online ritual peaked in popularity with 1.096 visitors on 25 November 2009. Now, eleven years later, the novelty has worn off and the MLP's following

has decreased. Yet, for the people who (still) engage in the MLP today, I argue that, the prayer has evolved into a habit that enables the fans to internalize, continue and spread Michael Jackson's humanitarian legacy.

This chapter explores the meaning of the MLP for its participants by examining how the ritual functions as a new sensational form which enables and reinforces an experience of the sacred in everyday life and contributes to the creation and maintenance of an ethical self. The findings in this chapter are based on my analysis of the MLP-website, an in-depth interview with MLP-administrator Donna, and an examination of the experiences of 20 MLP-participants. Working from the perspectives of these fans can enhance our knowledge of how contemporary people use their fandom and popular texts – particularly the medium of music – for meaning-making in their (daily) lives.

Birgit Meyer argues that the study of attitudes toward modern media and their adoption into established practices of religious mediation is an essential part of researching religious change.¹²⁸ This case study provides insights into how religion and spirituality are transforming under the influence of modern mass media. My findings furthermore correspond with the conclusions of Heidi Campbell and Rosalind Hackett that especially the internet is an important environment for contemporary people to express their worldview.¹²⁹ The ground-up, open space of the web fits the autonomous, anti-authoritarian self-portrayal of the MLP that stresses personal expression. At the same time, the virtual space allows the fans to gather with likeminded people from all over the world, thus also answering to a need for community. Moreover, I argue that the MLP-website and Donna's administration authorize the MLP, making it possible for fans to repeat the prayer and perform it together in the same manner.

Before I delve into an exploration and interpretation of the MLP, I will first present the analytical toolkit with which I make sense of the ritual.

1.1 Theoretical framework

As I set out in my introduction, I follow Lynch in my use of the sacred. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that for the MLP-participants Jackson functions as the embodiment of various sacred forms and that subsequently Jackson is a source of collective identification and morality.¹³⁰ What interests me in this case study is to disclose *what* MLP-participants believe to be sacred (i.e. profound representations of the good life) and how they connect this to Jackson. Furthermore, I hypothesize that the MLP and Jackson's music can be regarded as sensational forms, which

¹²⁸ Birgit Meyer, 'Medium', *Material Religion* 7:1 (2011) 58-65, 61.

¹²⁹ Heidi A. Campbell ed., *Digital Religion: understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (London; New York: Routledge 2012); Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Religion and the Internet', *Diogenes* 53:3 (2006) 67-76.

¹³⁰ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 78.

contribute to the cultivation of an ‘ethical self’. In the previous chapter, I introduced Meyer’s concept of sensational forms, which aims to investigate how certain rituals in ‘the here and now’ make possible and reproducible sensations of the ‘beyond’ – by some experienced as religious feelings. In addition, sensational forms can establish bonds between the people who practice the ritual together.¹³¹

Meyer has analyzed television and video as modern media that can be used to invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms, like televised miracle sessions.¹³² The MLP is an example of how the internet can shape new sensational forms. The fans in this chapter who perform the online prayer together profess to feeling connected, even without physically being near each other or seeing a mediated prayer service. Their example shows that the knowledge that others are performing the same ritual at the same time is enough to experience unity. I explore how performing the MLP produces sensations of ‘awe’ and physically and emotionally draws its practitioners into contact with sacred realities and with each other.

In the coming sections, I will suggest that the MLP provides an opportunity for moral growth. The studies of ethical self-fashioning of anthropologists Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind provide apt tools to shed light on how certain practices can influence the construction of a moral self. Based on her ethnographic fieldwork among a women’s piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood posits that bodily practices are not simply expressions of the self, but equally important in *shaping the self*. From the perspective of Mahmood, ethics is a set of practical activities that are relevant to a particular way of life.¹³³ Not only ‘official’ rituals can be tools to secure and refine a particular moral disposition, practical chores or other activities in daily life can also be sites to foster a right intention. The women in Mahmood’s study developed an ethical habitus by performing both religious and worldly acts *with the right kind of intention*. From their pious disposition they act ‘good’ almost spontaneously and effortlessly.¹³⁴

Hirschkind’s analysis of sermon-audition offers an inspiring starting point to explore the way the fans in this study interact with Jackson’s music. Hirschkind argues that the practice of listening to tape-recorded sermons among contemporary Muslims in Egypt can be regarded as an exercise of ethical self-discipline – an ‘ethics of listening’ if you will. Hirschkind talks about a moral physiology: proper sermon audition demands a “pious ear”. It is a particular responsiveness that is rooted in a “Quranically tuned body and soul”, which characterizes a person who is close to God. For the sensitive listener, Hirschkind argues, auditory reception involves “the entire

¹³¹ Meyer, ‘Religious sensations: media, aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion’, 159-160; Birgit Meyer, ‘How to capture the ‘wow’: R.R. Marett’s notion of awe and the study of religion’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22:1 (2015) 7-26, 7, 21.

¹³² Meyer, ‘Religious sensations: media, aesthetics, and the study of contemporary religion’, 162-163.

¹³³ Mahmood, ‘Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, 842-843, 846; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2011) 27-28.

¹³⁴ Mahmood, ‘Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, 850.

moral person as a unity of body and soul” – a state of mind that the men in his study described as “to hear with the heart”.¹³⁵ Repetitive and ‘sensitive’ audition can serve as a *reminder* to monitor behavior for vices and virtues and can foster these morals into one’s character, thus deepening the individual’s capacity to hear in this manner. It helps to maintain a level of self-scrutiny in regard to one’s day-to-day activities and, when possible, to motivate a person to change his or her ways.¹³⁶ In this chapter I argue that listening to Jackson’s music can be an extra incentive for an ethical lifestyle if a fan can “hear with the heart”.

By means of the analytical concepts of ‘the sacred’, ‘sensational forms’ and ‘ethical self-formation’ I aim to create a better understanding of the workings of the MLP. To fully grasp the function of the ritual together with its implications, I will first focus on the prayer’s website to outline the basic principles of the practice.

1.2 A Prayer for Michael

The name ‘Major Love Prayer’ was inspired by the song “Another Part of Me” (1987) in which Jackson sings: “We’re sending out a major love”. The goal of the MLP is to heal the world with love and positive energy in honor of Jackson every 25th day of the month at exactly the same moment worldwide (2:00 pm US Pacific Time).¹³⁷ To make sure that all participants perform the MLP together, the MLP-website includes a Countdown Timer, which displays the correct prayer-time per time zone.

Image 1.1 The MLP-Logo

The MLP is faith-based, yet not bound to any specific religion or form of spirituality. The website addresses a very broad audience; everyone who wishes to heal the world is welcome to join under the motto “We are the World!”.¹³⁸ Most of the visitors to the MLP-website are from the United States, followed by Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada.¹³⁹ The MLP no longer attracts the vast numbers as it did right after its establishment. There is, however, a loyal

¹³⁵ Hirschkind, ‘The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt’, 624, 628-629, 632.

¹³⁶ Idem, 627, 638-639; Charles Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape: cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2006) 71.

¹³⁷ Although it is not officially stated on the website, the 25th most probably refers to the date and time of Jackson’s death: 25 June 2009 2:26.

¹³⁸ Major Love Prayer, ‘Home’, <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/> (accessed 17 September 2020). This motto refers to Jackson’s charity single “We Are The World”, which he co-wrote with Lionel Richie in 1985 to raise money for victims of famine in Africa. The content of the website is available in 23 different languages, which reflects its international orientation.

¹³⁹ Flag Counter, ‘Countries’, <http://s03.flagcounter.com/countries/sOX6/f> (accessed 30 July 2020). The MLP-website has been visited 278.931 times by 197 different countries since its foundation. US: 38.328 visitors; Germany 12.536 visitors; UK 5.818 visitors; Canada 5.262 visitors (checked on 30 July 2020).

group of visitors, usually consisting of about 30 participants every 25th.¹⁴⁰ The MLP is active on Facebook and Twitter amongst other social media. Additionally, fans can subscribe by e-mail for updates and prayer-reminders.

Image 1.2 Layout of the MLP-website

1.3 How to join: instructions for the MLP

When you click the tab “How to Join” (see image 1.2) you find instructions for when, where and how the MLP should be executed. These guidelines are suggestions. Because Donna, whose story was central in the vignette, wishes to attract participants from all around the world, the instructions are not specific to any religion or spiritual practice. Participants are free to adjust the details of their MLP in accordance with their own beliefs and wishes. Ideally, the prayer should be performed in a place where one can remain undisturbed for about fifteen minutes. The participants do not have to be online during the prayer. Before the prayer starts, they are instructed to prepare for about five minutes by sitting down in a comfortable position and relaxing the mind. This can be done by concentrating on the breath, listening to inspiring music (for instance Jackson’s songs “Heal the World” and “We Are the World”), lighting a candle, and/or saying a special prayer or mantra for Michael, his family or others. When the mind is ready, it should be focused on the collective intention of the monthly prayer: to spread love, peace and healing through the world.

After this short preparation the actual prayer can begin. The participants close their eyes and focus on the feeling of giving and receiving love, visualizing thousands of others around the globe who are doing the exact same thing. Ideally – if possible – they try to connect with Jackson

¹⁴⁰ Flag Counter, ‘History’, <http://s04.flagcounter.com/more30/sOX6> (accessed 30 July 2020).

and reach out in spirit to the others who take part in the prayer. They are now part of a “vast web of love all around the world”. This love spreads out across the entire planet as a healing force: “going through all living forms, healing the animals, the forests, the air, the oceans, the people, everything. We are at peace. We are healed. We are love. We are one.” The MLP encourages fans to stay with this feeling of healing love for a few minutes before opening their eyes. They are advised to say “thank you” in their mind and heart to “fellow fans and participants, to God/ Universe/Creator and to Michael for the love and inspiration that brought us together today.” After wishing everyone well, the participants open their eyes and take a deep breath, they are “strong, healthy and loved.”¹⁴¹

The intention of the MLP is always the same. But throughout the year, the images and content are slightly adapted to fit the annual (holiday) calendar and special events like Jackson’s birthday and death day (see for example image 1.3). In February and March 2019 the MLP website organized a special additional daily intention for the protection and upholding of Jackson’s image and legacy in response to the global broadcast of *Leaving Neverland*. Donna called the initiative the “Light, Truth and Protection Meditation for Michael’s Legacy”.¹⁴² The guidelines for this extra meditation followed similar instructions as the monthly MLP, but focused especially on using the experience of pure love to “clear away all lies” and protect Jackson and his name.¹⁴³ Although this initiative was established apart from the MLP, it does give us an idea of the fans’ activist ambition that also underlies the MLP.

Besides hosting the prayer(s), the MLP-website provides a platform for fans to start their own (prayer) initiatives, write blog posts and post comments – which can evolve into group discussions. Since the primary aim of this chapter is to create a better understanding of the online prayer, I will not discuss all the sub-contents of the MLP-website. However, I will briefly reflect on one section of the website: “Things I Learned from Michael Jackson”, which is particularly informative for what MLP-participants consider to be the essential morals of Jackson and also shows how the fans’ worldview and interpretation of Jackson is influenced by the subjective turn that I will discuss more thoroughly in chapter four.

Image 1.3 Invitation to the MLP on 25 december 2017, the 100th MLP

¹⁴¹ All quotes in this section come from: Major Love Prayer, ‘How to Join: Guide to the Major Love Prayer’, <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2009/12/guide-to-monthly-prayer.html> (accessed 17 September 2020).

¹⁴² Major Love Prayer, ‘Light, Truth and Protection Meditation for Michael’s Legacy’, <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2019/02/light-truth-and-protection-meditation.html> (accessed 17 March 2020).

¹⁴³ Major Love Prayer, ‘Light, Truth and Protection Meditation for Michael’s Legacy’.

1.4 A devotional platform to share and connect

“Things I learned from Michael Jackson” was added to the MLP-website in May 2011 as part of “MJ Articles” (see image 1.2). It introduced a weekly series featuring personal stories and creations from MJ-fans about the ways Jackson has touched their lives and hearts. Eventually there were thirteen different posts. Visitors to the website have the opportunity to comment on the posts. In his study of online Islamic sermons and their responses, Hirschkind interprets comments as expressing more than just judgement. In his eyes comments have a similar function as a blog post itself, performing an “ethical response”; by their confirmation and repetition of a certain text/message, comments secure the authority of a specific mode of interpretation and: “attune the eyes and ears of new visitors in a distinctly devotional and ethical direction.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the commentaries underneath the posts on the MLP-website encouraged the fans’ contributions and echoed the content of the posts, hereby affirming the distinct interpretation of Jackson as a moral (sometimes spiritual) tutor.

I interpret the different testimonies first and foremost as expressions of a deeply felt connection with- and gratitude to Jackson. Four life lessons run through the fan-postings, namely: 1). One person can change the world; 2). Unconditional Love; 3). We are one in Michael;¹⁴⁵ and 4). Authenticity. The first lesson is that all individuals have a responsibility to make the world a better place, for example through taking care of others or the environment. “It is through us that he continues to live”, one fan writes, “through our words, our deeds, our love. Now WE are truly the ones to make the world a better place”. She continues: “Michael Jackson is no longer a man; he is a concept, an idea. WE are Michael Jackson!” Her quote already includes the second and third lesson of unity and love. Regarding the lesson of love, another fan comments that Jackson taught her that love is the only constant in the world and that “we are a human family”. Jackson furthermore reminded her that “labels and names and boundaries are dividers of humanity that only serve to separate us from love and understanding.” She also stresses that people have a responsibility towards the earth: “We cannot sit back and expect others to save her, it must be a daily commitment from each one of us, to whatever degree we are able.” In their contributions, the fans often conflate Jackson with love. From the notion that “we are Michael Jackson” follows the understanding “we are love”. One fan reported about the effects of this awareness: “If I believe I am Love, it inspires me to live better. And maybe, if we look for the light and Love in others, they will begin to see it in themselves, and live from it too.” The final life lesson that I deduced from the testimonies is the value of authenticity. “Be yourself and follow your heart” is something

¹⁴⁴ Charles Hirschkind, ‘Experiments in Devotion Online: the YouTube Khuṭba’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44:1 (2012) 5-21, 9.

¹⁴⁵ This is an interesting reference. See Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

that many fans claim to have learned from Jackson; he taught them to embrace their uniqueness and use their particular qualities to do right.

The contributions and commentaries of the fans on the website enforce the moral devotional character of the MLP-website. Jackson embodies for the fans the sacred principles of love, unity and social activism. His example and encouragement animate them to believe in themselves and take action. Even though the fans do not have the authoritative guidelines of organized religion, they themselves have created a particular homogeneous reading of Jackson that they hold as foundational and that they affirm in each other's behavior. This understanding also forms the foundation of the MLP. In the next section, I will outline the experiences of Donna, the administrator of the MLP. In the following pages, I will first discuss what motivates Donna to (continue to) dedicate a significant amount of her time and energy to maintain the prayer. I want to show how Donna connects the MLP to her outlook on life and how she uses the ritual to connect to Jackson, God, and the fan community. Donna's example demonstrates that through her investment in Jackson and the strong spiritual connection she experiences with him, she has developed a 'moral physiology'. This disposition motivates her to perform the MLP every month, but also allows her to fully experience the workings of the prayer, which enlarges its impact and again strengthens her conviction to keep performing the ritual.

1.5 Meditating to change the world: Donna's MLP-experience

Donna has organized the MLP for eleven years so far. After participating in the MLP for the first time, she could not get the idea out of her head. Donna described she felt "pushed/pulled" by the intuition that the prayer needed to be continued, for the world and for Michael. She was convinced that the initiative needed a website to prevent the prayer from fizzling out after a few months or remain small. Since then, she maintains and updates the MLP-website and sends out prayer-notifications every month through e-mail and postings on social media. Although Donna administers the MLP, she stressed that the prayer is not hers. It is "Michael's" and of everyone who partakes. To ensure that everyone is able to take part in the ritual, one of the first things she did was rewrite the original prayer-instructions – which she deemed too Christian. "I came up with a joke", Donna said, "a kind of phrase, anything that's too religious for people, that has too much religious connotation, I called "creepy religious"." She continued: "Michael Jackson fans are the world. So it doesn't matter if you are an atheist or Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim."

The MLP has played an important role in Donna's mourning process after Jackson's passing. It gave her a purpose and a way to continue Jackson's message. She remembers her first MLPs as very emotional because she and other participants "were suffering from deep grief". At the same time, she experienced the prayer as empowering and cathartic because so many people

came together to connect in love and send love in honor of Jackson. Donna believes that today, the “energy” is not as strong as in the beginning. She thinks that not as many fans are focused on Jackson with the same intensity and that the need to be part of something huge, which often follows a tragedy, naturally fades with time. Nonetheless, for Donna the monthly ritual continues to be an important way to:

love him (Jackson), cherish him and honor his lifelong message of global harmony and love, by focusing on that unity and spiritual love, and hopefully (...) helping to increase the love in this world... which I believe was a huge part of his earthly mission and heart.

Donna told me that she sometimes struggles to integrate the ideal of the MLP with reality. “Of course there is the lofty goal that millions of people would join us and change the world”, she said. However, after having performed the prayer every month for years, she sees that the world is still terrible in some ways. She reflected:

It’s hard to know, being skeptical and trying to look at things scientifically, if something like MLP actually matters in terms of really doing anything to the world. When we are putting love energy, when we are visualizing earth filled with love and we are feeling this on a spiritual level, does it really trickle down?

She continued:

And then I thought, even if – I still believe that it *does* actually make a difference – but even if it didn’t, it makes a difference to everyone who participates. To be able to send love to everyone and everything on this planet, that has to do something inside you. So at the bare minimum, it does something for all the people who participate. And I think it goes beyond that.

And so, Donna still participates in the MLP every month. She prefers to perform the prayer in her living room, sitting on the couch in a lotus-position. A few minutes before her MLP she usually listens to Jackson’s music to “get in the right mood” and she sometimes lights a candle. When the prayer begins her playlist switches over to meditation music to give a background of calm. Then Donna tries to focus on meditation and calls upon “all ascended beings in higher realms who wish for love to reign on earth”, after which she addresses Jackson with the words “Michael, it’s time”. Sometimes she feels his presence, sometimes not specifically. The general thing Donna tries to do is focus on Jackson. She explained:

Think of it like ehmm Harry Potter, ok? There is the *Patronus* charm, right? And in order to get there you have to have this particular memory, something that is really strong and then from there you can create your *Patronus*. That is kind of how it works for me, so Michael becomes like the focus at the very beginning that then just can get everything going.

Note here that Donna references another example from popular culture to clarify her spiritual experience. Performing the MLP gives Donna a sense of purpose; that she can contribute something and this makes her happy. Furthermore, the ritual leaves her feeling grateful to be a part of something special, which for her is a big part of the experience. The practice mediates a feeling of love and connection; to God, Michael, and the fan community. When Donna reflected on this connection, she came to the conclusion that this feeling of love and oneness is God of whom everyone is a part.

Donna connects the MLP to the sacred forms of equality, unity and love, which she regards as foundational principles in her life and as embodied by Jackson. She described Jackson as a messenger of a God whom she regards a “higher power” of love. Although Donna broadened her Christian upbringing to include a wide spiritual palette, she still often drew from Christian symbolism. She reflected on this herself when she explained that this was probably rooted in her youth but also in Western popular culture. Donna has integrated the MLP into a particular lifestyle that is aimed at making the world a better place, by creating awareness of love and unity. She is convinced that love is curative and that it can heal the world. She explained:

If you have experienced a place in your heart where all is love, where you love all the world, regardless of race or religion or nationality, and if you can actively remember that place, it is much harder or even impossible to commit rape or genocide or to enslave another... or to dump toxic waste or wipe out a species. You will remember that we are one, that you love even those who are against you, and that this is the deeper, more real truth. (...) just having been in that place of oneness... it changes your perspective. If we can make it last, if we can remember it more and more often, this will be a much better world.

Performing the monthly ritual allows Donna to experience the presence and power of the transcendental, which for her is captured by an experience of love and unity. Borrowing the words of Meyer, performing the MLP “tunes the senses and structures perception in a specific and selective manner, directing attention in a particular way and inducing openness for an amazing extraordinary experience.”¹⁴⁶ In Donna’s case, tuning into Jackson through the ritual affects her both physically and emotionally. The effects of the MLP are not temporary; because of its

¹⁴⁶ Meyer, ‘How to capture the ‘wow’’, 20.

repetitive nature, it has become part of a pious habitus. Participating in the MLP makes Donna feel relaxed, “more open to others and more giving” and focused on love, and “doing good”. Donna has experienced a life-long investment in Jackson and has built an intense relationship with him. Her body as such is attuned to her view on Jackson’s mission on earth, which, since his death, she has turned into her own mission. Donna’s love for Jackson enables her to really listen and be sensitive to his message. At the same time, performing the MLP works to deepen her capacity to hear in this manner, since it strengthens her connection with Jackson.

A group of ardent participants join Donna in the monthly virtual prayer. In the next part, I discuss the experiences of 20 loyal MLP-participants and show how they meditate to change the world. Besides focusing on how the fans practice the ritual and how they experience its effect, I want to show how the MLP is part of a broader lifestyle that the fans aspire to and wish to dedicate themselves to.

1.6 The Major Love Prayer in daily life: a survey

To find out more about the meaning of the MLP for the people who take part in it, I created an online survey, which Donna was so kind as to post on the MLP-website and on Twitter. In this part of the chapter, I present my analysis of the responses of 20 MLP-participants who filled in the survey somewhere during the months June, July and August 2017.¹⁴⁷ The group consists of 18 women and 1 man, one person filled in “not important” for the category gender. The average age, out of 18 answers, is 48,5 years old. Most of the respondents are above 50 (12 people). Four people are between 35–45. The two youngest participants are 18 and 21. I tried to find out more about the intentions of these fans to eventually explore how these related to their practices, experiences and the (long-term) effects of the MLP. In addition to a few questions about personal data, the survey consisted of four categories: 1.) motivations; 2.) practices; 3.) experiences; and 4.) reflection & worldview. Participants could skip a question if they did not think it was applicable to them or if they did not feel comfortable answering. I invited the participants to freely reflect on the ritual and its meaning by responding to open questions. In the next pages, I will discuss my findings per category and give exemplary quotes.

1.6.1 Motivations

The first part of the survey included questions such as “What is the reason you perform the MLP?” and “What do you hope to achieve through participating in the MLP?”. It is striking

¹⁴⁷ 19 people filled in their nationality. The majority of participants comes from native-English speaking countries (America: 5, Canada: 2, England 2 and Australia: 1). One person wrote ‘not important’. Other nationalities are (Italy: 2, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain, and Turkey). One participant wrote ‘Caucasian’.

that although the fans filled in the survey individually, they formulated very similar answers to why they participate in the MLP. Most respondents explained that multiple motivations – both individual and communal – underlie their MLP. The most frequently mentioned reason was – not surprisingly – Michael Jackson. Fans explained that the MLP was an expression of wanting to do something out of love for Jackson. Many expressed feeling responsible to (jointly) continue where Jackson left off and transform the wrongs in the world – captured by the wish to “spread love” and to “Heal the World”, as the fans often paraphrase. The fans often also underlined the individual aspect of looking for a connection with Jackson as a reason to perform their prayer. Others performed the ritual to experience hope and peace, and some practiced it to evoke a certain bodily experience, like calmness and confidence. Another recurring motivation mentioned in the survey-responses was to “create unity” with others and the world in general. One fan, for example, wrote that she performs the MLP:

primarily as a way to carry on the love that Michael sent out into the world during his lifetime and I believe he is still sending forth. People everywhere need that love so badly. Additionally, I find intense inspiration in knowing that I’m unified with others of like mind and love all around the world at the same moment, on behalf of our Michael.

A third of the fans connected the MLP to spirituality. One participant explained:

I do it (MLP, FE) as an active participant in the world, as motivated by Michael to be aware of the things occurring in the world that affect both humanity and the ecosystem. I feel a strong connection to Michael spiritually, as he is a connection that I have felt since 1984.

The participants’ verbalized motivations and goals already hint at a common narrative that recurred in their responses, namely that Jackson was a humanitarian who gave his life for creating a better world and tried to inspire his fans to contribute. It is the same narrative that Donna, and consequently the MLP-website, put forward. The answers to the survey indicate that the fans use the MLP to somehow send Jackson a message. Many voiced that it is a means to demonstrate that they have understood his teachings of love and unity and want to do their part to make the world a better place.

1.6.2 Practice

Following Mahmood’s argument about ethical self-formation, I take bodily practices not simply as expressions of the self, but also as important means in shaping the self. That is why in the second part of the survey I inquired about the actual practice of the MLP. I wanted to know

how the fans perform their MLP and if they follow the guidelines on the website or not. I was also interested to learn whether the fans prepare themselves for their prayer and, if so, how. Furthermore, I asked fans who regularly participate in the ritual to reflect on how the prayer was different or similar to when they first performed it. The answers to these questions helped me get a better idea of the bodily execution of the ritual.

The majority of the fans takes part in the MLP every month. Two people perform the prayer a few times a year and one fan commented that she participates as often as possible. Most respondents prefer to practice the prayer at home. If this is not possible, they look for a quiet place where they will not be disturbed. Sitting is by far the most favored position during the MLP, only one fan prefers motion. In accordance with the prayer guidelines on the website, most fans schedule a few minutes of preparation before the start of the MLP to consciously prepare their mind and body for the prayer. For most this takes the form of breathing exercises or meditation. Other ways to prepare the body and mind are visualization, the lighting of candles and listening to Jackson's songs. Many respondents also play Jackson's music during the MLP to evoke a mindset which enables them to concentrate on spreading love. "Heal the World" is the most popular song, followed by "Earth Song", "Another Part of Me", "Will You Be There" and "Cry". One participant explained that these songs stimulate "an emotion of inspiration to unite with love in our hearts for the sake of this planet." The fans' use of Jackson's music demonstrates the beforementioned potential power of popular music to shape mood and body.

Most fans use the guidelines on the MLP-website for the practice of their MLP. "I want to feel that I'm doing and saying and thinking pretty much the same thing as everybody else who is participating at the time", explained one participant. The description of the *Patronus*, that Donna used to clarify her intention during the MLP, fits the experience of the MLP more generally. I found it common for fans to begin their prayer with a focus on Jackson – sometimes directly asking him for help. Based on the experience of love that a focus on Jackson brings about, they try to send out good thoughts and love to the world. One particularly eloquent fan explained:

I address Michael and ask him to send his love to my heart and to connect me with the love of God- When my heart is filled with a warm feeling of love I imagine it flows from my overfilled heart and it expands to the MLP participants and to my beloved ones and to all the people in the world and then it spreads over the land, the mountains, plants, all animals, minerals and the oceans. Everyone and everything is healed.

Much like the men in Hirschkind's study who cultivated a particular moral responsiveness by attuning their body and soul to the Qur'an, the comments of the fans show that they try to attune their thoughts and behavior to Jackson and the values they attach to him, which enables and also enforces the experience of the prayer. Regarding the comparison between their

first participation in the MLP and their ritual practice today, the fans generally noted that the intention had remained the same throughout the years: to send love and heal the world. However, the majority of respondents indicated that their experience has intensified: the ritual has gained in meaning, focus and depth and it has become easier to connect with other participants during the prayer. One participant wrote that while she first focused on the global consciousness of the MLP community, she is now able to focus on the entire universe.

The picture that thus comes to the fore from the fans' answers is that by performing the ritual on a regular basis they have been able to train their capacity to connect and spread love. The specific pattern of the ritual not only makes sensations of the transcendental possible and reproducible, but, as the fans explain, also strengthens the experience itself. This case study thus demonstrates the power of ritual as mediated through the internet. Even though the fans are not in the same room, they still profess feeling a bond with each other. Sociologist of media and culture Nick Couldry and Communications and Media expert Sarah Cefai write about how people's media practices can mediate the 'presence' of others and an experience of intimacy.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, performing the MLP emotionally draws its practitioners into contact with each other. The fans are united in the knowledge that, although they are miles apart, each one of them is performing the ritual at the same time, in the same way, with the same intention. This is precisely where the guiding instructions on the website come in handy, as was confirmed by the participants.

The fans' conscious preparation of their mind and body for the MLP facilitates an impactful experience. During the prayer, they try to tap into an experience of love based on an intense focus on Jackson. This results in a connection with Jackson and with the community, in the hope to spread as much love energy as possible. The third part of the survey focused more on the experiences and effects of the MLP. I invited fans to describe the physical and emotional impact of performing the ritual and asked them about the long-term influence of participating in the MLP.

1.6.3 Experience

Although a survey is not the most apt format to share information about the specifics of one's daily life, the answers of the fans did give me an idea of how the MLP plays a role in their lives. I contend that performing the prayer every month has made the participants sensitive to the morality that they connect to Jackson.

As I stated before, the MLP evokes a contemplative, relaxed state of mind and brings about

¹⁴⁸ Sarah Cefai, Nick Couldry, 'Mediating the presence of others: Reconceptualising co-presence as mediated intimacy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22:3 (2019) 291-308, 298-299.

feelings of love, unity and happiness. Some characterized this experience of connectedness as a sensation of “oneness” or described it in terms of love for people and the earth. In general, the participants reported that the experience of, or focus on, love and connection triggered positive feelings, which they denoted by using words such as “happy”, “joy” and “warmth”. Some respondents voiced feeling (much) better than before after having performed the MLP, which they ascribed to an experience of (renewed) energy and refreshment. The MLP’s capacity to influence one’s feelings has partly to do with a feeling of accomplishment: of having done something to make the world a better place. Some participants attributed their experience of connectedness to God. But most ascribed it to the closeness they felt with Jackson and with the other MLP-participants. One fan explained:

First of all, I feel a connection to all the other people who are participating at the time, are thinking of Michael and of his legacy for us and what he has wanted us to do for one another. Of course I feel connected to Michael himself, and to that great source and oversoul that connects us all. I sometimes feel as if that source is running through me which means that Michael is there too.

What thus again came to the fore in the answers is that the MLP has both individual and communal dimensions. The notion that others simultaneously perform the prayer also works as a motivator and many explained that the connection made the experience of praying more powerful.

Nearly all participants believe that the MLP impacts them as a person because it reminds them to be focused on the message of Jackson. One participant illustrated it as feeling like her “heart is in the right place”. Many more fans reflected on the moral effect of the prayer. Another participant remarked that the MLP makes her feel peaceful, inspired and full of love for all people, especially the children and the earth, and that she tries to “stay in this state as much as possible every day.” The ambition to hold on to the feeling of love and inspiration outside of the MLP can be challenging according to the MLP-participants. Half of them claimed to succeed. Some added that even though they can experience it, the feeling is never as strong as during their MLP when they are connected with the world in love. Four fans stated that the feeling they experience during the MLP is unique and stressed the presence of likeminded others as essential to their experience. Those who actively try to continue the sensation evoked by the MLP in their daily life, mentioned applying several rituals to do so, including meditation and/or prayer, thinking about Jackson, listening to Jackson’s music and helping others. A few connected the experience of love and inspiration less to specific activities, but described it more as a way of life mirroring Jackson’s vision: “I feel this much of the time”, commented one fan, “It is living with Michael as my inspiration. His music, his videos, speeches, writing and my personal spiritual

relationship with Him brings Joy to my life.” Another participant wrote: “it’s not just about the MLP, it’s about going out and giving that same devotion in love in our daily lives.”

The answers of the participants to the third section of the survey demonstrate that performing the MLP contributes to a moral awareness since the prayer draws the fans’ attention to the values of love and unity. Many participants voiced that they try to stay in this feeling after the prayer has ended. Some are more successful than others, but it is striking that most intend to incorporate their focus on Jackson and his values into their worldview.

1.6.4 Reflection and Worldview

The fourth and last category of questions was aimed at finding out more about how the fans relate the MLP to their worldview. In this section I also asked the fans about important values and sources of inspiration in their lives. In so doing, I hoped to find out more about how the fans relate the sacred forms, that they orient their lives towards, to their interpretation of Jackson and their performance of the MLP.

As has become clear throughout this chapter, the practice of the MLP fits into a particular shared worldview among the participants wherein Michael Jackson is the foremost inspiration. Besides Jackson, the fans most often mentioned being inspired by: nature/environment, art (e.g. books, music), faith/spirituality and children. With regards to faith/spirituality some fans explicitly referred to God or Jesus. Participants often connected what inspires them in life in some way to Jackson. One participant, for instance, wrote: “Friends, Family, Music, children, helping others, prayer, meditation, Michael Jackson is a part of all of that. He has inspired me to be a better person and to help others in any way I can.” Another participant commented:

I’m a manager in a pre-school in a disadvantaged area of my town to make every child under the age of 5 that comes in for 6 hours a day happy enjoyable and see the laughter in their face is a wonderful feeling that I have made that child’s day happy. To see Michael’s dream in caring for the children to help them on the right path of life is so good.

Love and kindness were most often voiced as guiding values in life. Many fans also mentioned “helping others” and “be a good person” as foundational principles. One person reported: “I try to live my life as Michael demonstrated. Loving people, being kind, generous, forgiving, nurturing and doing my best at whatever I do.” Corresponding with the testimonies on the MLP-website and Donna’s statements, many participants stated that taking action and creating awareness of love is an important part of their values. For instance, one participant wrote: “My values center on doing as much good as we can in the lifetime we’re given. We need to open our eyes to what needs to be done for others, and find a way to address those issues.” When I asked

about vices, the participants emphasized hate, greed, abusing people and abstaining from helping people. Most participants explicitly connected the MLP to their beliefs and values. Like Jackson, they believe that people can make a change and that people should use all their capabilities to achieve goodness. One participant commented: “MLP gives me the opportunity to be loving to everyone and everything. My greatest dream is Peace on Earth between nations and all people individually”.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the Major Love Prayer (MLP); a monthly, communal prayer through which MJ-fans internalize and spread love, peace and healing as a means to effect global change in honor of Jackson. Originally, the MLP functioned as a way to commemorate Jackson and cope with his sudden death. Since then, the ritual has evolved into a routine that is incorporated into the daily life of its participants. Besides hosting the monthly prayer, the MLP-website offers a platform to share and connect. The blog posts and comments on the website confirm and repeat an ethical framing of Jackson as a spiritual teacher of love who has the answer to a world in dire need of help, thus fashioning the MLP-website into a moral space. On the basis of my findings, my argument in this chapter is that the MLP plays a central role in (re)directing the mindset of the fans towards the sacred principles of love, unity and taking action for a change.

The MLP provides insight into how contemporary people incorporate the internet in their engagement with spirituality. The internet facilitates the possibility of individually practiced religion, but also enhances the opportunity for people around the world to connect and create groups. In facilitating ground-up communities, the online world allows people to circumvent traditional types of authority. There is space for new leaders to stand up as authority. Furthermore, the open space of the web provides an ideal platform to play with (traditional) rituals and meanings. It offers a safe environment for people to explore new possibilities of spiritual or religious experience.

The case study of the MLP shows that people choose to do religion on their own terms; the fans take charge of their own spirituality and the way they wish to express it by adapting religious beliefs, practices and modern technology. In this way, they have created an initiative that offers them a place of belonging and purpose. Jackson embodies a source of meaning and ultimate values beyond traditional forms of institutional religion. Although the MLP reveals that these fans find and mediate the sacred and the transcendental through popular culture, the intention of the ritual is introduced as faith-based and the fans tap into religious heritage to shape the ritual. However, the MLP simultaneously detaches itself from any specific religious institution or authority. Donna carefully carved out prayer-guidelines that are intended to be accessible by anyone.

My analysis indicates that the fans are aware of the bodily and mental techniques they have to use to get in the right mood that guides them into experiencing a bond with Jackson, the transcendental and the other MLP-participants. The prayer makes them experience a calmness based on their breathing exercises and preparation in which they eliminate distractions and focus on Jackson's music. In so doing, the fans consciously create a special atmosphere and mindset that transforms the everyday nature of their home into a special space that allows them to perform the prayer and to benefit from its workings. The MLP thus shows us a new sensational form that is not rooted in traditional institutionalized religion, but does mediate contact with the transcendental by means of modern media. This makes it different from the sensational forms that anthropologist Birgit Meyer talks about which are rooted in particular prescriptive religious settings. Even though the MLP is not mandatory and there is no authority in the form of a church leader or a dominant text, one cannot call the MLP without authorization. The initiative is clearly steered by administrator Donna, who is the brains behind the monthly ritual and created the guidelines.

Donna is well aware of her precarious position as website-administrator. She may be in charge, but she explicitly disengages herself from a leadership-position and made it clear to me that no one should try to dictate the MLP's content or the way it should be performed. Donna's struggle with her position of authority reflects the influence of the ethics of authenticity. In agreement with the ideals of autonomy and freedom, the MLP aims to facilitate one's self-development and direct connection with Jackson and/or with any higher being of choice. This focus on an individual experience does not mean that the MLP is unorganized and individualistic; in fact, one of the key aims of the ritual is to transcend the individual by focusing collectively on the same intention at the same time. The fans show a longing for structure and community. Even though they are given the freedom to make up their own instructions, most expressed to stay loyal to the guidelines that are presented on the website, explaining that they appreciate the repetition and knowledge that other people do exactly the same things. Moreover, the fans argued that an essential appeal of the prayer is that it connects them with something beyond themselves, whether this be Jackson, God or the fan community – this union, the fans argued, gives a feeling of purpose and belonging, and intensifies the experience of the meditation. The case study of the MLP thus exemplifies the importance of shared experience for individual experiences. Together they build towards a set format of the ritual that exceeds the individual needs of the one participant.

Additionally, the case study of the MLP demonstrates the powerful workings of a combination of fandom and ritual to bring forth ethical identity. The fans connect the monthly prayer with the person they would like to be. Following the findings of anthropologist Charles Hirschkind that attentive listening can contribute to a moral physiology, the fans in this chapter

illustrate that they have nourished a particular responsiveness to Jackson's message. Because their bodies are tuned in to Jackson, the fans are open to receive the impact of the MLP. This same sensorium makes them receptive to the messages in Jackson's music. The act of purposefully focusing on positive, healing love not only establishes temporary feelings of connectedness, but also affects the MLP-participants more profoundly as it strengthens their connection with Jackson and triggers a (moral) awareness in daily life to 'do right'. Furthermore, performing the MLP on a regular basis has increased its meaning, focus and depth, making it easier to connect with the beyond. Through performing the MLP, the participants are steered towards internalizing and carrying on Jackson's humanitarian vision: modulating their hearts in the right place.

The next chapter presents the case study of the MJ-memorial in Munich. Similar to the MLP-participants, the fans who visit and maintain the MJ-memorial embrace an activist interpretation of Jackson and use his life and art to change the world for the better. I will start chapter two with the story of Bea, the woman who oversees the shrine in Munich.

CHAPTER 2

Unite and Fight:
the case study of the
MJ-memorial in Munich

Bea's quest to defend and honor Jackson

When Bea found out that Michael Jackson had died she decided to go to the place where she had once met him: the Bayerischer Hof Hotel in Munich. It turned out she was not the only one. Upon her arrival, Bea was struck by the sight of the Orlando di Lasso statue opposite to the hotel, which was covered with gifts for Jackson. Although touched by the fans' gestures, Bea disapproved of the condition in which she found the gifts: flowers were withered, candle-grease ran along the statue's steps and letters to Jackson were scattered across the monument. At that moment she decided she would start to take care of the memorial to make sure that it would always look tidy. Bea kept her promise: ten years later she still cares for the MJ-memorial that she visits almost every day. The MJ-memorial is "magical" to Bea, a sensation she described as "inner contentment". The site radiates "strong positive energy" to her because it contains Jackson's spirit – who stayed "many times" at the Bayerische Hof Hotel – and also carries the love from people from all over the world.

I estimate Bea in her early fifties. In her everyday life she works in the bakery owned by her family. Throughout our conversations Bea kept returning to the importance of family, which she connected to foundational principles in her life, such as taking care of others. Born in Serbia, she grew up in a multigenerational family with modest financial means all living together under one roof. As a child the family moved to Germany where Bea went to school and learned German. When she was eleven years old she became a fan of Jackson and from that moment onwards the popstar was part of her identity. Her fandom first centred on Jackson the artist; Bea was enraptured by his music, art and appearance. However, gradually she "started to love him" and her admiration shifted to Jackson the man "with all his insights and his fight against injustice". Already at a young age, she understood that being an MJ-fan came with the responsibility to defend him. And defend Jackson is what Bea did. She protected Jackson "everywhere no matter what". She compared her feelings for the artist with how she feels for her parents and children: "I would go through fire and water for my children and I would go through fire and water for Michael Jackson. Crazy as that may sound, it is like that."

Bea described Jackson as a "messenger of love" who was sent to awaken people. In her view, he was not a conventional human being; he was *more*. She cautiously compared him to Jesus. It was Jackson's death that made her aware of her own transience and position in the world. Although she had lost loved ones both before and after Jackson died, his demise was different: "it was so big, and so very powerful. He was on a completely different level and when he can die just like that, overnight, then you become aware of your own mortality

and that is something that you mourn at the same time.” Jackson’s passing “pushed” Bea to do “more with his message” and to become more engaged in humanitarian activism. According to her, doing good is precisely what separates “good” fans – who have understood Jackson’s message – from fans who “only like the music”. *Being* a true fan, however, is difficult: one has to put in effort to actually implement it in one’s day-to-day life. Bea tries to live Mike-Like by helping people in need. Furthermore, she interacts respectfully with the environment.

Bea identifies as an orthodox Christian and is married to a Muslim man with whom she has two children. Her immigrant past and interfaith marriage make her recipient to Jackson’s message of “loving all religions and all people” – a value that she tries to pass on to her children for whom she consciously chose a school with “all layers of society, all different colors of skin and different incomes”. Bea connected her “inner need” to nurse the MJ-memorial also to her background. She explained that in Eastern-Europe “it is normal to often visit the cemetery as an expression of gratitude.” Maintaining the memorial is thus a way for her to thank Jackson. But Bea also uses the place to publicly display how much the artist is loved and respected. She explained her core motivation as to guarantee that the next generations will remember Michael Jackson.

Another essential function of the memorial to her is to inspire charitable projects in honor of Jackson, in this way carrying out what the popstar demonstrated: namely that everyone can contribute, even if it is only a little. The public location of the MJ-memorial in the city center of Munich is very important to Bea as “a statement”. She explained how the current generation of fans has a great responsibility to defend Jackson and rectify “false information and allegations”. In her eyes, the memorial offers the ultimate opportunity to do this. One of the tasks of the fans at site is to explain the monument’s meaning to visitors and passers-by, and thus maybe make them change their opinion of Jackson. Bea furthermore stressed the importance of a central MJ-memorial in the public domain because memorial places “should be about contact and movement” and need to be accessible to everyone.

Bea’s work at the memorial and her commitment to child-aid charities fill her with pride: “I love the idea that he sees what we do for him”, she said. Bea’s biggest wish is for the fans to get their own Michael-statue. She does not consider the current monument a “real memorial place” because there are no guarantees that it will still be there when there is nobody left to maintain it. But for now, it is all the fans have. She wants the memorial to be a safe place for MJ-fans, because many cannot rely on an understanding family or friends, and some even have opponents. At the memorial they are not declared “crazy” and can express their emotions and love for Jackson freely and openly.

Introduction

This chapter examines the MJ-memorial in Munich and the people who take care of it. Eleven years have passed since fans erected the grassroots shrine in 2009 and since then much has changed; while the memorial began as an unorganized, spontaneous response by fans to Jackson's untimely death, today it is coordinated by the fan group and non-profit organization MJ's LEGACY, which is headed by Bea. The group uses the site to publicly honor and defend Jackson, raise money for charity and recruit new members for their association. The MJ-memorial makes for a rare case study because grassroots shrines usually tend to last only a couple of months. The eleven-year use of the Di Lasso statue as an MJ-memorial demonstrates the fans' perseverance as well as the tolerance of the municipality of Munich. In the course of time the MJ-shrine has become a part of the cityscape of Munich as an official tourist attraction. This, however, does not assure its continued existence. City officials keep their grip on the public space by marking the MJ-monument "temporary and reversible" and strictly monitor the fans' actions and the response of citizens to the public veneration of Michael Jackson.

I opened this chapter with the story of Bea who has committed herself to the MJ-memorial right from the start and who co-founded MJ's LEGACY. The members of this fan-group have appointed themselves as owners and preservers of the MJ-memorial. Within this fan community, Bea has achieved a high status as a group leader. She is the one who manages the memorial's exterior and steers an activist course in coordinating the community's activities. The case study of the MJ-memorial challenges the portrayal of celebrity-focused fans as obsessed, passive and irrational and demonstrates how fandom can form the basis for civic engagement.¹⁴⁹ Like the fans involved in the MLP discussed in the previous chapter, instead of just enjoying Jackson as an entertainer, the fans I focus on in this chapter embrace their activist interpretation of Jackson and use his life and art to change the world for the better.¹⁵⁰ However, besides being contested from the outside, the fan group's claim to the MJ-shrine has also evoked internal conflicts over power and ownership. Bea's authority in particular has been challenged. The battle over the use and access to the memorial makes it a contested site. The shrine has especially triggered questions about when and for whom it is appropriate to establish public monuments. The broadcast of the documentary *Leaving Neverland* has rekindled this discussion.

In this chapter I investigate how MJ-fans appropriate the Di Lasso statue as a grassroots MJ-memorial to internalize, continue and spread Jackson's humanitarian legacy to "Heal the World" and I ask what power-conflicts are related to MJ's Legacy's appropriation of the statue.

¹⁴⁹ Bethan Jones already contested this stereotyping in scholarship on celebrity-focused fans with her study of X-Files fans & social engagement: Jones, 'Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement'.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce and Politics* (Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press 2016) 165.

My analysis is based on my fieldwork in Munich between 1-3 May 2015 and between 28 August and 11 September 2017. I draw from the responses I received to (e-mail) interviews and informal (group) conversations that I conducted with German fans. I also examined online sources, such as websites, forums and Facebook pages. Online Ethnography is a relatively new field which does not yet have a generally agreed on approach regarding ethics. It is up to the researcher to (intuitively) decide how to address and process the data found in the 'public' virtual space. I follow scholar Bethan Jones and treat the use of websites, blog posts and Facebook pages as I would treat the use of a personal interview.¹⁵¹

Before giving a description of the MJ-memorial and MJ's LEGACY, I first want to reflect on the analytical framework from which I understand the erection of the MJ-memorial. I already mentioned the term above, but I consider the MJ-memorial in Munich a "grassroots memorial". In the next section I will outline how scholars understand and explain the cultural phenomenon of spontaneous memorialization.

2.1 Grassroots memorials

Grassroots memorials are unofficial, temporary memorials that express grief and usually arise in public space at the place where a person died, or when the death of a person is associated with this specific location. Examples are the memorabilia in remembrance of Princess Diana, the 9/11 shrines created in New York as well as so-called "roadside shrines"; memorials and crosses that are erected alongside roads to mark the location of fatal traffic accidents. Grassroots shrines usually only last several months and are generally erected for victims of high-profile tragedies or for people with a "high mass-media status".¹⁵² Grassroots memorialization fits into a wider trend that appeared in the late twentieth century that death and mourning expert Tony Walter has called "the new public mourning". It has become more common to publicly mourn the deaths of people we do not know personally.¹⁵³ Indeed, historian and ethnologist Peter Jan Margry and anthropologist Cristina Sánchez-Carretero have argued that grassroots memorials are generally "claimed, used, and instrumentalized by persons other than family and direct friends."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Jones, 'Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement'. This pertains to both publicly accessible and private websites.

¹⁵² Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, 'Introduction: Rethinking Memorialization The Concept of Grassroots Memorials', in: Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero eds., *Grassroots Memorials: The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death* (New York: Berghahn Books 2011) 1-48, 1-2; Irene Stengs, "Gedenken op de plek des onheils", *Bermonumenten als materiële uitdrukking van veranderende rouwcultuur*, *Volkskunde* 3 (2012) 263-281, 271; Tony Walter, 'The New Public Mourning', in: Margaret S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, and W. Stroebe eds., *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention* (Washington: American Psychological Association 2008) 241-262.

¹⁵³ Walter, 'The New Public Mourning', 246.

¹⁵⁴ Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 'Introduction: Rethinking Memorialization', 34.

Although the components that comprise a spontaneous shrine vary from case to case (relating to the specific trauma) usually a mix of the same categories of objects can be found – such as flowers, candles, notes, pictures, stuffed animals, and often religious icons.¹⁵⁵ Grassroots memorials have a certain “aura of sacrality” because they are set-apart for purposes other than those of daily practical use – it is this what Bea pointed at when she described the MJ-memorial as radiating strong “magical” energy. Theologian Lizette Larson-Miller observed how visitors of roadside shrines used religiously-charged words to describe the sites and expressed the specialness of the memorials by touching: “touching the ground, touching the trees, touching the things, and leaving objects behind”.¹⁵⁶ People often also perform rituals of commemoration at spontaneous shrines, for example at the anniversaries of birthdays or deaths of the deceased.¹⁵⁷

Anthropologist Irene Stengs emphasizes that it is the *process* of ritualization – such as the laying down of flowers – that transforms a beforehand unarticulated public space into ritualized space (a memorial site). The original purpose of a site, whether a pavement or a statue, is pushed into the background by the objects put there. At the same time, it keeps shining through, which makes roadside memorials inherently ambiguous phenomena, Stengs argues.¹⁵⁸ Margry and Sánchez-Carretero stress the role of the mass media regarding grassroots memorialization. They contend that since the late 1990s the global broadcast of fatal catastrophes and the expressions of material memorialization have contributed strongly to “the idea that after a traumatic, unexpected death, collective and public mourning is appropriate”. The media also provided a “material format” for these mourning rituals: based on seeing examples in the news, people know what they should bring to the site.¹⁵⁹ That is why, according to the scholars, the spontaneity of the creative process of what people bring into a memorial, is limited.

Walter argues that ordinary citizens can erect grassroots shrines in public spaces because the time period following a death is liminal “with normal hierarchical relationships held in abeyance”. This opens the possibility for people to co-opt certain places “that ordinarily would be controlled by the other groups”.¹⁶⁰ The appropriation of space by public mourners, however, can cause conflict over control of space. As an example Walter mentions the occasion after Princess Diana’s death when in some English towns mourners left flowers and messages at the town war

¹⁵⁵ Lizette Larson-Miller, ‘Holy Ground: Discerning Sacred Space in Public Spaces’, in: Marcel Barnard, Paul Post and Els Rose eds., *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Cult of Saints in Past and Present* (Leuven; Paris; Dudley: Peeters 2005) 247-274, 260-261; Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 266-267; Walter, ‘The New Public Mourning’, 245.

¹⁵⁶ Larson-Miller, ‘Holy Ground’, 264-265.

¹⁵⁷ Jack Santino, ‘Between Commemoration and Social Activism: Spontaneous Shrines, Grassroots Memorialization’, in: Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero eds., *Grassroots Memorials: The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death* (New York: Berghahn Books 2011) 97-107, 98; Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 267-268.

¹⁵⁸ Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 267-268.

¹⁵⁹ Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Memorialization’, 2, 11, 27.

¹⁶⁰ Walter, ‘The New Public Mourning’, 246.

memorial, much to the dismay of veterans, who felt that they owned the memorials.¹⁶¹ In the case of the MJ-memorial in Munich there have also been disputes about ownership over the Di Lasso statue. I will return to this matter in a later section.

Larson-Miller states that identification lies at the heart of shrine building. She quotes Haney, Leimer & Lowery who interpret spontaneous memorialization as “a public response to the unanticipated, violent deaths of people who do not fit into the categories of those we expect to die (...) and with whom the participants in the ritual share some common identification.”¹⁶² Haney et al. stress that the process of spontaneous memorialization does not replace traditional funerary rites, but functions as an “adjunct ritual” which “extends the opportunity for mourning to individuals not conventionally included in tradition rites.”¹⁶³ Stengs describes the roadside memorial as a link between the world of the living and the world of the dead:

With flowers and decorations – daffodils in spring, asters in fall, a heart-shaped balloon on Valentine’s day – the monuments follow the rhythms of the seasons and the annual holiday calendar as they place themselves in public time. With stuffed animals, cards and candles on birthdays and death days the course of life of the monuments follow the biographies of the dead and they collide.¹⁶⁴

Margry and Sánchez-Carretero similarly describe how the objects that are left behind at a grassroots shrine constitute a relationship between the visitor and the site and between the living and the dead. They, however, interpret the objects particularly as an expression of social discontent and protest and consequently as a means to realize social action. In their opinion, grassroots memorials are foremost instruments to voice social or political disaffection – with as clear example roadside memorials that address the immoral behavior of people who drive under influence.¹⁶⁵

Because grassroots shrines are unofficial places of memorialization, there is always a certain degree of insecurity and instability to their continued existence as a memorial site. Stengs notes that where, how and for how long grief for a premature and violent death is or is not visible in the public domain, to an important degree depends on municipal decisions.¹⁶⁶ Most grassroots memorial sites disappear after a few months. Either people are not able anymore to continue taking care of the memorial place, or the local government interferes and decides to remove the

¹⁶¹ Idem.

¹⁶² Larson-Miller, ‘Holy Ground’, 258. Original reference: C. Allen Haney, Christina Leimer and J. Juliann Lowery, ‘Spontaneous memorialization: Violent death and emerging mourning ritual’, *Omega* 35:2 (1997) 159-171, 161.

¹⁶³ Haney, Leimer and Lowery, ‘Spontaneous memorialization’, 161.

¹⁶⁴ Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 272. Translation from originally Dutch text by Fardo Eringa.

¹⁶⁵ Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Memorialization’, 11, 25.

¹⁶⁶ Idem, 13; Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 271, 275-276.

memorial after a certain period of time. Governments generally try to keep their grip on the public space by formally marking memorial places as only temporary interventions that divert from the original destination. At the same time, remarks Stengs, the occurrence of spontaneous memorials also illustrates that governments cannot prevent people from publicly expressing their grief through appropriating and marking public space.¹⁶⁷

I would argue that the MJ-memorial is part of the broader upsurge of instances of public mourning over the death of people the mourners do not know personally. Jackson's death was unanticipated and fans were looking for ways to deal with the unexpected loss. The MJ-memorial fits many of the characteristics of grassroots memorials. It arose as a public expression of grief and indignation with Jackson's untimely death. The fans created their unofficial commemoration place by appropriating the Orlando di Lasso statue, which is situated in front of the Bayerischer Hof – the hotel where Jackson used to stay during his visits to Munich. In line with Margry and Sánchez-Carretero's interpretation of grassroots memorialization as a sign of social or political disaffection, activism and protest underlie the MJ-memorial. Fans instrumentalize it to inform others about what – to them – is Jackson's true nature, to rectify "false allegations" and to make sure his humanitarian legacy will not be forgotten. The MJ-memorial also fits Stengs' description of grassroots memorials as inherently ambiguous. Visitors of the MJ-memorial in Munich will immediately see that the monument is not an image of Michael Jackson, but displays the 16th-century Franco-Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso. At the same time, the memorabilia in remembrance of Jackson have transformed the location of the statue into a ritualized space and the monument is clearly recognizable as a memorial for Jackson.

Despite many resemblances with other grassroots memorials, the MJ-memorial also seems to be exceptional. Because it has existed already over eleven years, it has developed into a multifaceted space that is claimed by various parties. In the next section, I will describe the MJ-memorial's exterior and discuss the objects at the site.

2.2 A memorial for two: the exterior of the MJ-memorial

The lineage of the MJ-memorial takes us back to 1847, when king Ludwig I ordered the German sculptor Max von Widmann to create a memorial statue for the composer Orlando Di Lasso. The statue was originally placed on the Odeonsplatz in 1848 but was moved to the Promenadeplatz in 1860. In the Second World War the monument was destroyed. It was possible to recast the statue and in 1958 it was placed on the Promenadeplatz once again. The memorial measures 3.20

¹⁶⁷ Stengs, "Gedenken op de plek des onheils", 271, 275-276.

meters and consists of a granite base and bronze image of Di Lasso.¹⁶⁸ In 2009, after Jackson's death, the statue was appropriated by Bavarian MJ-fans as a memorial for Jackson, changing the function of the bronze figure into a memorial for two very different public figures.¹⁶⁹

The MJ-memorial is situated in the rich city center of Munich. The Promenadeplatz follows the Theaterstraße where you will find jewelers, chocolateries and designer shops such as Karl Lagerfeld and Loden Frei. The buildings surrounding the Promenadeplatz are majestic, tall and decorated with ornaments and host branches of, amongst others, the Commerzbank and the HypoVereinsbank. The Bayerischer Hof Hotel can be found in the middle of the street and is known to be one of the most luxurious hotels of Munich. The Promenadeplatz itself is a long stretched green field with five statues of which the Di Lasso monument is one. It is a busy, public space; many people pass by via public transport, car, bicycle or foot. It is a popular site for people to walk their dog, take lunchbreaks or rest on one of the benches. Within this luxurious context, the MJ-memorial stands out. Although the monument is well maintained – the flowers are fresh

Image 2.1 the MJ-Memorial

and the ornaments are neatly arranged – the colorful ‘fannish’ display contrasts with its posh and formal surroundings. The plinth of the Orlando di Lasso statue is plastered with pictures of Jackson through all ages. The images are plasticized to protect them against rain. Along the photographs runs a thread of light so the memorial can be lit in the evening. The monument’s steps are crammed with candles, flowers, personal messages, listed photographs of Michael, statuettes, and religious icons – notably angel-shaped statues and grave lanterns. In 2015 I also found two plastic boxes that contained pamphlets in German and English with “the most

¹⁶⁸ Anneliese Senger Stiftung, ‘Standbild Orlando di Lasso, 1849, am Promenadeplatz in München’, http://www.sengerstiftung.de/orlando_di_lasso.html (accessed 5 February 2020).

¹⁶⁹ Although one could argue that music links the two, in practice this resemblance is not referred to by fans.

common questions about Michael Jackson and their answers”. The documents illustrate the activist focus of the memorial: the fans utilize the public space for social action. Through their public memorial and accompanying pamphlets they hope to provide information that counters what to them are allegations about Jackson that have been spread by the media out of “sensationalism and pure greed for profit”.

The material objects the fans have left at the statue are in line with the kind of items one tends to find at grassroots memorials. There is little coordination to the collection of items at the MJ-memorial. In her study of grassroots memorial shrines in California Larson-Miller explains the lack of coordination at the shrines. At the shrine that she studied “people simply brought what they had or felt to be appropriate.”¹⁷⁰ She traces “a type of pan-religious, pluralistic, inclusive remembrance” in the combinations of articles present at the memorials “one that invited

Image 2.2 The 4 sides of the MJ-memorial

all participants in through any number of different avenues. If the crucifix did not engage you, perhaps the crystals would.”¹⁷¹

The gifts of the fans are reminiscent of votive offerings.¹⁷² It is difficult to say, however, to what extent the gifts are motivated by a spiritual connection to Jackson. The handwritten notes and statues with personal messages provide the most information about the relationship between the fans and Jackson. Many messages expressed grief, stating, for example: “Michael, we miss you”. But most messages were about love and gratitude: “Michael, I love you more”. The theme of

¹⁷⁰ Larson-Miller, ‘Holy Ground’, 260-261.

¹⁷¹ Larson-Miller, ‘Holy Ground’, 261.

¹⁷² Sarah Blick, ‘Ex Votos’, in: Larissa J. Taylor, Leigh Ann Craig, John B. Friedman, Kathy Gower, Thomas Izbecki and Rita Tekippe eds., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* (Leiden; Boston: BRILL 2010) 198-201, 198-199; C. Lindsey King, ‘Pilgrimage, Promises, and Ex-Voto’s: Ingredients for Healing in Northeast Brazil’, in: Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelmann eds., *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2005) 49-68, 49-50.

love was also recurrent in the many heart-shaped items that were attached to the memorial. In 2015 I found a rather special hand-written message on a heart-shaped piece of paper: “Michael, please bring back my love to me – I know you can make any wish come true! ‘little’ Marina”. The contribution of “little Marina” suggests a reciprocal relationship between the fan and Jackson. Like pilgrims in the Christian tradition, Marina asks Jackson a favor. Her note is given in anticipation of a particular wish.

Besides the usual Jackson-memorabilia, the exterior of the MJ-memorial follows the seasons and the yearly holiday calendar: around Christmas-time the fans decorate the statue with a little Christmas tree and with Easter its steps are filled with Easter eggs and bunnies. On Jackson’s birthday the memorial is filled with birthday cards. The ways the MJ-fans interact with the MJ-memorial confirm the observations of Stengs who argues that by following the biography of the deceased and the annual calendar, grassroots memorials provide a link between the world of the living and the world of the dead.¹⁷³ By maintaining and nurturing their shrine the fans keep the memory of Jackson alive and relevant.

Although everyone is free to leave items at the memorial, most objects on the monument belong to MJ’s LEGACY, said Bea. MJ’s LEGACY also holds itself responsible for the overall appearance of the MJ-memorial and has pledged to make ‘their’ monument globally known. In the next section I want to zoom in on this organization, their ideals and their work at the memorial.

2.3 Introducing MJ’s LEGACY

Bea clearly remembers when she decided to establish MJ’s LEGACY. She came up with the idea in 2009 when the maintenance of the memorial became too strenuous. More importantly, she wanted to do more than only take care of a memorial site. Inspired by Jackson’s humanitarian engagements, her wish was to set up an institution to help children. In hindsight, Bea stated that a quote of Jackson in *This Is It* gave her an extra push to take action: “many say the government will take care of it, but who will take care of it when we don’t do it?” When she heard this quote, it was clear to her that she needed to show Jackson that she had understood him and that she wanted to realize what he stood for. In March 2011 Bea and four other women founded “MJ’s LEGACY Association International”; a non-profit charitable organization to support and preserve the humanitarian legacy of Jackson. It is the first officially recorded German public association in honor of Michael Jackson.¹⁷⁴

MJ’s LEGACY has two websites to promote their foundation and the MJ-memorial. The

¹⁷³ Stengs, “Gedenken op de plek des onheils”, 272.

¹⁷⁴ MJ’s LEGACY, ‘Welcome’, <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/welcome.html> (accessed 11 February 2020).

association also administers a Twitter account and three Facebook pages.¹⁷⁵ The websites and social media are used to post event updates and report the association's charitable achievements. MJ's LEGACY formulates its goal as being Jackson's messengers of love and wanting to step in his footsteps to help children and make the world a better place. On one of its websites, under the subhead "Jackson Message" the song lyrics of five MJ-songs appear: "Heal the World", "Man In The Mirror", "What More Can I Give", "Earth Song", and "We Are The World". Following the message of "We Are the World", the association intends the memorial to be a uniting place of "love, laughter, tears and togetherness" that is welcoming to "people of all races and nations".¹⁷⁶ The association feels indebted to Jackson. Now that he is dead, they see it as their responsibility to carry on "Healing the world" and to not consign him to oblivion. Furthermore, they aim to preserve the MJ-memorial in Munich and turn it into an official and permanent monument of Jackson himself.¹⁷⁷ One can become a member of MJ's LEGACY by paying an annual membership fee that supports the maintenance of the memorial and the associations charitable involvement. Membership allows for participation in meetings and members receive gifts and privileges – such as a personal candle at the MJ-memorial and priority concerning event-registrations.¹⁷⁸

Because the MJ-memorial is the association's tool to get their message across, the monument needs to look tidy. Furthermore, the tolerance of the government rests in part on the statue's appearance; should the monument look neglected, it might be removed. To guarantee the neatness of their memorial site, every Friday afternoon MJ's LEGACY hosts the Offener Stammtisch. 'Stammtisch' is a German cultural concept which traditionally refers to the get-togethers of like-minded men or to the 'regulars table' where they gathered. Anthropologist Dominic Boyer describes the Stammtisch as a "communicative space" in which serious debates are held about politics and society.¹⁷⁹ Today, a Stammtisch can be regarded in a broader sense, also including mixed groups or female only groups, with or without political reference. For a typical Stammtisch meeting of MJ's LEGACY the participants gather at 16.00 to clean the statue together. Afterwards they discuss their efforts to honor Jackson over dinner. Although the association stresses the word 'offen' (open), the weekly gatherings seldomly attract new visitors and mostly consist of active members of MJ's LEGACY.

¹⁷⁵ MJ's LEGACY, 'Links', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/links.html> (accessed 5 March 2018).

¹⁷⁶ MJ's LEGACY, 'About us', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/uber-uns.html>.

¹⁷⁷ MJ's LEGACY, 'Welcome'; Michael Jackson Memorial Munich, 'About us and our mission', <http://denkmalfuermichaeljackson.npage.eu/das-team-ueber-uns-about-us.html> (accessed 8 March 2018). Up till now, MJ's LEGACY lacks the power to enforce their interest. That is why they started an online petition to collect signatures for their cause: Ipetitions, 'Denkmal fuer Michael Jackson in Muenchen', <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/memorialmjj/> (accessed 31 January 2018).

¹⁷⁸ MJ's LEGACY, 'Membership', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/membership.html> (accessed 10 March 2020); Bea e-mail correspondence (May 5 2015).

¹⁷⁹ Dominic Boyer, 'Conspiracy, history, and therapy at a Berlin Stammtisch', *American Ethnologist* 33:3 (2006) 327-339, 329.

Image 2.3 Some of the cleaning attributes of the Memorial-Fairies

The members of MJ's LEGACY who take care of the monument introduce themselves as 'Denkmal-Feen' ('Memorial-Fairies'). In addition to the communal Friday cleaning sessions, each memorial-fairy is assigned one or two cleaning-shifts per week. There is an arrangement for the work that has to be done at the memorial and a work plan that states who comes when. The fairies also have a budget plan which keeps track of what is bought for the memorial. Bea supervises the arrangement and she is the one who the fairies have to contact in case of sickness or when someone wants to change a shift. Bea keeps a high standard for cleaning the MJ-memorial. She described the maintenance of the memorial as "insanely time-consuming". The fairies have to order the different objects, sweep, mop, light candles, water the flowers or free them from rain, laminate the images and so on. Indeed, during my stay in Munich I witnessed five memorial-fairies work non-stop for 1,5 hours beautifying the memorial. Everything was taken off the statue's steps so they could be brushed, the pictures and candle holders were wiped with baby wipes, tea lights and batteries were replaced, flowers were cut off, dead flowers were removed and old water was thrown away and replaced with fresh water. Bea told me that she ideally wished for a fairy to be present every day, which is what the website of MJ's LEGACY claims to be the case. During my stay in 2015 and 2017, however, I noted that the association apparently cannot realize this ideal.

By day the MJ-memorial is almost never without visitors. Being situated in a busy, public space, you will usually find someone lingering around the statue. When memorial-fairies are present, they function as spokespersons on behalf of the MJ-memorial and inform passers-by

and tour-groups about the reason behind the shrine and about Michael Jackson as a person. I occasionally saw fans light a candle or leave a note. Sometimes a candle would be burning early in the morning before the hustle and bustle of the day had begun. One female fan shared with me that she prefers to visit the memorial by night so that she can be alone with Jackson. Perhaps there are more fans like this woman, but besides the members of MJ's LEGACY I observed few fans visit the MJ-memorial on a regular weekday.

This is different when an event is organized at the MJ-memorial. MJ's LEGACY uses the MJ-memorial as their official meeting-point. As far as I know, it is the only group that regularly organizes get-togethers at the monument throughout the year, including an annual Christmas celebration. The two most important events are without doubt the anniversary of Jackson's birthday and the commemoration of his death. On these days substantially more fans assemble at the MJ-memorial and leave notes, candles, (sun)flowers and Michael Jackson memorabilia.¹⁸⁰ Visitors also clean and beautify the memorial on these occasions. During these special events fans also often go out for dinner together. Afterwards they generally return to the memorial to perform a few rituals, like building a light-heart of love with red grave lights and holding hands while keeping silent for a few minutes.

Image 2.4 Lighting the candles at Jackson's birthday

During the celebration of Jackson's birthday in 2017, I observed a difference between fans from 'afar' and residents of Munich who visited the memorial several times a week. The fans from out of town wore Michael Jackson T-shirts and other Jackson attributes such as bags or fedora hats. These were also the fans who most often had their pictures taken with the MJ-memorial, with their decorations, and with each other. Most 'regulars' always wear some kind of subtle reference to Jackson, for example, in the form of jewelry, and did not dress any differently than they usually do. The day mostly seemed to have a social function for fans to come together on a day that has a special meaning for them.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. In her study of the commemoration events at the statue of their idol in Amsterdam by fans of the Dutch singer André Hazes, Stengs similarly observed how fans lay flowers and André Hazes attributes at the statue – especially on the anniversaries of his birth and death. "Significantly, many of these fans mimic the singer by wearing Hazes attributes, or embody him through a tattooed portrait, or through wearing André Hazes T-shirts." See: Irene Stengs, 'Death and disposal of the people's singer: The body and bodily practices in commemorative ritual', *Mortality* 14:2 (2009) 102-118, 115-116.

Jackson's birthday celebration did not attract the number of people I had expected: at its peak there were about 18 people, mostly German (white) women between 40 and 50 years old. The low turnout possibly had to do with the fact that Jackson's birthday fell on a Tuesday. Most attendants stood around the memorial, some sat in the grass or on one of the benches next to the monument. Although most fans knew each other, it struck me that the majority did not talk to other people than those they had come with. The mood was relaxed. People were chatting and making jokes. All visitors were German and most also lived in Munich. A few had traveled from a nearby town. A group of four women, for example, had taken the train to celebrate Jackson's birthday together. Wearing MJ-T-shirts and accessories I saw them decorating the memorial with flowers, hearts and white and red grave lanterns. Afterwards they took pictures of themselves with the memorial.

In the next section, I will describe how the fans use the grassroots memorial to enhance awareness of Jackson's humanitarian message and to assemble money for charities they connect to his legacy.

2.4 The MJ-memorial as an instrument for social change

The German fans describe Jackson as a misunderstood and persecuted benefactor who worked hard at achieving a better world. They laud the singer for building such an extraordinary career irrespective of his humble upbringing and abusive father. The fans argue that during his life Jackson had to fight off the press and the media. He took it upon himself to make a change, did not wait for the government or others to intervene, but used his music to raise awareness and gather money to fight injustice. The fans who are active at the memorial told me that Jackson's untimely death was the result of persecution by the media. As a group they identify with his idealism; they too want to make the world a better place. In their dedication to Jackson, the fans in this study respond to the artist's 'social body'. Stengs describes this term as an emancipatory construct by fans of a celebrity's biography. Based on her study of the commemoration events of fans of the Dutch singer André Hazes, she argues that the fans' interpretation of Hazes and his songs is based on the "mediatized André Hazes". It is not the factual biography of Hazes but his 'social body' that the fans appropriate.¹⁸¹ By coming together at the commemoration events and dressing as Hazes, the fans confirm as a group this identity.

It seems that for the German fans who gather at the MJ-memorial one of the most important motives is to affect change and collect money for children in need. MJ's LEGACY usually connects a charity sale to their events. They use the grassroots memorial to encourage fans

¹⁸¹ Irene Stengs, 'Echt André: Belichaming en beleving van ruige authenticiteit onder André Hazes', *Sociologie* 6:2 (2010) 50-70, 52.

to become (more) civically engaged and give to charity. By December 2020 the association had donated over €42.000,- to child-aid projects, all in explicit honor of Jackson.¹⁸² The German fans' participation in continuing Jackson's humanitarian legacy, and their activism at the MJ-memorial is emblematic of a general characteristic of the MJ-fan community. There exists an astounding number of fan-based non-profit organizations in honor of Jackson. These charities collect money for all sorts of causes, that tend to mirror what the fans consider to be Jackson's primary concerns: the environment, child-aid and animal welfare.¹⁸³ The non-profit organization Michael Jackson Fans For Charity estimates the global total donations of MJ-fans close to \$400.000 from 2009 until February 2020.¹⁸⁴

Both in my individual conversations with fans and in my participation in group-events of MJ's LEGACY I was struck by the fans' activism. The fans discussed numerous political and societal issues, including the refugee-crisis, religion, education, care for the poor, the meat-industry, child labor and the faults of consumer society. In their group-meetings they lamented injustice, discrimination and inequality. The conversations had a high utopian level. In this sense, they remarkably fit Boyer's description of the traditional function of the Stammtisch as a "communicative space" in which serious debates are held about politics and society.¹⁸⁵ The fans frequently discussed what a just society looks like, in which they referred to Jackson who said that eventually all people will be equal. At times it almost felt as bragging about how good and aware of all evil in the world these people were and how everyone else has not understood what is just.

The way that the (German) MJ-fans embrace Jackson's values and use these as inspiration for non-profit organizations or critical discussions about politics and society is an example of "civic imagination in practice". Media scholar Henry Jenkins coined the term "civic imagination" to describe the relationship between acts of the imagination and the origins of political consciousness. Jenkins argues that sources of pop culture can function as inspirational for imagining and articulating what a better world might look like.¹⁸⁶ According to Media and Culture expert Stephen Duncombe it is no mystery why fans can become activists:

Fandom provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate according to different norms, laws, and structures than those we experience in our "real" lives. Fandom also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop

¹⁸² See for a complete overview of their charitable work: MJ's LEGACY, 'MJ's LEGACY goes CHARITY - Our projects', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/mjs-legacy-goes-charity.html> (accessed 5 March 2018).

¹⁸³ Michael Jackson's Legacy, 'Charities He Supported', <http://michaeljacksonslegacy.org/index.php/michael/charities-he-supported> (accessed 3 May 2018); Michael Jackson Fans For Charity has recently broadened their scope to include, besides Animals, Children and Environment, 'family' and 'Science & Arts': (MJFFC), 'F.A.C.E.S.', <https://www.mjffc.org/about-faces> (accessed 11 February 2020).

¹⁸⁴ MJFFC, 'Global Total', www.mjffc.org.uk/globaltotal (accessed 5 February 2020).

¹⁸⁵ Boyer, 'Conspiracy, history, and therapy at a Berlin Stammtisch', 329.

¹⁸⁶ Jenkins et al., *Participatory Culture in a Networked era*, 154, 165.

networks and institutions, and create a common culture. This ability to imagine alternatives and build community, not coincidentally, is a basic prerequisite for political activism.¹⁸⁷

Indeed, it happens more often that celebrities inspire their fan base to make a stand. Bethan Jones highlights the efforts of celebrities Misha Collins and Lady Gaga who use social media to reach their fans and encourage them to become activists in various philanthropic and activist projects. Lady Gaga, for example, partnered with Virgin Mobile on her Monster Ball tour and offered premium VIP tickets to fans who volunteered their time to organizations for homeless youth. In doing so, she and her fans raised more than \$80,000 to support homeless youth.¹⁸⁸ Fandom and Media Audiences expert Lucy Bennett also underlines the effectiveness of social media for celebrities to get their message across, because they allow a seemingly direct, personal dialogic close connection between the star and the fan that instigates “a powerful and active response when calls to action are generated by a celebrity to their fan base.”¹⁸⁹

There is, however, a distinct difference between celebrity-driven activism and fans who take it upon themselves to raise money or awareness for a specific cause. Jones argues that fans can be active participants in encouraging social awareness and charitable giving. She notes that such initiatives are often led by small teams of fans who dedicate much of their free time to “web site maintenance, Twitter links, Facebook updates, calls to donate, and fundraising events.”¹⁹⁰ Like the celebrities who use social media, fan-driven activism rests to a large extent on the internet to mobilize others to make a change. Scholars Elizabeth Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner found that especially social network sites (SNSs) provide a convenient platform for individuals to establish proactive efforts to advance social causes endorsed by a celebrity or in honor of a celebrity.¹⁹¹ This is certainly the case for MJ’s LEGACY, who use their websites and social media as platforms to encourage others to attend their events and donate to child-aid.

Jones states that despite the real contribution of celebrity-focused fans who are active for a certain charitable cause and convert awareness into good works, “celebrity-focused fans are often still maligned in popular discourse”.¹⁹² Jones warns that these popular constructions of celebrity-focused fans need to be reexamined. She differentiates between “fan activism” and “fan charity”, defining the first as “fans actively campaigning for issues nominated by or affiliated with the fandom, either through issues raised in the text or by awareness raised by the star.” “Fan

¹⁸⁷ Stephen Duncombe, ‘Imagining No-place’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

¹⁸⁸ Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’.

¹⁸⁹ Bennett, ‘Fan Activism for Social Mobilization: A Critical Review of the Literature’.

¹⁹⁰ Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’.

¹⁹¹ Elizabeth L. Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner, ‘Finding meaning in a celebrity’s death: The relationship between parasocial attachment, grief, and sharing educational health information related to Robin Williams on social network sites’, *Computers in Human Behavior* 65 (2016) 643-650, 648.

¹⁹² Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’.

charity” in Jones’s definition concerns a “concerted effort made by a group of fans to raise money for an organization nominated by or affiliated with their fandom.”¹⁹³ The German fans engage in both fan activism and fan charity. The fans model themselves on positive features that they attribute to Jackson and bring those into their own lives for the benefit of themselves and others – for example by raising funds for, and awareness of charities inspired by Jackson’s humanitarian legacy.

Scholars Melissa Brough and Sangita Shresthova propose that fan activism has most often been regarded as toward nonpolitical issues, being more associated with fans lobbying for a content-related outcome, such as a program staying on the air or the representation of racial or sexual minorities in a program.¹⁹⁴ Brough and Sangita criticize this narrow approach to fan activism “given the porous boundaries between cultural and political concerns, as well as the overtly political orientation of many fan activist campaigns today.”¹⁹⁵ Jenkins broadly defines fan activism as:

Forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture.¹⁹⁶

Jenkins and Shresthova state that even though a growing number of fans are exploring ways to translate their fan investments into campaigns for social change, not all fan efforts are successful. The scholars temper, what they call, “the utopian view of fan activism” by noting that most forms of fandom stop at the level of creative expression and do not translate into collective action.¹⁹⁷ In this regard, the fans in this study can be regarded as quite exceptional, because they successfully turn their fandom into civic action.

The behavior of the MJ-fans fits, what Cohen and Hoffner qualify as, “behavioral meaning making”; it is “an effort to create some positive meaning out of a tragic situation by educating others.”¹⁹⁸ Cohen and Hoffner investigated the motivation of Steve Irwin fans who donated money to wildlife conservation charities after his unexpected death. In the case of Irwin, the fans use donating as a way to memorialize Irwin and also have a positive environmental impact.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’.

¹⁹⁴ Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, ‘Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

¹⁹⁵ Idem.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Henry Jenkins, ‘Cultural Acupuncture’: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

¹⁹⁷ Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, ‘“Up, Up, and Away! The power and potential of fan activism’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012).

¹⁹⁸ Cohen and Hoffner, ‘Finding meaning in a celebrity’s death’, 646.

¹⁹⁹ Idem, 648.

I recognize this motivation in the explanations of MJ's LEGACY for their dedication to the MJ-memorial. Many told me that dedicating their time to the memorial and charity gave them a feeling that Jackson's passing had not been for nothing. They described his death as a highly impactful event in their lives. It was a striking pattern in their reports that the fans made a conscious change after Jackson's demise. They decided to commit themselves to continuing his humanitarian lifework by "doing good". In the next section I will focus on fans I met in Munich who visit the memorial on a regular basis. I will reflect on what the MJ-memorial means to them and how they instrumentalize it to internalize, continue and spread Jackson's humanitarian legacy to "Heal the World".

2.5 The people who visit the MJ-memorial

During my stay in Munich I met several people who habitually visit the MJ-memorial. Most of them were members of MJ's LEGACY and also regularly tend to the monument. These fans described the shrine as a site of communion and memory. They expressed that throughout the years, their feelings about the MJ-memorial have changed. Especially in the beginning, the predominant emotion was sadness because Jackson was gone. In the meantime, however, the experience has shifted to a feeling of contentment and appreciation because they sense a closeness to Jackson at the memorial. The fans' relationship to Jackson can be characterized by 'projection' and 'identification'. 'Identification' is "the process by which individuals reconstruct their own attitudes, values, or behaviors in response to the images of people they admire."²⁰⁰ 'Projection' is to be understood as "a condition whereby fans take into account how stars would behave in certain situations, and then attempt to imitate that supposed behaviour in their own lives".²⁰¹

The fans recognize themselves in Jackson. Many told me they relate to certain character traits of the artist or to his values and principles. In doing so, the fans approached Jackson as an equal partner. Josie, for example, recognizes her shy and cautious nature in Jackson's personality and described herself as Jackson's "ally, linked together by soul". At the same time, the fans put Jackson on a pedestal in that they perceive him as an example who inspires and empowers them to believe in themselves and to do good to the best of their ability. I was struck by the agentive interpretation of fandom that the fans voiced. Like Bea, who expressed that being a fan means more than just enjoying the music, the other fans similarly explained that their fandom implies a commitment to "do good" in line with Jackson's message. For these fans taking care of the MJ-memorial in Munich is an expression of this responsibility.

²⁰⁰ Benson P. Fraser and William J. Brown, 'Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification With Elvis Presley', *Mass Communication & Society* 5:2 (2002) 183-206, 189.

²⁰¹ Gina Rumbaugh quote in: Jones, 'Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement'.

Many fans, furthermore, mentioned the social dynamics at the MJ-shrine. Some shared with me that a public display of fandom can encourage negative responses. Wendy, who has a large tattoo of Michael on her back, explained that because “many people don’t understand” MJ-fans “are ridiculed”. Jessica admitted that when she wears clothes that depict Jackson, people often “look”, which makes her feel uncomfortable. The MJ-memorial is a safe place for fans where they can freely show their fandom and feel supported by the presence of other fans. At the commemorations at the monument, Jessica always wears one of her MJ-t shirts. “You understand each other immediately”, she said, “that is why people love to be here.” She finds it nice to feel “that you are not alone”. Being at the memorial always lifts her spirits, even when she is having a bad day.

Besides being a location where they experience a community atmosphere, the fans frequently described the MJ-memorial as a place where they feel close to Jackson – something they described as an uplifting experience. Wendy voiced that when she first found out about the MJ-memorial she visited the place almost every day and quickly joined MJ’s LEGACY to take care of the memorial. She characterized the MJ-memorial as a beautiful, magical place where she comes to rest because she is “in Michael’s proximity”. When I met Alexis, she was diligently cleaning the memorial – sweeping the steps, removing old flowers and spreading pink rose petals across the monument. At the memorial she prays and talks to Michael because she can feel him there, a feeling she described as a “divine” presence. Alexis found it difficult to explain this feeling, but eventually explained it as “love, no pain, no sorrow and no worries”.

Some fans touched upon the initial function of the memorial as a place created to express and share grief after the sudden loss of Jackson. Many described Jackson’s passing as one of the saddest moments in their lives, sometimes even more challenging than the loss of friends or family-members. Marc, one of the rare male fans in this study, is a good example of how the MJ-memorial helped fans cope with Jackson’s death and provided them with meaning and purpose in the loss of their idol. Thinking back to the morning he found out Jackson had passed brought tears to his eyes: “oh God, he was such a part of me (...) I had built such a relationship with his art, with his music and just like that he isn’t there anymore.” Marc explained that he had a tough, unsafe childhood. Growing up he found in Jackson a loving figure and someone he could look up to. Jackson shaped his outlook on life: Marc learned from him to always strive for perfection, to believe in himself and to persevere and fight even when something is difficult. Jackson still inspires him to dedicate himself to “the good”, which he clarified as nature, animals, environmental protection and social justice.

I noticed that more fans took into account how Jackson would behave in certain situations and modelled themselves on that behavior. The German fans unanimously stated that Jackson’s most important message was love and taking action for change. In their vocabulary

they frequently cited lyrics or paraphrased song texts. They most often referred to “Man in the Mirror”, “Earth Song” and “Will You Be There”. Generally, the fans were not much interested in Jackson’s humanitarian side nor in doing charity work themselves until 2009. Jackson’s death marks a turning point in their lives; they told me that they became aware of his importance for the world and decided to spread his legacy from that moment onwards. Marc described Jackson’s death as a “wake-up call” which led to “a collapse of egocentrism” and urged him to contribute and “do something good on this earth”. For Marc the MJ-memorial symbolizes this ideal.

Indeed, I discovered that many more fans felt impelled to do something after Jackson’s death. I interpret their dedication to the memorial in part as an answer to their feelings of injustice and powerlessness. It is a way to continue the legacy of their idol and keep his memory alive and their relationship with him. A significant number of fans I spoke to stated that taking care of the memorial was a way to give something back to Jackson and to not let him slip into oblivion. The fans also explained that the memorial gives them the opportunity to rectify “false allegations” and “give facts” to people who have questions and who are open to learn about Jackson.²⁰² Jessica, for instance, cleans the memorial to create awareness. She told me it fills her with pride to tell passers-by about the reason behind the MJ-memorial and how fans have taken care of the memorial ever since Jackson passed away. Although she is well aware that she cannot force anyone to feel the same way she does about Jackson, she still hopes that her efforts might bring others closer to him and maybe even create “a little spark.”

Many talked about Jackson’s suffering and unjust death. The German fans portrayed him as a martyr and are convinced of his innocence. They described him as more than a conventional human being – for example referring to him as an “angel” or emphasizing his “God-given” talent to make the world a better place. A few drew parallels between Jackson and prophets, like Jessica who compared Jackson to Jesus because both came to the world with a mission to change it and eventually had to sacrifice their life for their ideals. I think the interpretation of Jackson as a martyr is an important factor in the fans’ agentic approach to their fandom. Because Jackson is under attack, they feel called upon to defend him at all times. Especially since the popstar himself is no longer alive, it is really up to them to make a stand.

The original function of the MJ-memorial as an expression of grief and shock after Jackson’s unexpected death is a classic function of grassroots memorials. The way that the fans utilize the memorial as a place to bring about change confirms the findings of Margry and Sánchez-Carretero. In my view, however, the way the fans use the public memorial as a way to reach people and provide information about Jackson is quite unique. It made me think of the way in which Jehovah’s Witnesses use stands and kiosks to reach people in public. I mentioned

²⁰² This motivation has again become especially relevant since the broadcast of *Leaving Neverland*.

earlier that Stengs noted the function of grassroots shrines as a bridge between the living and the dead. Indeed, the way the fans interact with the MJ-memorial came across as communicating, thus demonstrating the materiality of religion; the MJ-memorial is the medium through which “religious concepts and beliefs sediment and become tangible”.²⁰³ Some fans admitted that they hoped Jackson would somehow notice their efforts and that it would please him. When I asked the fans if they would miss the memorial if the Munich city officials would decide to dismantle it, they all expressed that they would. First of all because they want Jackson’s legacy to stay alive, but also because they appreciate it as their meeting-place, a place where they can talk to people of like mind and enjoy being fans together.

The fan accounts give the impression that everything at the MJ-memorial is hunky-dory. A closer look, however, reveals that the place does not go uncontested.²⁰⁴ In the next section, I will first discuss the different stakeholders that have a vested interest in the Di Lasso statue at the Promenadeplatz, after which I will explore some of the conflicts that have arisen out of MJ’s LEGACY’s claim of ownership of the Di Lasso statue.

2.6 Who owns the MJ-memorial?

The continued existence of the MJ-memorial rests on a fragile equilibrium between the city officials of Munich, the fans, and citizens of Munich. The Orlando di Lasso Memorial is officially the property of the free state of Bavaria, while the Munich municipality owns the ground on which it stands. The Bavarian State Ministry has been remarkably lenient towards the appropriation of the statue by fans as an MJ-memorial. When in July 2016 the Di Lasso statue had to be cleaned, city officials even waited with dismantling the MJ-memorial until after the commemoration of Jackson’s death day on 25 June. After the cleaning, the fans were allowed to restore their shrine.²⁰⁵ The shrine is tolerated on condition that everything on the steps of the Di Lasso statue can be easily removed and that the gifts do not leave any traces on the monument. Since its establishment, the memorial has gradually become one of Munich’s tourist attractions. The official Munich city website even recommends it as a place “worth seeing”.²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the government stresses the temporary status of the MJ-Memorial, thus wanting to keep their grip on the public space. The municipality does not allow the fans to establish a personal statue

²⁰³ Meyer, ‘Medium’, 59.

²⁰⁴ Digance defines “contested sites” as: “sacred locations where there is contest over access and usage by any number of groups or individuals who have an interest in being able to freely enter and move around the site.” Justine Digance, ‘Pilgrimage at Contested Sites’, *Annals of Tourism Research* 30:1 (2003) 143–159, 144.

²⁰⁵ Muenchen.de, ‘Reinigung des Michael-Jackson-Memorials’, <http://www.muenchen.de/aktuell/2016-05/michael-jackson-denkmal-pflege-im-juli.html> (accessed 10 February 2020).

²⁰⁶ Muenchen.de, ‘Das offizielle Stadtportal, „Sehenswertes“, <http://www.muenchen.de/sehenswertes/orte/120336.html> (accessed 10 February 2020).

of Jackson on public ground. MJ's LEGACY has been promised tolerance for their memorial until 2021.²⁰⁷

Another party with a vested interest in the Di Lasso statue is the independent non-profit foundation Anneliese Senger Stiftung which preserves the work and artistic legacy of the German sculptor Max von Widmann – the creator of the statue. The foundation accepts the MJ-memorial on condition that the fans do not damage the monument or cover it with too many statuettes and frills. Art historian Charlotte Meinardus-Stelzer called the appropriation by the MJ-fans “a refreshing symbiosis for both MJ, Max von Widmann and Orlando di Lasso.” The foundation refers to the Di Lasso memorial on their website as a “shared monument” (“Doppeldenkmal”) and posts the activities of MJ's LEGACY to generate publicity for their cause.²⁰⁸

Over the past eleven years the MJ-memorial has caused tension within the MJ-fan community and between fans and citizens concerning access and use of the monument or the Promenadeplatz. These disputes expose the hierarchy within the fan community and the power-politics related to maintaining the MJ-memorial. In the remaining part of this section, I will first reflect on disputes about ownership between MJ's LEGACY and two other fan groups. Subsequently, I will discuss the commotion that was caused by the ironic art project Bubblesplatz, which was installed next to the MJ-memorial. After that I will touch upon the response of citizens of Munich towards the MJ-memorial, and how the recent broadcast of *Leaving Neverland* has rekindled familiar debates.

Jenkins has argued that, even though most fan communities like to portray themselves as egalitarian networks who “explicitly embrace the ideals of democracy and diversity”, fan communities are “rarely as inclusive as they imagine themselves to be.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, other studies have similarly shown that conflict and social hierarchies are common within fan cultures and fan communities.²¹⁰ Fan and cultural studies scholar Bertha Chin takes it a step further and argues that possibly fandom is exactly “a site of struggles for control, a contested space for dominance in determining the reading formations surrounding the text, or the accepted practices within a fandom.”²¹¹ Scholars Stijn Reijnders, Marlies Spijker and Johan Roeland disclose the issues of jealousy, envy and social hierarchy in the fan community of the Dutch singer Marco Borsato. They point to struggles for status and power among fans, where access to and contact with

²⁰⁷ E-mail correspondence with Tarek Kreitner civil servant Munich, 20 February 2018.

²⁰⁸ Anneliese Senger Stiftung, ‘Standbild Orlando di Lasso, 1849, am Promenadeplatz in München’. https://www.senger-stiftung.de/orlando_di_lasso.html (accessed 5 February 2020).

²⁰⁹ Henry Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’, in: Paul Booth ed., *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons 2018) 13-26, 24.

²¹⁰ Bertha Chin, ‘It's About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom’, in: Paul Booth ed., *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons 2018) 243-256, 246-247; Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic 2013) 247.

²¹¹ Bertha Chin, *From Textual Poachers to Textual Gifters: Exploring Fan Community and Celebrity in the Field of Fan Cultural Production* (PhD Thesis Cardiff University 2010) 90-91.

Borsato form an “exclusive and desirable status symbol that determines someone’s position within the fan community. (my translation, FE).”²¹²

I similarly found that possessing knowledge about Jackson can be powerful cultural capital in the MJ-fan community.²¹³ During my stay in Munich, I was struck by the status that the German fans attributed to Bea, who was praised for her detailed knowledge of Jackson and her work at the memorial. Many expressed their gratitude towards Bea’s commitment: the cleaning, the organizing of events, the assembling of money for charity, she makes it all happen. Bea’s authority was reinforced by her two ‘Michaeling’-journeys to America. Being the authority figure in the group, Bea not only managed the cleaning-sessions and the exterior of the memorial but also administered the website of MJ’s LEGACY and its social media. She answered the association’s general email and operated as the spokesperson for the media. I also saw fans ask Bea permission regarding what they could throw away at the memorial.

Bea, on the other hand (much like Donna from the previous chapter), emphasized that at the MJ-memorial everyone is equal. She stated that taking care of the MJ-memorial and collecting money for charity is the responsibility of every good fan. She casually mentioned, however, that her work and dedication did bring her “praise” and “recognition”. On the basis of my conversations with Bea, and by observing her interact with other fans, I would say that the praise Bea talks about refers both to Jackson – about whom she said that she would like to believe that he sees what she does for him – and to her status within the fan community.

Chin calls fans like Bea, who have gained prominence within the fan community, “high status fans”. These fans, she argues, are the community leaders who receive special treatment within their fan communities. Chin compares the prestige of such fans with some kind of celebrity status. She notes that it is not uncommon for fans to become fans of other fans who have acquired more status, thereby creating a social hierarchy within the fan community. Fans work hard at earning these statuses of high-status fan or fan leader within their subculture. This leader-status can be achieved by the possession of so-called “fan cultural capitals”, which Chin defines as “the cultural knowledge that members of a subculture acquire to distinguish themselves from other members of the group.”²¹⁴ Chin gives the example of the practice of fan fiction writing. A fan can acquire a higher status by producing high-quality, well researched and written fan fiction, and presenting them as gifts to the fandom.²¹⁵

Fan ‘celebrities’ often “determine how the communities are run, the boundaries of these

²¹² Stijn Reijnders, Marlies Spijker and Johan Roeland, ‘Dichtbij Marco. Over de ritualisering van nabijheid in het celebritytijdperk’, *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap* 40:2 (2012) 116-134, 126.

²¹³ Fans cherish knowledge of intimate stories about Jackson and some keep new information to themselves. Contrary to the popstar Borsato, Jackson is no longer alive, which arguably makes the chance of discovering exclusive information about him even more slim.

²¹⁴ Chin, *From Textual Poachers to Textual Gifters*, 6.

²¹⁵ Idem, 38, 49, 69, 90-91.

communities, as well as discussion themes and topics for community members”.²¹⁶ Indeed, I observed this during one of the cleaning sessions of the Offener Stammtisch. When I saw some flowers that did not look fresh any more I asked Marc if I should throw them away. He responded that we should wait for Bea, because she decides. When Bea arrived with fresh flowers, I noted that a bouquet of good-looking lilies was thrown away. “Isn’t that a shame to throw away perfectly good lilies?”, I asked Marc. “Well”, he answered, “Bea said they had to go, because she brought new ones.” “In that case, I can surely throw away those half-dead flowers”, I said whilst pointing at a perished bouquet. Marc agreed but did nothing.

The reason why it has to be discussed whether to throw dead flowers away might also be explained by what Stengs calls “sacred waste”. Sacred waste is material residues and surpluses that cannot be disposed of as just garbage, but neither can be kept or left alone. Stengs mentions as an example the flowers and attributes that were placed at royal sites in tribute to Princess Diana. Sacred waste has an ambiguous nature because it is charged with religious, moral or emotional value, but at the same time is a kind of leftover for which no proper destination exists.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, sacred waste demands special treatment, because once a part of a commemorative space, the objects exert a power of their own. I am not sure if the flowers on the MJ-memorial fully qualify as ‘sacred waste’ in the eyes of the fans, but I would contend that needing Bea’s permission to throw them away indicates that they are imbued with meaning. Nevertheless, I observed no ‘sacred dealing’ with the waste afterwards; the dead flowers were simply thrown away in the nearest bin.

Being the community leader allows a high status fan to act as the spokesperson of their fan group. Chin quotes scholar Andrea MacDonald who observed that:

Outsiders to fan discourse (such as journalists and academics) will usually be directed either by fans or by production people to fans who have achieved a certain level of recognition or authority... Only authorities are able to speak uncontested to outsiders such as journalists.²¹⁸

Bea’s status as the head and spokesperson of MJ’s LEGACY at times hampered my fieldwork. She has put an incredible amount of hard work and money in the memorial and charities. This enormous investment, however, has a flipside. Bea told me that she considers it her responsibility to make sure that the memorial is preserved and that the association collects enough money for

²¹⁶ Chin, ‘It’s About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom’, 243. In her use of “capitals” Chin refers to Bourdieu, and defines these as a “set of actually usable resources and powers”.

²¹⁷ Irene Stengs, ‘Sacred waste’, *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 10:2 (2014) 235-238, 235.

²¹⁸ Chin, ‘It’s About Who You Know’, 247. Original quote from Andrea MacDonald, ‘Uncertain utopia: science fiction media fandom and computer-mediated communication’, in: Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander eds., *Theorizing fandom: fans, subculture, and identity* (Hampton Press 1998) 131-152, 138-139.

charities. In our conversations she pointed out that, as a result, she was under much stress. In 2017, the interest in the MJ-memorial was decreasing together with the financial support she received with her charity. “We are struggling to make it work”, she admitted. A lot of the work rested on her shoulders, which she described as mentally, physically and financially strenuous. Bea even admitted that if donations were to decrease even more she was not sure that she would muster the energy to keep up the maintenance of the memorial. Nevertheless, she did not consider giving up. Bea’s ardent efforts to take the lead in her association’s efforts to clear Jackson’s name and preserve the MJ-memorial resulted in keeping me at a distance; I had difficulties getting into contact with other team-members and fans, because Bea protected them and the memorial from too much ‘outside’ attention. In an email preceding my visit, she let me know that she nor her team-members could commit to meeting me and added that I should keep in mind that “we don’t want to stay long or constantly under some kind of “observation””. I did not know if the fans had mutually agreed that Bea would talk on their behalf, but in my spontaneous encounters with other members of MJ’s LEGACY at the memorial I experienced the contact as very pleasant and all fans were quite willing to tell me more about the memorial and their dedication to it.

According to Chin, it is important to note that the authority and status of the ‘high status fan’ is never permanent and frequently contested, whether by another fan from within the community, or by another group of fans.²¹⁹ This is certainly the case in Munich, where there have been conflicts between fan groups regarding the authority of Bea and MJ’s LEGACY. Bea classified her opponents as “bad” and “evil”.²²⁰ These fans directly functioned as scapegoats who were referred to as examples of how not to behave. Bea explained that bad fans have at times molested the MJ-memorial out of envy of what the good fans have accomplished in honor of Jackson and pose a true test for the ‘good’ fans to not lose their vision and courage. Allegedly already from the start, fans have not seen eye-to-eye regarding the maintenance of the monument. The biggest conflict has been between MJ’s LEGACY and another fan group – reportedly called MJ Memorial Munich. MJ Memorial Munich has accused Bea and MJ’s LEGACY of unjustly claiming exclusive ownership of the memorial and of insulting non-members, threatening them, attacking them, and banning them from the memorial site. MJ’s LEGACY, in turn, has accused the rivaling group of harassment and violation: “they remove our decorations, take down our posters and crush the flowers we plant”, Bea told me. As a peace offering, MJ’s LEGACY proposed to give one side of the monument to the other group to decorate. This offer was not accepted, because this would still mean that the association would take three sides for its exclusive use. At the height of the dispute the Department of Public Order and Security and the Department of

²¹⁹ Chin, ‘It’s About Who You Know: Social Capital, Hierarchies and Fandom’, 247.

²²⁰ It is common for fans to quarrel about who deserves the label ‘fan’ and what kinds of activities constitute fandom and distinguish between themselves and what they constitute as the ‘Other’ fan. Cf. Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 182; Chin, ‘It’s About Who You Know’, 246-247.

Culture had to intervene and warned the fans that if peaceful coexistence would not be possible, the MJ-memorial would be removed.²²¹

500 kilometers away from Munich, three other German women also established a child aid organization in honor of Jackson called “Give A Smile Projects”. Like MJ’s LEGACY, they want to draw attention to Jackson’s humanitarian lifework and pursue their own official public MJ-monument in a large city.²²² Between 2009 and 2013 Give A Smile Projects regularly visited the MJ-memorial in Munich, where they stated to have actively dedicated themselves to the preservation and tolerance of the memorial, bringing fresh flowers, lighting candles, and cleaning the memorial of dirt and fallen leaves.²²³ In 2013 the association decided to withdraw from the memorial because they did not feel welcome. Indeed, they are not. Although they have the same goals, MJ’s LEGACY wants to have nothing to do with Give A Smile Projects. When I mentioned the group to Bea, she responded heatedly: “they use *our* labor for their projects as an access (...) as if they were the initiators of this (the memorial) and as if they contribute here.” Bea’s emotional response brought home to me once again the importance of the memorial for her.

The (online) fan community disproved of the disputes between the fan groups. Many fans condemned the hostile behavior at the MJ-memorial and stated that the fans who behaved thus clearly had not understood the message of Jackson. On *mjjackson-forever.com* several fans commented that it would be best to close the memorial because the love and magic that were once part of it had been desecrated by the violence and hate. Moreover, many expressed irritation and embarrassment because the conflicts reinforce the stereotypes of MJ-fans as crazy and irrational, which hurt Jackson and the MJ-community in general.

Besides fending off the attempts of other fan-groups to claim ownership of the statue, the authority and status of MJ’s LEGACY and Bea have been contested by citizens of Munich. Especially since the release of the documentary *Leaving Neverland*, citizens have questioned the appropriateness of the public honoring of Jackson. Before looking into these responses, I first want to zoom in on an earlier attempt to address the legitimacy of the MJ-memorial, namely the satirical artwork Bubblesplatz by artist David Shrigley.

²²¹ Merkur.de, ‘Denkmal vorm Bayerischen Hof droht aus: Streit unter Jackson-Fans in München: Staatsanwalt ermittelt’, <https://www.merkur.de/lokales/muenchen/altstadt-lehel-ort43327/michael-jackson-denkmal-muenchen-staatsanwalt-ermittelt-5277908.html> (accessed 6 March 2018).

²²² Give a Smile Projects, ‘Unser Projekt’, <http://www.giveasmile.de/Unser-Projekt/> (accessed 30 January 2018); Give a Smile Projects, ‘Denkmal für Michael’.

²²³ HEAL THE CHILDREN e.V. ‘Michael Jackson Memorial Munich’, <http://www.michael-jackson-memorial-germany.com/Gedenkstaette-Muenchen/> (accessed 12 February 2020).

2.7 Bubblesplatz: Why a chimpanzee is worthy of a memorial

Between January and September 2013 the City of Munich hosted the art project “A Space Called Public/ Hoffentlich Öffentlich” curated by the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset. The project presented a series of 17 artworks by artists from different countries and aimed to generate a debate about the concept of public space.²²⁴ One of the artworks was “Bubblesplatz”: a shrine created by the British artist David Shrigley for Bubbles – Michael Jackson’s former pet chimpanzee. Shrigley installed his tribute adjacent to the MJ-memorial on the base of the Maximilian Emanuel statue. The artist commented that he wanted his piece to provoke a discussion about “who gets to decide to create a memorial in the public domain” and “who is worthy of a monument and who isn’t?” Furthermore, he wished to “raise awareness of Bubbles’ plight” and to raise funds for his future care “in light of the fact that Michael Jackson neglected to make provision for him.”²²⁵

Not everyone was aware that Bubblesplatz was an art project. Many passers-by interpreted the installation as an extension of the MJ-shrine. This was not too surprising since Shrigley’s ironic artwork mimicked the exterior of the grassroots MJ-memorial with similar laminated photos, drawings, memorabilia, flowers, and candles, but now dedicated to Bubbles. Shrigley also copied MJ-fans by stating that he chose this particular location for the Bubbles memorial as it is likely that the chimpanzee stayed at the Bayerischer Hof Hotel at some point, having accompanied Jackson on his 1986 visit to Munich. He emphasized that his installation should not be interpreted as a criticism of the MJ-fans who created the MJ-memorial and that he in no way wanted to offend them, but sought to create a dialogue around monuments in public spaces.²²⁶ What is more, Shrigley advised the fans to embrace the debate his artwork evoked as a means to achieve their goal of having a permanent memorial for Jackson. The artist pointed towards the fact that both shrines are guerilla monuments that appropriated existing monuments without official permission and without the consent of the relatives of the figures for whom the original monuments were erected. From this follows, Shrigley argued, that it would “seem a paradox to be concerned for the future of one guerrilla monument and to be hostile to the existence of another.”²²⁷

Shrigley’s artwork was not received well in the MJ-fan community. By setting up his shrine right next to the Jackson memorial, the artist competed for access and usage of space that the fans had claimed. Bubblesplatz infuriated the members of MJ’s LEGACY who felt mocked at

²²⁴ A Space Called Public, ‘Idea’, <http://www.aspacecalledpublic.com/ascp4.html#idea> (accessed 19 February 2020).

²²⁵ A Space Called Public, ‘David Shrigley’, http://www.aspacecalledpublic.com/ascp4.html#david_shrigley (accessed 19 February 2020).

²²⁶ A Space Called Public, ‘David Shrigley’; Blouin Artinfo, “Bubbles Is Still Alive”: David Shrigley Makes a Shrine to Michael Jackson’s Pet, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/893755/bubbles-is-still-alive-david-shrigley-makes-a-shrine-to> (accessed 29 January 2018).

²²⁷ http://www.aspacecalledpublic.com/ascp4.html#david_shrigley.

the place where they could freely express their love for Jackson. It thus threatened one of the main principles of the MJ-memorial, namely to be a safe place where fans can openly share their feelings for Jackson without being declared crazy. On behalf of MJ's LEGACY Bea responded in a news item by stating that they wanted nothing to do with the new memorial and regarded it as an insult to Jackson and to their association. She explained how most passers-by interpreted Bubblesplatz as an extension of the MJ-memorial because the artwork established a relationship with the MJ-memorial.²²⁸ According to Bea, the fans had fought years to be taken seriously. She feared that the satirical art project Bubblesplatz stimulated the image of fanatic fans who now "also worshipped a monkey". Indeed, the artwork seemed to be the last straw for some citizens who had previously tolerated the fans' public honoring, but were now provoked to respond and demand for both memorials to be removed.

2

Image 2.5 Bubblesplatz photograph made by Leonie Felle

²²⁸ Welt Regionales, 'Riesiger Zoff um Denkmal für Michael Jacksons Affen', <https://www.welt.de/regionales/muenchen/article115429721/Riesiger-Zoff-um-Denkmal-fuer-Michael-Jacksons-Affen.html> (accessed 29 January 2018).

Shrigley's project furthermore hit a raw nerve because it questioned some of the fans' sacred principles.²²⁹ The fans interpret Jackson as a humanitarian activist and as a symbol for taking responsibility to make the world a better place. Animal welfare is considered an integral part of this message. By raising funds for Bubbles' shelter, Shrigley openly criticized Jackson and accused him of "lacking responsibility" in taking care of Bubbles. Shrigley's portrayal of Jackson thus directly attacked the sacred principles of animal welfare and humanitarianism that the fans attribute to Jackson. The fans saw the artwork as a blatant profanation because it 'polluted' their sacred memorial. Lynch argues that if the sacred is 'polluted', adherents of this sacred reality will look for restitution.²³⁰ Indeed, Bea did everything in her power to get Shrigley's artwork removed, including sending a letter to the mayor of Munich.

The public response that the artwork provoked, made the fans worry that the artwork would threaten public tolerance towards their monument. The fears of the fans were not ungrounded. After the installation of 'Bubblesplatz', the mayor of Munich received complaints from citizens who asked the city to intervene and instruct the fans to worship Jackson on private property.²³¹ In response to the fans' agitation, the mayor reminded them of the – by no means self-evident – long-term tolerance towards the use of the Di Lasso monument as an MJ-memorial. He assured that Bubblesplatz was not intended as an act of discrimination against Jackson, but that the art project contributed to rekindling the debate about cultural memory and the use of public space – which also comes up with the MJ-memorial.²³² The fans realized that they were in the precarious position of being dependent on the benevolence of the city officials. Bubblesplatz would be something they had to endure. One fan posted on the fan-website *mjjackson-forever.com*: "the city tests with this Bubbles 'memorial' the tolerance of MJ fans, according to the principle of: how far do the fans go, do THEY condone others as well, do THEY tolerate others as well, is there also a place for others?" The fans thus tried to interpret Shrigley's work as an exercise in tolerance and endurance and agreed that they needed to pass this 'test' because they also expected other people to accept and tolerate their memorial.²³³

2.8 Response of the citizens of Munich

In 2015 and 2017 I observed that many passers-by were visibly intrigued by the public display of affection towards Jackson. Most looked amused: there was a lot of pointing to the statue and

²²⁹ Cf. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 29; Lynch, *On the Sacred*, 32-33.

²³⁰ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 18, 28, 47-49.

²³¹ Direktzu Christian Ude - "Bubblesplatz" "A Space Called Public - Hoffentlich Öffentlich", <http://direktzu.muenchen.de/ude/messages/bubblesplatz-a-space-called-public-hoffentlich-oeffentlich-46854> (accessed 9 October 2020).

²³² Idem.

²³³ *Mjjackson forever*, Bubbles Denkmal.

laughter. The people I spoke to often stated that they found the memorial funny and that they did not take it seriously. But the Jackson shrine also annoyed people; some shook their head or made skimping remarks. Especially right after its establishment the grassroots MJ-memorial evoked protest and there have been reported attempts of people to sabotage the monument so it would be removed. Throughout the years there have been several requests from citizens of Munich to remove the Jackson-memorabilia and re-establish the original situation. Some see it as a defacement of the original statue, others disagree with the public honoring of Jackson. The government has had to mediate between the fans and opponents several times.²³⁴

The broadcast of the documentary *Leaving Neverland* in the spring of 2019 again tested the tolerance of the city and citizens towards the MJ-memorial. People wondered whether it was appropriate to continue publicly honoring someone who has been accused of molesting children during his lifetime. The fans, in turn, utilized the MJ-memorial to protest against the documentary.²³⁵ To the fans' great satisfaction, the Bavarian government decided to continue allowing the memorial. In an article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Philippe Crone states that little has changed after the documentary. It seems, he writes, that most people can "disconnect the artist from the person."²³⁶

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the MJ-memorial in Munich and the fans who take care of it as an example of a grassroots memorialization. Grassroots memorialization is part of an upsurge in public mourning as a response to the unanticipated, violent deaths of people who do not fit into the categories of those we expect to die. Walter has called this phenomenon 'the New Public Mourning'. The global broadcast of tragic deaths – such as that of Michael Jackson's – have contributed to the idea that it is necessary to respond but also to the creation of a material format of the appropriate way to do so: namely in the form of laying flowers, notes, or other memorabilia either at the place of death or at a site that is associated with the deceased. In the case of the MJ-memorial in Munich fans chose the Orlando di Lasso statue opposite to the Bayerischer Hof because that was the hotel where Jackson used to stay whenever he was in Munich.

²³⁴ Abendzeitung, „Nach Doku: Was wird aus dem Michael-Jackson-Denkmal in München? Hüseyin Ince, 09.04.2019. Cf. Direktzu.muenchen: 'direktzu Christian Ude Oberbürgermeister der Landeshauptstadt München', <http://direktzu.muenchen.de/ude/messages/denkmal-promenadeplatz-31433> (accessed 19 September 2020); Süddeutsche Zeitung, L. Eberle und F. Meyer, 'Streit um Denkmal für Michael Jackson: Moonwalk am Promenadeplatz', <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/streit-um-denkmal-fuer-michael-jackson-moonwalk-am-promenadeplatz-1.16141> (accessed 6 March 2018).

²³⁵ Süddeutsche Zeitung, „7. April 2019, Fans von Michael Jackson demonstrieren gegen „Leaving Neverland“. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/michael-jackson-leaving-neverland-muenchen-1.4400270> (accessed 9 October 2020).

²³⁶ Philippe Crone, Süddeutsche Zeitung, „Debatten unterm Jackson-Denkmal: „Darf man sich jetzt über Billie Jean noch freuen?“ (10 March 2019).

Grassroots memorials arise as a material expression of grief. Larson-Miller stresses identification as the primary reason behind spontaneous memorialization. Indeed, the German fans I spoke to maintained that Jackson is part of their identity. They recognize certain character traits in him and attach values and principles to him that they deem important in life. Losing Jackson felt for many like losing a part of themselves. The MJ-memorial arose as a ground-up unofficial public expression of that grief, but also of indignation with Jackson's early death. From the start, the MJ-memorial has been an outcry from fans who believe Jackson's death was preordained: it was the result of persecution by the media. Fans used their public honoring of Jackson to express their gratitude and to show to Jackson that he did not die in vain; they will continue his underexposed humanitarian legacy. Margry and Sánchez-Carretero interpret grassroots memorials as a sign of social or political disaffection. They argue that people instrumentalize such monuments to affect social change. This is certainly one important motive underlying the continued maintenance of the MJ-memorial.

What makes the case study of the MJ-memorial exceptional is the simple fact that it is still there many years after the artist's demise. Most grassroots memorials are temporary and disappear after a few months, because people lose interest or because the government decides to restore the place to its original state. The MJ-memorial has so far survived for eleven years. This has made it possible for the place to evolve from an unorganized place of grief into an organized site because a group of fans claimed the statue and adopted it as their place of gathering. The MJ-memorial now functions mostly as a social place for fans to meet, spread awareness of Jackson and affect change. As one of the main aims is to attempt to make people change their view on Jackson, the grassroots memorial has a proselytizing nature. It made me think of the information-stands of Jehovah's witnesses.

The fans see it as their responsibility to have a bigger impact on the world and they use their interpretation of Jackson as a concrete ideology to do so, thus using Jackson as the foundation for their "civic imagination". The fans expressed feeling close to Jackson at the memorial; it motivates them to be 'good' and follow the lyrics of "Man in the Mirror" to try and contribute where they can. The case study shows how the fans operationalize the grassroots memorial for Jackson to bring about awareness of his humanitarian message and to collect money for charities they connect to his legacy. Often MJ's LEGACY connects a political message to their fan-events. These events should not only be about commemorating Jackson but also about concretely doing something good.

However, the eleven-year existence of the MJ-memorial has not always been easy. The place is a 'contested site' with multiple parties battling for use and access. MJ's LEGACY has claimed ownership of the memorial and its maintenance, which has resulted in conflicts with other fan groups who also want to nurse the memorial. The public honoring of Jackson has also

triggered debates about who gets to decide to create a memorial and for whom it is appropriate to establish a memorial in public. The arrival of the satirical art project Bubblesplatz in 2013 caused quite the stir up. The fans regarded it as a profanity that mocked Jackson and their efforts. Since the broadcast of the documentary *Leaving Neverland* the discussion has been rekindled. Some citizens of Munich have asked the government to intervene and remove the MJ-memorial. The Munich government, however, has decided to condone the fans' memorialization till 2021.

This chapter has shed light on the dedication of a small group of MJ-fans who dedicate much of their time, money and energy to the preservation and continuance of their commemoration site. The meaning and function of the MJ-memorial has developed since its erection. Throughout the past eleven years it has become more difficult for MJ's LEGACY to maintain their memorial and to find funding for their charities. They have lost members, found new ones, and struggled with competing fan groups. Bea's example displays the continuous stride to convince the local government and citizens of Munich about the necessity of their shrine. The future existence of their memorial rests on a fragile, conditioned relationship. The fans' place of commemoration can be revoked at any time.

The case study of MJ's LEGACY demonstrates the potential powerful effect of fans' investment in celebrities. The MJ-fans use their fandom as inspiration to continue Jackson's humanitarian legacy. This case study also illustrates the impact of the media on the public's response to a celebrity's death. Following the televised response to previous high-impact deaths, the fans have internalized the appropriate reaction to Jackson's death – which is by erecting a grassroots memorial. The MJ-memorial demonstrates that people need (public) rituals to cope with grief and that these rituals are both individual and communal. The fans in Munich have channeled their grief into action by turning the tragedy into an opportunity to do something good – a coping mechanism that is more commonly found among fans in responding to the demise of their object of fandom. The shrine is the materialization of their dedication and through taking care of the statue, the fans state to experience a closeness to Jackson – thus confirming Birgit Meyer's thesis that it is through materiality and rituals that religious experience comes into existence.

Like with the MLP, where Donna plays a central role, MJ's LEGACY has chosen a leader to guide the group. Bea has turned the unofficial grassroots memorial into an official memorial site with rules of conduct. Her authority, however, is not unchallenged. Both from inside the fan community and outside, the appropriation of MJ's LEGACY of the Di Lasso statue has been a matter of heated debate. This chapter sketched how the fans deal with the insecurity of their dependent status. Losing the memorial would mean losing a part of themselves, and no matter how much work it takes, that is not a price they are willing to pay. The fans made clear that although *being* a true fan is difficult, Jackson never said it would be easy. The fans kept repeating

the lyrics of “Man in the Mirror” and explained how Jackson urged his fans to take a stand themselves and fight for justice. The MJ-memorial is their concrete way of saying “Michael, we have understood your message”.

The next chapter presents the third and final case study of this thesis. Chapter three zooms in on Michael Week; a fan-initiated yearly pilgrimage to Michael-places in California. I examine the act of ‘Michaeling’ based on my ethnographic findings of Michael Week 2018 and 2019 and the pilgrimage-experiences of 26 female fans. I will show that it is a prime example of the influence of the subjective turn as it ties in well with the turn to the self because it supports a person’s articulation and exploration of self-fulfillment.

CHAPTER 3

Walking in Jackson's footsteps:
the experiences of MJ-pilgrims

Hellen's time of self-work and self-healing

Hellen is a 66-year-old retired nurse, divorcee, mother and grandmother whose left wrist shows a tattoo of the word “Michael” written in Hebrew. Looking back on her life, Hellen divided her story into four chapters: childhood, young adulthood, “the responsibility section”, and freedom. She described her youth and young adulthood as “walking on eggshells” and obeying “authority-figures”, with which she referred to her violent mother and God. As a child, Hellen remembers feeling “utterly alone”. She took comfort in knowing that Michael Jackson also had no friends and childhood and had a similar experience with an abusive father. She called this identification a lifeline: “if he could survive it, I could survive it.” Growing up in a strict Lutheran church, God was described to Hellen as a man in the sky who would punish you and send you to hell if you did something wrong. “I remember sitting in those pews”, she said, “it was like death.” Moreover, church felt “hypocritical” to Hellen who observed that people were only being good in church to keep up appearances.

Jackson was always there in the background of Hellen's life and continued to be her “rope”. When she left her violent husband after 25 years, Hellen had to find a way to provide for her three children as a single mom. She decided to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing. She remembered that: “Inside the cover of the binder I carried with me to every class was an 8x10 picture torn out of a magazine of Michael Jackson. I ran my fingers over that picture every day for four years.” In 2009 Hellen nursed her father who battled cancer while working shifts in the hospital. It was during this time period that Jackson died, which Hellen called the catalyst for her awakening. “It hit like a ton of bricks in a fire storm”, she said, “it was paralyzing shock.” After her awakening, Hellen decided to retire early. Shortly after, her father passed away.

Since her retirement, Hellen experiences freedom. After a lifetime of taking care of others, now it is her time of “self-work and self-healing”. Jackson is her teacher who shows her that she is “so much more than you believe”. Instead of rules and regulations, Jackson presents a way of life without obligation. Hellen's only responsibility is to work on herself. Jackson helped Hellen to “be free and independent enough to say no matter what the authority figures in my life told me was true, this is my reality, this is my belief.” Hellen still believes in a higher power, but she now understands this as “divine energy” that also lives within. She called her new anti-authoritarian approach to spirituality liberating. Hellen's relationship with Jackson has given her a solid foundation in the sense that she has the inner knowing that all is well.

A trust that carries her through anything and everything that she might encounter. Her awakening even helped her forgive her mother: "I spent my whole childhood and my adult life hating her. But through Michael, now I *understand* her and I have compassion for her."

Hellen described the meaning of her relationship with Jackson as a never-ending inward journey of "learning, growing and healing". She tries to live like Jackson and "present him" in her vegan-lifestyle, her behavior and in helping others. Traveling to Michael-places is a way in which she honors Jackson and an expression of gratitude. But Hellen also approaches it as part of her greater journey of self-growth. Michael-places hold great power to her because she believes that Jackson "deposited himself in every place he went." Especially Forest Lawn and Neverland have "a sacred energy in combination with a personal journey." "I think every step he took is sacred", she said, "that's not a 'worship' kinda thing. It's just a feeling of him coming forth more so in the places he walked." Hellen regards Michael Week a precious time because of the fellowship she experiences with other fans whom she considers a part of her spiritual family, which is "so much stronger and so much more connected than your blood family." "I crave for this every year", she said, "I'm just like a little kid, starting in February."

Introduction

Hellen approaches Michael Week as part of her spiritual journey of self-growth and self-healing. Her narrative is representative of how many of my interlocutors spoke of 'Michaeling'.²³⁷ In this chapter I use the term 'Michaeling' to refer to traveling to Michael-places. In the next pages of this chapter, I will outline what 'Michaeling' entails by drawing on the experiences of 26 women and on my own observations and experiences of Michael Week 2018 and 2019. As I mentioned before, Michael Week is the week before Jackson's death day (25 June) during which fans organize various commemorative events. I approach the interplay between fandom and religion by asking how the fans use the format of pilgrimage to express and reinforce their fandom and worldview. I have structured my inquiry more or less chronologically by focusing on the different stages a

²³⁷ At the same time, their stories revealed the different ways in which the fans personally appropriated the annual event. See for example the experience of Iris in the appendix. While Iris interprets Jackson through a spiritual lens, she mostly regards Michael Week a holiday and calls it her "favorite hobby".

fan goes through with regards to a 'Michaeling'-journey. I zoom in on the women's motivations to participate in Michael Week, on the journey itself and its destinations, and on the effect and function of the trip for the women involved. In the conclusion of this chapter I will assess what makes pilgrimage such an apt tool for these women to find meaning and belonging. For this chapter, I have chosen to occasionally interrupt the body text with vignettes that include short descriptions of particular situations during my fieldwork.

Most women in this study are frequent 'Michaeling'-travelers. Many have made three pilgrimages or more since Jackson's passing and some aim to travel every year. Miranda, Vivian, Donna and Betty are the only ones who have not yet traveled to Los Angeles.²³⁸ Through Facebook they keep track of the journeys of other fans. They are, what Tourism expert Justine Digance calls, 'armchair pilgrims'; people who 'travel' via mass communication modes such as the internet.²³⁹ The internet plays an important role in 'Michaeling'. Behind those who visit Michael Week is a much larger community of people who are not able to go. Participants of Michael Week often bring gifts from those back home.

The meaning of 'Michaeling' depends on the views of the person one speaks with. In this regard, the ritual is highly individual as the women shape the journey to their own liking. Nevertheless, the fan statements show a pattern. All described:

(1) a physical journey; (2) where the fan walks in Michael Jackson's footsteps; (3) in order to (spiritually) connect with (Jackson's) energy that is believed to be stored in Michael-places.

After reflecting on my question what it entails to be a Michael-pilgrim, Sophie came up with the following explanation:

A Michael-pilgrim is an individual who visits sites familiar to Michael during his life which have taken on special meaning since his transition (i.e. his burial site, his beautiful Neverland, etc.) In general, these pilgrims go to great expense in time, energy and money to be physically present at these sites to increase their individual connection with the spirit of Michael Jackson.

I find Sophie's description representative of how most fans in this study approach 'Michaeling'. Fans frequently also underlined the importance of sharing these experiences with like-minded others, which intensifies the 'Michaeling'-experience. Most travel in June during Michael Week,

²³⁸ Work and being a single parent held Miranda back. Vivian and Betty blamed financial restraints and work obligations. Vivian, Donna and Betty did visit a Michael-place in their home country.

²³⁹ Justine Digance, 'Religious and secular pilgrimage: Journeys redolent with meaning', in: Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen eds., *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge 2006) 36-48, 40.

some travel in August to celebrate Jackson's birthday and others prefer to travel "off-season". Fans generally journey with a group and visit multiple locations and events over the course of a few days up to two weeks. *Experiencing* Jackson to the fullest seems to be the overarching goal. 'Michaeling', the women shared, allows fans to be where Jackson was, see what he saw, touch what he touched and breathe in the air that he breathed.

The group of women I traveled with during Michael Weeks 2018 and 2019 self-identified as pilgrims and referred to their visits as a pilgrimage, which they described as "physically traveling to sacred places". Erica explained the deeper meaning of pilgrimage as "a way of life": a spiritual soul-journey to God which includes sharing Michael and his message with others. Many other fans in my study could similarly relate to the term pilgrimage – including those who do not think of themselves as religious. However, most fans I met chose not to define or categorize their acts and experiences. Indeed, in one of our email conversations, Sandra pointed out that doing so was more an academic interest, whereas "the differences between sacred and secular in the minds of the pilgrims is often blurred or non-existent".

The rich amount of pilgrimage scholarship contains valuable theories to structure, analyze and understand what the fans in my study do and say. To clarify my position in the field, I will first explain how I use the term pilgrimage in this study.

3.1 Approaching pilgrimage: there are no pilgrim police

The emergence of 'Michaeling' fits a global growth of pilgrimage.²⁴⁰ New pilgrimage sites are continuously evolving both within traditional realms, such as Marian pilgrimages, and within non-confessional contexts – by some referred to as 'secular pilgrimages'.²⁴¹ Apparently, the ancient format of pilgrimage continues to have a great appeal to modern people around the world. Anthropologist Ian Reader explains this by arguing that the ritual can be regarded a facet of modernity because of its emphasis on individual autonomy, self-discovery and personal development. Pilgrimage, Reader continues, offers the possibility of encountering the spiritual and the miraculous on a personal level and provides a way of dealing with individual needs

²⁴⁰ The revival of pilgrimage has been matched with a growth in pilgrimage scholarship, mirroring the diversity of the ritual. See: John Eade and Michael Sallnow eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London; New York: Routledge 1991); Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Carrien Notermans eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Surrey Farnham: Ashgate 2009); Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy eds., *Tourism, Religion & Grand Spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006); Ian reader and Tony; Reader and Walter eds., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke 1993); Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm eds., *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond. Reconfiguring gender, religion and mobility* (London; New York: Routledge 2021).

²⁴¹ In their book *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* Ian Reader and Tony Walter applied the term secular pilgrimage to "journeys related to places that had no direct connection to specific religious traditions or buildings". Recently, Reader argued that he does not find secular pilgrimage a helpful term anymore because it adds little to the field: Reader, 'Pilgrimage growth in the modern world: Meanings and implications', *Religion* 37:3 (2007) 210-229, 213 footnote 4.

without commitment to organized traditions and even with the rejection of religion as an organized entity.²⁴²

Already in the 1990s Reader and Walter observed that the term pilgrimage was widely used in popular culture to describe visits to mundane areas in the fields of sports and entertainment – for example the stadium of Manchester United.²⁴³ Their decision to refer to such journeys as pilgrimages evoked a fierce debate about the meaning and application of the concept.²⁴⁴ Margry pinpoints the origin of the popular use of the term pilgrimage in music fan culture.²⁴⁵ Visits to the final resting places of musicians have grown significantly in the 20th century. Famous examples are Elvis Presley's home Graceland and Jim Morrison's grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery. Fans generally pay their respects on the birth days and death days of such rock stars and bring numerous gifts to their grave sites like posters, floral displays and notes.²⁴⁶ Some scholars refer to these visits as 'celebrity pilgrimage'.²⁴⁷ Religious Studies scholar Alex Norman, for instance, has argued that fans are like pilgrims because both make journeys to special sites dedicated to their object of devotion and both perform rituals to come closer to their idols.²⁴⁸ Likewise, theologian John Drane sees fans' interaction with celebrities as a continuation of the veneration of (medieval) saints.²⁴⁹ Scholar Gregory Reece, on the contrary, is critical of a too rash equalization of fan and devotee. With regard to Elvis 'pilgrims', Reece argues that the people who actually *worship* Elvis are often the exception. Most fans are not religiously motivated and religious terms like 'pilgrimage' and 'shrine' are generally not part of the average Graceland visitor's vocabulary.²⁵⁰ I agree with Reece that one should be careful with claiming too easily that celebrity-pilgrimage is religiously motivated. As I already stated in the introductory chapter, it is common for fans to draw from religious symbolism metaphorically as a way to explain their interest in their chosen

²⁴² Reader, 'Pilgrimage growth in the modern world', 222-223, 225-226.

²⁴³ Ian Reader, 'Introduction', in: Ian Reader and Tony Walter eds., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1993) 1-25, 5.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Peter Jan Margry, 'Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?' in: Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries Into the Sacred* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2008) 13-46, 19. See on the contrary: Jennifer Porter, 'Pilgrimage and the IDIC Ethic: Exploring Star Trek Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage', in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman eds., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2004) 160-179, 161.

²⁴⁵ Margry, 'Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?', 18.

²⁴⁶ Christine King, 'His truth goes marching on: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland', in: Ian Reader and Tony Walter eds., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1993) 92-106; J. D. Reed and Maddy Miller, *Stairway to Heaven: The Final Resting Places of Rock's Legends* (New York: Wenner 2004) 9-13; Peter Jan Margry, 'The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison's Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery: The Social Construction of Sacred Space', in: Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2008) 143-171.

²⁴⁷ Historian Willem Frijhoff uses the term to refer to the phenomenon where a certain social group ascribes sainthood to an exemplary, non-church-related life: Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, 20-21, 51, 80-81.

²⁴⁸ Alex Norman, 'Celebrity Push, Celebrity Pull: Understanding the Role of the Notable Person in Pilgrimage', *Australian Religion Studies Review* 24:3 (2011) 317-341, 317.

²⁴⁹ John Drane, 'Celebrity-centric Spirituality', in: Christopher Partridge ed., *New Religions A Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (New York: Oxford University Press 2004) 360-366, 360, 365.

²⁵⁰ Reece even goes as far as stating that many fans might be offended if religious terminology was used in relation to their visits to the site. Gregory L. Reece, *Elvis Religion: The Cult of The King* (London: I.B. Taurus 2006) 15, 185.

fan object. Digance has once said that “there are no ‘pilgrim police’” who “ensure that only those who are indeed spiritually worthy take on the name of pilgrim.”²⁵¹ I follow the proposition that to be able to state that a journey is a pilgrimage or not, the pilgrim’s own view is most important.²⁵² The scholar should listen to what in the eyes of the participant distinguishes his or her journey from other trips. Instead of taking an essentialist approach to pilgrimage, I agree with anthropologist Simon Coleman that it is more valuable to use ‘pilgrimage’ as a case study to “mak(e) points about human behaviour”.²⁵³ In this study I explore how MJ-fans use the format of pilgrimage to mediate a connection with Jackson, with each other and frequently also with the transcendental. Following the approach to pilgrims of anthropologist Willy Jansen, I take the fans’ experiences, ideas and realities on their own terms to show the wide variety of pilgrims, meanings, and motivations.²⁵⁴

In this chapter I will draw from several theories and concepts from pilgrimage scholarship as heuristic tools to explore my data. I use multiple theories because ‘Michaeling’ is an inherently multidisciplinary topic: ‘the’ MJ-pilgrim does not exist. She is not solely a ‘serious’ traveler looking for spiritual renewal, nor only a ‘fun’ traveler wanting to have a good time; she can be both, at different times or simultaneously. Furthermore, the ritual of ‘Michaeling’ is not uniform: there is no standardized or documented correct way of traveling to Michael-places, nor is there an agreed upon description of the act. In the next section I will introduce some foundational principles that return in this chapter as sensitizing concepts.

3.2 Guiding concepts and perspectives

In the field of pilgrimage research one simply cannot ignore Victor and Edith Turner who are regarded as the first to propose a theoretical model for the anthropological study of pilgrimage. Victor Turner adopted Arnold van Gennep’s approach to rites de passage and adapted it to the act of Christian pilgrimage. Following the three phases of separation, transition and incorporation, Turner interprets pilgrimage as a journey that is set apart from the ordinary. The pilgrim is motivated by the goal to reach a sacred place, the “holy finish line” of the journey, and this mission lies at the heart of pilgrimage. During the journey, the pilgrim is in a so-called *liminal* state that is marked by the act of *motion*; in order to start the spiritual journey, the pilgrim has to

²⁵¹ Justine Digance, ‘Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journey redolent of meaning’, 45.

²⁵² Jill Dubisch, ‘Heartland of America’: memory, motion and the (re)construction of history on a motorcycle pilgrimage’, in: Simon Coleman and John Eade eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge 2004) 105-132, 115-116.

²⁵³ Simon Coleman, ‘Do you believe in pilgrimage?: Communitas, contestation and beyond’, *Anthropological Theory* 2:3 (2002) 355-369, 363.

²⁵⁴ Willy Jansen, ‘Old Routes, New Journeys’, in: Catrien Notermans and Willy Jansen eds., *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 1-18, 5.

leave his well-known, fixed life behind to enter into an unknown way of life. He is betwixt and between and exists for a certain amount of time in a social limbo. Although pilgrimage does not inevitably effect a permanent cultural transformation, like initiation rituals do, Turner perceives an undoubtedly initiatory quality in the ritual. Furthermore, over the course of the journey, there can be a form of transformation. Through the act of pilgrimage the pilgrim is given the opportunity to become a better person, as he enters into a new, deeper level of existence than they have known in their customary milieu. This possible transformation is an invisible initiation of the heart.²⁵⁵

Although Turner regarded pilgrimage by nature an inward spiritual journey intended to strengthen the pilgrim's faith, he also posited that pilgrimages activate egalitarian, harmonious communion, to which he referred as *communitas*. Turner understood the term *communitas* in two ways: a palpable *communitas* and the experience of *communitas*. The tangible *communitas* consists of the group of pilgrims that the pilgrim encounters on his journey or at the sacred pilgrimage site. The term can also be understood in a more philosophical way, as the feeling of unity between those pilgrims who set for the same goal. In this sense, argues Turner, *communitas* embodies the overall joyous experience of unification, healing and renewal. In the experience of *communitas* all are one and differences are accepted or tolerated.²⁵⁶

The work of the Turners has influenced much subsequent research on pilgrimage both in Christian and non-Christian contexts. However, their theses have also been contested, especially the *communitas* paradigm and the place-centered approach to the act of pilgrimage. Furthermore, scholars have criticized the "approach to pilgrimage as a static, bounded ritual that is performed in places and times that are isolated from the everyday world outside."²⁵⁷ Simon Coleman has argued that the hypothesis of *communitas* "has proved insufficient to describe the often troubled, rivalrous relations among visitors to sacred sites."²⁵⁸ In their book *Contesting the Sacred*, John Eade and Michael Sallnow similarly postulate that *communitas* is merely an idealizing discourse about pilgrimage rather than an empirical description of it. Instead of giving room for equality and harmony, they call attention to the power dimension in pilgrimages and argue that pilgrimage

²⁵⁵ Victor Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage* (Bali; New Delhi: Concept 1979) 16, 38, 129, 131-132, 153-154. Cf. Edith Turner and Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press 1978) 8 15, 31. Even though the pilgrimage was mostly about an inward transformation, pilgrims could also show that they had made their pilgrimage by purchasing a pilgrim badge. This badge often portrayed the saint of the pilgrimage in question and was worn as a visible evidence for the arduous travel. See: Jörg Ansoerge, 'Mittelalterliche Pilgerzeichen aus der Handsestadt Wismar', *Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Jahrbuch*, Jahrbuch 56 (2008) 213-257, 213.

²⁵⁶ Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage*, 131, 153-154; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 8, 31, 191-192; Victor Turner, 'The Center out There: Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions* 12:3 (1973) 191-230, 222; Victor Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in play flow, and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology', *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies*, 60:3 (1974) 53-92, 78-80.

²⁵⁷ Marjo Buitelaar, 'The Hajj and the Anthropological Study of Pilgrimage', in: Luitgard E. M. Mols and Marjo Buitelaar eds., *Hajj: Global Interactions through Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Sidestone Press 2015) 9-25, 13.

²⁵⁸ Simon Coleman, 'Pilgrims and Pilgrimage: Social Anthropology', https://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/content/soc_anth.html (accessed 14 January 2020).

must be seen as a realm of *competing* religious and secular discourses. The scholars note that at a pilgrimage shrine differences are only reinforced, because pilgrims bring and impose their own perceptions and meanings to the site.²⁵⁹

The thesis that the sacred site is at the core of pilgrimage and the pilgrimage experience, has been countered with an emphasis on the power of motion within pilgrimage. Coleman and Eade, for instance, edited the volume *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, in which they propose to study (the interaction between) different types of movement and show that pilgrimage is not isolated from the ordinary, but is part and parcel of pilgrims' everyday lives.²⁶⁰ The scholars, for example, explore the power of both movement to and movement at sacred space to construct sacredly charged places. They also argue that it is through movement that people can switch their identities and become somebody else, or return to the people they used to be.²⁶¹ Anthropologists Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans distinguish four different movements in relation to Marian pilgrimage: physical movement, emotional movement, the movement of Mary herself, and social movement.²⁶² They argue that motion helps bring "cogency to the relations pilgrims want to establish with the divine, with their fellow travelers, or with their inner self."²⁶³

Although the concepts of *communitas/contestation* and *liminality* should not be taken as the defining features of pilgrimage, together with the perspectives of place-centered sacredness and movement, they have heuristic value to make sense of the new phenomenon of 'Michaeling'. In the next pages I will outline what places, practices and experiences co-constitute the journey. My understanding of the practice necessarily relies heavily on the women I accompanied in 2018 and 2019 and the fans they introduced me to. Both years I had the pleasure of traveling with North-Americans Erica, Ava and Hellen and in 2019 Elena, a woman from South-America, joined our group. I use these two journeys as the basis for the next section of this chapter in which I shed light on the general format of Michael Week.

²⁵⁹ John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, 'Introduction', in: John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow eds. *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London; New York: Routledge 1991) 1-29, 5.

²⁶⁰ Simon Coleman and John Eade, 'introduction: reframing pilgrimage', in: Simon Coleman and John Eade eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge 2004) 1-25.

²⁶¹ Idem, 3. John Eade and Mario Katić, 'Introduction: Crossing the Borders', in: John Eade and Mario Katić eds., *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders* (Surrey; Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate 2014) 1-12, 9.

²⁶² Hermkens et al., 'Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage', 6-7.

²⁶³ Idem, 2.

3.3 Attending Michael Week

Michael Week is not an official event, but arose after Jackson's death out of a call for help from fans who looked for advice with planning their trip to LA.²⁶⁴ Facebook turned out to be a convenient platform to share information and meet other prospective-travelers. Gradually a community formed and a semi-fixed program developed, consisting of diverse events and places, including visits to restaurants, studios and fan-parties – some lists even mention over 200 MJ-spots.²⁶⁵ The two most important places, however, are Neverland; Jackson's former house close to Solvang, California and his grave at Forest Lawn in Los Angeles. Often fans will also make a trip to Las Vegas, where they visit the One Show; a tribute show by Cirque du Soleil that ends with a hologram of Jackson.

The Facebook pages of the past five Michael Weeks show that the event has expanded both in duration and in the number of participants; whereas the first Michael Week lasted 8 days and attracted 60 online registrations, the 2019 event lasted 15 days and attracted 204 registrations.²⁶⁶ Note that this figure only captures the Facebook attendance. The total number of visitors is much higher. Being a ground-up event, there is no formal organization that keeps track of the number of attendees that visit Michael Week. I was told that the number of visitors varies. My travel companions estimated that there are about 100 “regulars” from afar who yearly make a pilgrimage. Besides these pilgrims, each year there are different (groups of) people who join. Furthermore, there are fans who live in the area and visit Forest Lawn and Neverland during Michael Week but also throughout the year.

I attended Michael Week in 2018 and 2019. Although in both years the places and events were the same, the experience and intensity of Michael Week 2019 was very different. While I experienced Michael Week 2018 as a festive commemoration of Jackson, Michael Week 2019 took an unexpected turn. In anticipation for the tribute event, fans were taken by surprise by the unannounced release of the documentary *Leaving Neverland*. What was supposed to become a lustrum-celebration of the tenth year anniversary of Jackson's death turned into a united defense of Jackson's innocence.²⁶⁷ Michael Week 2019 symbolized the resilience of the fan community and their united protest against the allegations. The event attracted considerably more people

²⁶⁴ Although fans have traveled to Michael-sites since Jackson's passing, Michael Week is a fairly recent invention. The first mention of the event I could find dates back to a Facebook group in 2015 that was hosted by three women – who referred to themselves as 'Michael Jackson's Angels'.

²⁶⁵ Cf. The list of 'MJ spots in California & Las Vegas' on Facebook, which consisted of more than 200 Michael-places: Facebook, 'MJ Spots in California & Las Vegas', <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mjj-top-news/mj-spots-in-california-las-vegas/1259844000727571/> (accessed 22 January 2019).

²⁶⁶ 'Michael Jackson Tribute Week June 2015', <http://facebook.com/events/411785112532751/> (accessed 13 January 2020); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson 10th Anniversary Week - June 2019, LA, USA', <https://www.facebook.com/events/138214770318580/> (accessed 13 January 2020).

²⁶⁷ Besides using Michael Week as a platform to gather and protest, fans tried to rectify the allegations online through social media and the website 'MJ Innocent': <https://www.mjinnocent.com/> (accessed 7 September 2020).

than it had the previous year. I also observed an increase in fan donations, both regarding charities and the gifts fans brought to Michael-places. The theme of 'innocence' was emphasized during events and was written on cards, posters, and t-shirts. Fans also organized a special 'MJ Innocent Love March & Rally', during which a couple dozen fans marched down Hollywood Boulevard, claiming Jackson's inculpability. One of the events that clearly showed the difference between Michael Week 2018 and 2019 was Jackson's death day on 25 June.

Every year on June 25, fans gather at Glendale Forest Lawn Cemetery to commemorate Jackson's death. At exactly 14.26 – Jackson's time of death – fans form a circle, hold hands and join in a communal prayer and moment of silence. A few other rituals are carried out, like the Major Love Prayer and the Circle of Love, during which fans form a circle and share their 'Michael story' or whatever is in their heart. Besides this, fans mostly go their own way. Jackson's commemoration is the highlight *and* low point of Michael Week. It is a day when emotions run high and differences between fans and fan groups become clearly visible; some want to dance and celebrate, others wish to mourn and commemorate. Nevertheless, June 25 is marked by unity; fans agree that the day should be about Michael. Apart from being emotionally strenuous, Jackson's death day is infamous for its physical impact. The open space of Glendale cemetery provides hardly any shade. Fans usually reside a whole day in the burning sun. Although challenging, this communal hardship adds to the experience of *communitas*.

Both years that I attended the commemoration of Jackson's death day, I saw fans from all over the world, as far as Tokyo, Australia and Italy. Nevertheless, I would say that the vast majority of visitors is North American. Although the crowd was diverse – including children and men – my observations and the fans' testimonies indicate that those fans who also actively participate in the rest of Michael Week, are part of a smaller group. If you zoom in onto this inner circle of fans, who often meet up every year, the group mostly consists of women over 40. This is the group to which my research-participants belong. In 2019 about 6000 people visited Jackson's death day. In 2018 I observed perhaps a third of this number. In 2019 there was barely place to park. The whole street was filled with people – with a long line of fans queuing for the Holly Terrace doors. The grass was filled with posters, letters, cards and flowers. In 2019 the visitors were also more varied than in 2018 and there were a lot of media to document the spectacle. Many fans told me they had saved up to be there at the 10-year commemoration, others expressed that their presence was a demonstration of solidarity in the wake of *Leaving Neverland*.

In 2019 the different fan groups struck me as more united, which was confirmed by fans who proudly expressed that they were “stronger than ever”. Being together at Michael Week in the company of other fans was experienced as empowering. Besides sensing a shift in approach and intensity, I also noticed a change in myself in 2019. The documentary had made me more cautious concerning ‘outsiders’. I was uncomfortable when people took pictures of me at Michael-places without asking permission and was afraid people would call us names. I also struggled more with my dual role as researcher and friend. I had grown close to the fans I traveled with but knew that this would be my last Michael Week. The women’s disappointment and my own reluctance of having to say goodbye made Michael Week 2019 more emotional and loaded than Michael Week 2018 had been. Nevertheless, it was precisely this close relationship that allowed me to get a greater understanding of (the experience of) ‘Michaeling’ and also helped me in my analysis of my fieldwork and interview data.

When I visited Michael Week I found it generally easy to distinguish fans that visit to have fun and those who are looking for a deeper connection. This resembles Margry’s identification of two groups of fans who visit Jim Morrison’s Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery. Margry divides the visitors into ‘music lovers’ and ‘pilgrims’.²⁶⁸ The first category mostly celebrates Morrison as a rock star and approaches the grave first and foremost as a meeting place of kindred spirits. Those who belong to the second group are more contemplative and individualistic and come for the spiritual and shamanistic qualities that they connect with Morrison and his poetic writings and lyrics.²⁶⁹ Margry states that fans who belong to the second category are a minority. They tend to stay longer at the grave and often return in the course of a day or several days. Margry furthermore found that ‘pilgrims’ generally do not like to talk about the religious dimensions of their pilgrimage and find it difficult to do so. He attributes this to the secular context, in which religious feelings or behavior “have no right to exist”.²⁷⁰ Like the Morrison-pilgrims, the MJ-fans who attest to have a spiritual connection with Jackson are a minority within the larger MJ-pilgrim community. However, on the basis of my conversations with fans I would argue that the difference between the two groups is less stark than between the two fan groups Margry distinguishes. Moreover, instead of belonging exclusively to one group or the other, my impression is that many MJ-pilgrims belong to both categories and switch depending on activity, company and context.

In the next section, I will shift my focus to 26 women who shared their ‘Michael stories’ with me. I will augment my analysis of their ‘Michaeling’-experiences with my findings based on my participant observation. I will show that certain overlapping patterns can be discerned in

²⁶⁸ Margry, ‘The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison’s Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery’, 157.

²⁶⁹ Idem, 167; Margry, ‘The Performance of a Cult of the Senses’, 143, 146.

²⁷⁰ Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’, 23, 29-31, 33, 35-36; Margry, ‘The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison’s Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery’, 158.

their motives, movements and attitudes. For these fans, 'Michaeling' is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, it is part of a lifestyle and the fans plan to travel as long as they are able to. Their reasons for traveling now, though, are different from when they first decided to go. Each year the women finetune their journey to fit their (changing) needs.

3.4 Motives for 'Michaeling'

Studies in the field of pilgrimage scholarship have found empowerment, self-improvement and a quest and search for meaning as important motives underlying contemporary pilgrimage.²⁷¹ In line with these findings, the fan statements attest to a search for meaning and self-development. As was mentioned before, most of my interlocutors have visited Michael-places more than once. The greater ease in traveling, in combination with the approach to pilgrimage as a potential to find meaning and address (daily) problems, explains why in modern times people are inclined to visit pilgrimage-sites regularly. Cultural anthropologist Catrien Notermans has shown that for women who visit Lourdes on a yearly basis, the pilgrimage can be seen as:

a constant and active way of defining one's problems and aspirations and of searching for help to solve one's difficulties or to realize their solutions. Each year, the pilgrims say, life presents different needs and obstacles. Mary then is asked to help her followers continue in good stead.²⁷²

My data support Notermans' findings. The women in my study explained that every journey has its own focus and character, mirroring the changes in their lives.

Margry underscores existential insecurities and the need to call on higher powers as the main motivations behind pilgrimage outside of a confessional context. Because of the letting go of the churches or the incompatibility of existing churches and religious movements with modernity, individuals have started to seek new forms of spirituality. These journeys, Margry argues, are highly individual and with strictly personal intentions, thus reflecting the individualization of contemporary society.²⁷³ What is more, Margry states that such alternative pilgrimages are so personal that pilgrims prefer a certain measure of privacy "with few other pilgrims present, without being constrained by collective rituals, and if possible using their own cars, perhaps accompanied by close family members or a good friend."²⁷⁴ The fans in this study are undeniably

²⁷¹ Cf. Digance, 'Religious and secular pilgrimage', 39; Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman, *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 2005); Hermkens et al., 'Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage', 2.

²⁷² Catrien Notermans, 'Interconnected and Gendered Mobilities: African Migrants on Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes in France', in: Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans eds., *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 19-35, 27-28.

²⁷³ Margry, 'Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?', 23, 34; Margry, 'Conclusion', 327.

²⁷⁴ Margry, 'Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?', 23.

looking for an individual connection with Jackson. However, as will become more clear in chapter four; the particular group of fans in this study interprets Jackson against the background of their preexisting belief-system, not as a substitute of religion. Moreover, the fans in my study use their ‘Michaeling’-time to socialize – which already came to the fore in Hellen’s story.

When I asked the fans in my study what had made them decide to start visiting Michael-places, they voiced a range of different reasons. All of them had started to travel after Jackson’s death. In agreement with the initiatives of the MLP and the MJ-memorial, their comments show that in this time of raw grief ‘Michaeling’ functioned as a coping-system; it provided an opportunity to pay respects to the deceased pop icon and share their (disenfranchised) grief with fellow fans. Most fans look back on an emotional first visit. Nicole described the first year as “solemn” and as a “pilgrimage of loss”. When Reese traveled to Forest Lawn for the first time in June 2010 the sight of the mausoleum where Jackson’s body lies gave her closure because it made her accept that he was gone. Jennie journeyed to Los Angeles to talk face to face with- and embrace the women she had been in online contact with since Jackson’s death and who had helped her come to terms with her spiritual awakening and mourning.

Fans generally described their first pilgrimage as the most hectic one. These first visits centered on a busy schedule during which the fan tries to see as many Michael-places as possible. Brooke characterized her first ‘Michaeling’-experience as “ticking off boxes”. Reta also remembered her first ‘Michael Week’ as busy:

We tried to see everything we could. We went to Holly Terrace, Neverland, Hollywood, Encino, his elementary school in Hollywood, the antique store and bar where he filmed his music video in Los Olivos, Santa Maria where his trial was held, the Amoeba record store, Dodger Stadium, Pasadena Civic Auditorium, the Graf Lab, Akasha Restaurant, Disney Studio Lot and Disneyland.

During my fieldwork I also noticed a clear difference between ‘first timers’ and more seasoned travelers. The first, like Reta’s quote illustrates, are in a rush to see all there is to see. The second category, to which the women in this chapter belong, have slowed down; they know what to expect and usually prefer to visit a few places repeatedly and spend time with friends. This is illustrated by my travel group. The last few years, they have spent the majority of their time divided between Forest Lawn and Neverland because these are the places that they feel the most peace and serenity, and that speak to them most intimately of Jackson.

For most women, their first visit turned out to be the start of a lifelong journey. In the past ten years they have grown into a group of (quasi) regular travelers and their trips have evolved into layered journeys with varying motivations for traveling. Iris and Ava are good examples of this. Both have traveled every year since their first visit. Ava’s first journey in June 2010 was

initiated by the overwhelming grief she felt after Jackson's death and her wish to "be alone with Michael". Today, besides looking for a connection with Jackson, she also looks forward to seeing her friends again. Likewise, Iris described her later travels as less sad and more centered on social get togethers. Thus, although fans still grieve and miss Jackson, their testimonies show that over the years, 'Michaeling' has evolved into more of a celebration and people connecting as kindred spirits.

Religious scholar Michael Stausberg traces a dynamic interaction between religion and tourism. He notes that religious motives often co-exist with other motivations such as desires to get away from home, to spend time with family and loved ones, or to discover and to be entertained. Vice versa religious elements (experiences, practices, information) may become part of one's journey which was originally not intended as a spiritual endeavor.²⁷⁵ I recognize Stausberg's observation in how the fans approach Michael Week; parts of the journey are introspective and spiritual, while other parts center on socializing, entertainment and tourism. Through experiencing the different places and events the fans feel they get to know the different layers of Jackson's intangible personality. However, the reason why fans voice multiple motivations might not so much be explained on the basis of the nature of 'Michaeling', but may be more a reflection of the needs of the women who use the format of pilgrimage to answer their quests. Indeed, as already came to the fore in my previous reference to Notermans, pilgrimage is often used as an adaptable ritual that fits the pilgrim's individual needs. It is neither uncommon nor particularly recent for people to voice multiple motives for pilgrimage.²⁷⁶ Digance states that:

A review of the literature supports the view that the various dynamic processes operating within any individual indicate that there is seldom one dominant, over-riding motive explaining solely why people chose to travel at that particular point in his or her life.²⁷⁷

Although most of my interlocutors had several reasons for visiting Michael Week, usually two major reasons surfaced on why they set off on a journey to Michael's world. First of all, the women described feeling motivated by the wish to be as near as possible to Jackson. They looked forward to experiencing the strong energy that they feel is present at Michael-sites. Like the Mary-pilgrims in Notermans' study, the MJ-fans use their journey to create and maintain a close

²⁷⁵ Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, destinations and encounters* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2011) 14, 32.

²⁷⁶ Based on his study of Shikoku pilgrims, Reader notes that few pilgrims identify just one reason for going on a pilgrimage: Reader, 'Pilgrimage growth in the modern world', 214. Badone and Roseman note that among the large number of medieval Europeans who traveled to Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury, it is not likely that all were propelled by uniquely pious motives. See: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman eds., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman eds., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2004) 1-23, 2.

²⁷⁷ Digance, 'Pilgrimage at Contested Sites', 145.

relationship with their idol. Besides searching for a personal experience at Michael-places, most fans in this study are equally motivated to experience *communitas* with the larger fan community. The women described Michael Week as a festive break from the routines and obligations of ordinary life, it was a time during which they can shamelessly spend every minute focused on Jackson. This big emphasis on the social during Michael Week contrasts with Margry's claims that 'secular' pilgrimages are foremost personal.²⁷⁸

In the next section I focus on the trip itself; what is it like to step into "Michael's world" and how is the journey characterized by place and motion? I will reflect on how 'Michaeling' has a liminal character, set apart from the routines of daily live. At the same time, the fan statements reveal that their (sometimes annual) 'Michaeling'-journeys have become an integral part of their lives at home because they reinforce their way of life.

3.5 The Journey: liminality and movement

In agreement with an understanding of pilgrimage as a journey set apart from the ordinary, a fan has to move away from her habitual day-to-day life and family to step into, what Erica and Ava called, "Michael's world" – a world in which other rules apply and where anything can happen. The fan accounts reveal that even the perception of time is different during 'Michaeling'; fans stay up late and claim to have more energy. The women in my travel group explained that it is a means to have a "supercharged hyper focus on Michael" without any distractions. It is precisely this liminality that appeals to the fans who explained that they cherished their journeys because it takes them away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. My travel companions reported that after their first pilgrimages they had found it difficult to adjust to their regular life. Ava said that she used to feel "torn" when she left Michael Week because she felt like she "was going back to a regular life" that includes "working, grocery shopping and all of the mundane things you end up doing." But as time goes by, both Erica and Ava find that there is no crash on returning home anymore because Jackson is "integrated more and more" into their life. It was more common within the narratives that 'Michaeling' is considered a part of the fans' everyday life. Most also use their Michael-time as an opportunity to reflect on life back home.

What has helped fans like Erica and Ava integrate "Michael's world" into their regular life, is that they visit Michael Week every year. Through their multiple trips the fans have come to know well the places they visit. One of the ways in which this became clear was that fans frequently referred to Michael-sites as "home". The women fit Coleman's description of "habitual pilgrims", referring to pilgrims who travel regularly to the same place. For such pilgrims, Coleman

²⁷⁸ King also notes that for Graceland-pilgrims the co-visits to Graceland enhance the experience of being part of a community of Elvis fans: King, 'His truth goes marching on', 98, 101-104.

argues, there is a predictability of places, which is rooted in personal memories of past visits. In this respect the women I studied resemble the habitual pilgrims to Walsingham that Coleman studied; like Walsingham, the Michael-sites are ostensibly very different to the home towns of the pilgrims. Nonetheless, the annual visits to the same sacred spots “renders a visit to the site not exactly mundane, but rather akin to arriving at a second home.”²⁷⁹

I mentioned before that it is more common within contemporary pilgrimage practice that people go on pilgrimages again and again. Reader argues that this shows that pilgrimage is a part of the normal lives of pilgrims:

pilgrimage need not be an exceptional activity that happens rarely or perhaps just once in a lifetime. While it can be about being restless and wanting to get away from normal daily existences to find things anew, it is also closely associated with reinforcing the everyday nature of existence.²⁸⁰

Anthropologist Anna Fedele similarly observes that most pilgrims in her study saw their pilgrimage as part of a larger way of life. Although her informants appreciated their pilgrimage as a special occasion for spiritual experiences and practices in which they could meet kindred spirits, what they did as pilgrims was not so different from what they did back home.²⁸¹ I recognize the patterns Reader and Fedele observed in my interview-data and contact with MJ-fans during Michael Week. It struck me that for these fans their visits are, although a special, liminal, time of unique focus on Michael, more a continuation, in fact, an incentive for their regular way of life as MJ-followers.

Michael Week is all about motion. It is first of all an experience of physical movement. Fans often travel by plane to LA after which they reach the Michael-places by car. At the site, they decorate, leave cards and flowers, perform rituals – like burning candles – and sit still. Through these acts the fans establish relations with the Michael-places, but also with fellow travelers and with the transcendental. ‘Michaeling’ also triggers movement on the emotive level and can be considered a social movement. In the remaining part of this section, I will reflect on the different types of movement that are a part of ‘Michaeling’, starting with how the fans transform Michael-places into consecrated space.

In the previous chapter, I referenced anthropologist Irene Stengs who emphasizes that it is the *process* of ritualization that transforms a beforehand unarticulated public space into a ritualized place.²⁸² The objects that are left at a memorial site not only constitute a relationship

²⁷⁹ Simon Coleman, ‘Meanings of movement, place and home at Walsingham’, *Culture and Religion* 1:2 (2000) 153-169, 156.

²⁸⁰ Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015) 79, 82.

Anna Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France* (Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford University Press 2013) 251.

²⁸² Stengs, ‘Gedenken op de plek des onheils’, 267-268.

between the visitor and the site, but also between the living and the dead.²⁸³ Indeed, in the run up to Jackson's death day, fans turn Michael-places into odes to Jackson. At Neverland, for example, fans annually create "the Rope of Love": a rope alongside the Neverland-fence with fan messages and thoughts, including empty cards to give visitors the opportunity to spontaneously leave a message for Jackson. The items and decorations that the fans bring to Michael-places turn, after a certain amount of time, into "sacred waste". As I pointed out before, sacred waste has an ambiguous character because it is charged with religious, moral or emotional value, but at the same time is a kind of leftover for which no proper destination exists.²⁸⁴ This duality is most apparent on the occasion of Jackson's death day. After Holly Terrace has been transformed into memorial ground by posters, flowers and Jackson memorabilia, the Forest Lawn guards restore the property to its original condition. The fans know their gifts will be removed after their ceremony and take back their contributions from the grass at the end of Jackson's death day. (See pictures 3.1-3.2 for before and after).

During 'Michaeling' the fans sometimes experienced, what the women in my travel group called, 'Michael-moments': a short instant in which Jackson shows himself, which the women described as "meant to be" or "orchestrated by Michael". A Michael-moment has the power to create a moment of enchantment. Fans, however, can also create the right ambience to enable a spiritual connection with Jackson. This act of 'setting the stage' by which the women open themselves up to enchantment, is what religious scholar Terhi Utriainen calls 'ritual-framing'.²⁸⁵ Utriainen builds her argument on fieldwork on Finnish women who practice angel rituals – such as meditation and healing – to create an altered state of being. She understands enchantment as "experience and action wherein something extraordinary is acknowledged and brought in to meet and enrich everyday life".²⁸⁶

It was clear to me that in my travel group certain collective rituals had evolved that 'set the stage' for contact with Jackson. By providing an altar, burning incense, sitting in silence, collective prayer or reading from *Dancing the Dream*, the women secured ritual space in which they tried to connect with Jackson. The notion of ritual-framing might also explain why it was sometimes more difficult or even impossible for the fans to connect with Jackson because of a lack of the right ambience. Knibbe et al., describe, in a similar way to Utriainen, how rituals have the sensuous power to create a temporal space in which spiritual changes might happen. The scholars also point to the possibility that nothing happens and argue that:

²⁸³ Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 'Introduction: Rethinking Memorialization', 25; Stengs, 'Gedenken op de plek des onheils', 272.

²⁸⁴ Stengs, 'Sacred waste', 235.

²⁸⁵ Terhi Utriainen, 'Ritually Framing Enchantment: Momentary Religion and Everyday Realities', *Suomen Antropologi* 41:4 (2016) 46-61.

²⁸⁶ Idem, 47.

3

Image 3.1 and 3.2 Forest lawn before and after 25 June

The fact that they sometimes do not happen only adds to the credibility and ontological status of bodily sensations when they do occur: these sensations cannot be willed; therefore, they must originate from “somewhere” or “someone” else.²⁸⁷

Utriainen stretches the concept of ritual framing from the physical act of creating the right environment to a mental capacity. In this sense, ritual framing is a skill (or a mindset) that can frame occurrences as extraordinary. Utriainen explains how, because the women in her study are open to experience “something extraordinary” in their everyday life, they can use the act of mental ritual framing to create enchantment. Like this, ritual framing can become dynamic and can create “fleeting or otherwise often only minimally discernible enchantments in the midst of everyday social life”.²⁸⁸ I recognize this skill in the women I accompanied during Michael Week. In their perception of the world (their ‘ritual-frame’) Michael can show himself in unexpected moments, which the women described as “magical”. This is what happens when, for example, they see a butterfly and interpret this as a sign of Michael, or when a particular Jackson song is played on the radio.

An example of such a ‘fleeting moment of enchantment’ was when I stumbled upon a bouquet of sunflowers (Jackson’s favorite flower) in the middle of a construction site in LA. There were no stores or other facilities in the neighborhood. The women were amazed and interpreted it as a clear sign. It amused them that this find had not yet convinced me of Michael’s power, and they dismissed my skepticism as ignorance. During a dinner, Ava told fan Aubree about my hesitance to recognize and accept Michael’s signs. The sunflower-anecdote made Aubree laugh: “that is Michael!”, she said. She predicted that when I resisted his signs, Michael would only send more and more up till the point that I could not ignore him anymore.

The fans in this study use ‘Michaeling’ as a means to invoke and experience, what many believe to be, Jackson’s energy. Traveling to and spending time at Michael-places not only physically and emotionally draws the fans into contact with Jackson and the transcendental but also with each other. Brooke said about the Michael-sites:

²⁸⁷ Kim Knibbe, Marten van der Meulen and Peter Versteeg, ‘Why Participation Matters to Understand Ritual Experience’, *Fieldwork in Religion* 6:2 (2011) 104-119, 116-117.

²⁸⁸ Terhi Utriainen, ‘Ritually Framing Enchantment’, 54.

They are all very interesting and I always try to envision Michael there. But Neverland and Forest Lawn, these are the special places. Places of serenity, respect, love, peace. Places that I feel close to Michael. Think of Michael... and my mother. Places to reflect. I am compelled to visit both Neverland and Forest Lawn regularly and repeatedly and it never gets old. I feel drawn to these two places, like I *MUST* visit annually or more. I feel "at home" in those special places. I don't see that changing. My family knows that Michael Week is sacred and I will not miss it. There is also a bond I feel with certain other MJ fans from around the world, and it makes me feel closer to God, knowing that Michael has brought people from around the world together. It gives hope for this troubled world. It puts many of life's troubles in perspective, and just makes me happy.

Dakota compared her experience at Neverland with her experience of visiting Bethlehem. The specialness is rooted in the imagination that "I was on it and he was on it." At Neverland:

I don't have to try to feel his presence when I'm at his gates. It's just saturated with his spirit. (...) A gate is a gate until Michael Jackson drives through it and then it becomes the holy land and that's what Neverland is to me: it is a place where his spirit still lives permeably, palpable, detectable. And we're only at the outside. Ha! We're not even close to the actual residence and we don't have to be. When I tell people here (at home) like "yeah we just go and sit outside on the curb", (they respond) "that's it?" Yeah! Haha, you feel Michael's presence and that's enough for us. I don't have to go anywhere else. I love feeling his presence there. It's loving, it's peaceful, it's Michael-ful. I'm seeing the same mountain that he saw. (...) These Michael-places (...) it's there as a blessing, it's there as a point of contact between spirit and, between heaven and earth. It's the being there that matters more than anything else.

As the experiences of Brooke and Dakota illustrate: it is the residing at these places that matters. *That* is what allows for the sensation of being close to Jackson, being close to other fans and being a part of something greater. Some perform rituals on site, like meditation, communal prayer – such as the MLP – or reading from *Dancing the Dream*. But for most, 'Michaeling' it is about standing still and experiencing the extraordinary sensation that emanates from the ground that Jackson once set foot on.

Besides being characterized by physical and emotional movement, 'Michaeling' can be considered a social movement.²⁸⁹ I demonstrated in the previous chapters that the fans in this study have a normative approach to Jackson and see it as their responsibility to internalize, continue and spread – what they believe to be – Jackson's ideology. Fitting this characterization,

²⁸⁹ Cf. Hermkens et al., 'Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage', 7-8.

the fans use Michael Week as a means to celebrate and emulate Jackson's humanitarian legacy. During Michael Week 2018 and 2019 I observed both "fan activism" and "fan charity". The civic engagement of the fans demonstrates the power of the fan community as a foundation for action. The next two examples serve to illustrate how the fans collectively participate in charitable activism during Michael Week, namely the Michael Jackson Kickoff Party (MJKOP) and One Rose 4 Michael.

The MJKOP is a good example of how entertainment, awareness and charity can meet in 'Michaeling'. In 2018 the event was themed 'Smooth Criminal' and ticket-sale raised \$950.- of which \$700 was donated to the St. Jude Children Research Hospital and \$250 was invested in youth projects. The evening included a Best Dress Contest, an MJ Art Auction, a performance of MJ impersonators and had as its highlight the Glove of Love Award: a goblet in the shape of Jackson's signature crystal glove that honors people who have done their best to show "unconditional love" following the example of Jackson's humanitarian legacy. The goblet was handed out while the song "Man in the Mirror" played in the background, underscoring the message of the award to inspire the attendants to make a change.

Another initiative I want to highlight is the yearly event 'One Rose for Michael J. Jackson', which many fans consider one of the highlights of Michael Week. MJ-pilgrim Robyn (65) started the project soon after Jackson's death to give all fans the opportunity to "pay their respect" to Jackson, including those who cannot travel to Michael Week. Each year fans can buy red roses, which Robyn and her Rose Fairies put up on Holly Terrace on the day before Jackson's anniversary. After placing the roses, they hold hands and sing along with "We Are the World". Photos and videos are posted in a private Facebook group. After Jackson's commemoration, on June 26, the roses are donated to various charities, including senior houses, Meals on Wheels and the Ronald McDonald House. In 2019 the final rose count was 18.757 (a record). Instead of the traditional red roses, the fans had chosen for a combination of red and white roses and the buckets stated "Roses of Love and Innocence". Like this, the fans used the roses as part of their rebuttal to show that they stand by Jackson as his global army of love.

Like the ritual of the MLP that I discussed in chapter one, 'Michaeling' steers the attention of the fans for a certain period of time to the values they attach to Jackson. The fan statements reveal that their hyper-focus on Jackson as a pacifist, humanitarian, and their wish to come closer to him and pay him tribute during 'Michaeling' has a moralizing effect. The fans' intention to emulate Jackson influences their approach to 'Michaeling', making them sensitive to experience a closeness with Jackson, which in turn triggers them to renew their vows to follow in his humanitarian footsteps. This was also voiced by Grace, who shared that her focus on Jackson's good deeds and sharing his memory with fellow fans during 'Michaeling' inspires her

to renew her ideals of loving others. Grace's comment also displays how Michael Week enables the participants to be a part of something bigger. My interlocutors agreed that knowing that their fellow travelers are there with the same focus, intensifies the 'Michaeling'-experience and makes them feel part of a safe community of kindred spirits, which contributes to a feeling of unity and belonging. Indeed, the feeling that is created during 'Michaeling' is something the fans long for when they return home.

Whether physical or social, movement is an important part of Michael Week. Nevertheless, as the comments of Brooke and Dakota already illustrated, 'Michaeling' is also very much about reaching a destination and standing still to experience the energy at site. The fan reports denote that there are two "centers out there" that form the backbone of the pilgrimage: Forest Lawn and Neverland. These sites are regarded as most powerful and it is at these locations that the fans generally tried to feel the (transformative) extraordinary energy. These are also the sites where the fans place their gifts and collect their souvenirs.

3.6 The destination: Magical Michael-places

The case study of 'Michaeling' confirms the thesis of anthropologist Jill Dubisch that the power of place is very wide in pilgrimage and is not confined by the pilgrimage sites.²⁹⁰ 'Michaeling' does not have one single destination, it is a "linked pilgrimage circuit"²⁹¹: Jackson's 'magical energy' can be experienced at several locations. The fans I observed and spoke to set aside the Michael-places both verbally and in action. They compared them to holy places like Bethlehem or the Sistine chapel. Physically the fans expressed the specialness of the places in touching: placing their hands on the doors of Holly Terrace or the gate of Neverland. It struck me that the pilgrimage sites did not necessarily have to be places that Jackson visited himself – which was illustrated by those fans who included visits to *This is It* and Michael-related theatre shows in their pilgrimage. Although the Michael-sites are scattered (even across states), they are connected because the fans walk in Jackson's footsteps. As I said, 'Michaeling' is at its core about *experiencing* Jackson through being in the places where he was. This overall purpose mends the different places and events together.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Jill Dubisch, 'Epilogue: The Many Faces of Mary', in: Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate 2009) 227-238, 232.

²⁹¹ Reader, *Pilgrimage: A Very Short Introduction* (2015) 22.

²⁹² Cf. Fedele observed that even though the Magdalene-pilgrimages did not have one single destination, the route brought the separate sites together to form a whole and through traveling the pilgrims "were creating an energetic connection among them". Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, 249.

Image 3.3. a Fan honors Jackson by placing her hands on his star of fame

Image 3.4 A fan places her hands on the Holly Terrace doors

Nonetheless, the stories of the fans evidenced that there is a hierarchy among the places. Some sites are, like Brooke said, “ticked off boxes”, whilst others are visited every time. The women feel especially drawn to Neverland and Forest Lawn since these places most profoundly contain Jackson's energetic mark. The sensation of this power – that some recognize as “Michael's spirit” – was described to me as uplifting and peaceful.

Neverland, the house where Jackson lived between 1988 and 2005, is situated in the middle of nature near Los Olivos, California. The ranch can only be reached by car and is closed for visitors. Fans usually gather in front of the gate. The environment of Neverland contributes to introspection; there is little traffic and visitors mostly have the place to themselves, only sharing it with great spotted woodpeckers. In the evening you can spot stars surrounded by the sounds of frogs and crickets. Neverland felt timeless and disconnected from the world because of its remoteness. At Neverland the focus is on reflection, introspection, and spiritual exploration with the ultimate goal of self-growth. Our Neverland-days were filled with many hours of sitting on the grass and reading from *Dancing the Dream*. Afterwards we had long, philosophical conversations about how the poems applied to our lives. In these intimate conversations the fans shared their hopes, doubts, and interpretations of Jackson.

3

The women in my travel group described their meditative state of mind at Neverland as “bliss”. Many more of my interlocutors stated to cherish the serenity at Neverland. Their descriptions of the place indicate that visiting it is the most *liminal* part of the journey offering potential for moral growth and a focus on one's inward spiritual journey.²⁹³ Because of its remoteness, visitors are far away from their customary patterns of everyday life, which allows them to gain new insights. The following description that Sandra wrote down in a blogpost captures “the magic” at Neverland:

The stillness and sense of solitude helped me better imagine the presence of Michael's spirit. I stayed there just soaking it in, savoring the sensation, whether it was illusion or not, didn't matter. (...) (I)t was what I felt and believed for the brief time I was there. My eyes were moist for feelings and sensations I find difficult to explain.

Sandra's anecdote represents the experience of many other (aspirant) travelers who (want to) embark upon a ‘Michaeling’-journey in search of closeness to Jackson. Not every fan is

²⁹³ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 8, 15. The strengthening of faith is a classical function of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition according to Victor Turner: Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage*, 129-130.

as outspoken as Sandra – who explicitly writes about Jackson’s spirit and about Neverland as sacred ground – but all share the conviction that Michael-places contain and radiate an extraordinary energy and all express the wish to be present at these special sites to touch that energy. Although the fans were clear that Michael-places emanate a special energy, they often had trouble explaining what it was they experienced. Sandra’s anecdote also captures this; she knows she senses something special, but she is not sure how to pin it down. The women, however, were clear that it was a pleasant sensation. Most described it as “magical”. When I asked them to explain the word magical, they generally replied that it was “a feeling”.²⁹⁴

I see many parallels between my interlocutors and the Magdalene-pilgrims in Fedele’s study. Both are (mostly) female and have a Christian background, but most identify as spiritual and criticize institutionalized religion. They use an energy discourse – describing the world as permeated by a life force, and focus on direct, embodied experiences of this energy by trying to absorb the positive energy of the places they visit. They access the power by means of ritual creativity, mixing together elements from different traditions. Furthermore, the pilgrims use their journey of self-exploration for transformation, healing and empowerment.²⁹⁵ In keeping with Reader, both ‘Michaeling’ and Fedele’s study of Magdalene pilgrims demonstrate that pilgrimage is a useful, malleable format to fit contemporary people’s spiritual needs. The fans in this study differ from Fedele’s research participants in their quest. Even though ‘Michaeling’ is an enforcement of the fans’ connection with Jackson, it is also a principal expression of their fandom and membership of a fan community. Contrary to Fedele’s pilgrims, my interlocutors do not use pilgrimage to reclaim religious places in critique of the church. Instead, they appropriate the ritual as a cathartic means to freely express themselves for two weeks a year and validate their identity. Moreover, the fans in this study are habitual pilgrims and stressed the moralizing effect of their journeys.

Similar to medieval pilgrimage shrines that were believed to derive their power from the presence or relic of a saint²⁹⁶, the fans stated that the special energy at Neverland emerges from

²⁹⁴ It is not that surprising that many fans talked about the Michael-places in terms of magic, when one knows that magic is a word that Jackson himself often used. Especially in his book *Dancing the Dream* the artist frequently returns to the concept, which he understands to be inherent in nature, and something that people can experience as a state of wonder: Jackson, *Dancing the Dream* (1992) 50.

²⁹⁵ Anna Fedele, ‘Gender, Sexuality and Religious Critique among Mary Magdalene Pilgrims in Southern France’, in: Willy Jansen, Catrien Notermans eds., *Gender, Nation and Religion in European Pilgrimage* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 55-69, 59-60; Anna Fedele, ‘Energy and transformation in alternative pilgrimages to Catholic shrines: deconstructing the tourist/pilgrim divide’, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 12:2 (2014) 150-165, 152, 156, 160; Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, 4, 7, 14, 18-19, 86, 88, 120.

²⁹⁶ Arnold Angenendt, ‘Relics and their veneration in the Middle Ages’, in: Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker ed., *The Invention of Saintliness* (London; New York: Routledge 2002) 27-37, 29, 31; Richard Kieckhefer, ‘Imitators of Christ: Sainthood in the Christian Tradition’, in: Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond eds., *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990) 1-42, 5, 12, 20-21; Derek Krueger, ‘The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium’, in: Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann and James Robinson eds., *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, relics and devotion in medieval Europe* (London: British Museum Press 2011) 5-18, 6-7; Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ‘The invention of saintliness: texts and contexts’, in: Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker ed., *The Invention of Saintliness* (London; New York: Routledge 2002) 3-23, 4, 9; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 7-8, 10-11.

Jackson's former house and his energetic footprint on the land. Like the Magdalene-pilgrims in Fedele's study, the fans believe they can access this energy. Kristin, for instance, described Neverland as a place to "recharge yourself". Some women see Neverland as a miraculous place. The miracles that they themselves experience or hear about from others are believed to be signs of Jackson's presence. Hellen told me she had once seen the Neverland-gates glow. She commented: "do I wanna say it's Michael? of course I do! But I have nothing to validate that except feeling and hoping it is." Even though the fans mark Neverland as special and sometimes miraculous, none said that they visited it with the purpose to get a physical cure or find salvation. Instead, many reported that being physically present at the site allowed them to feel closer to Jackson.

The second most important place is Forest Lawn, where Jackson's body is preserved inside the Holly Terrace mausoleum; a private building which is only accessible to families of the deceased who lie there.²⁹⁷ It used to be possible to peer through the Holly Terrace doors and view Jackson's tomb. To the fans' dismay, a black tarp was placed behind the mausoleum-doors which makes it nearly impossible to look inside. Based on the fan statements, I gather that the obstacle of the black tarp has taken away some of the power of the place. Even so, fans often still peer through the glass that divides them and Jackson and touch the doors with their hands (see image 3.4).

An often heard difference between Neverland and Forest Lawn is that the latter is more a social place. Especially during Michael Week, Forest Lawn is where people hang out and meet fellow-fans. Donna has not yet had the opportunity to visit Forest Lawn. She would like to be there, but she does not know if she could deal with "the carnival atmosphere on June 25th". Rather, she would want to be alone to "just sit there and tell him what I have to say." Indeed, those fans who search for a deeper connection with Jackson, prefer to visit Forest Lawn before or after June 25.

Although the fans were unanimous about the importance of Neverland and Forest Lawn, I noticed that their views on Jackson's birthplace Gary, Indiana were mixed. While some regarded it as one of the most important Michael-places, others did not feel the urge to visit it at all. It struck me as odd that Gary was not more popular among the fans since their main motivation was to walk in Jackson's footsteps. Would Jackson's home town not be the primary place to go? Erica and Ava explained the lack of enthusiasm among members of the fan community as follows:

(Gary) is a very poverty stricken place. There is a lot of depression, it is not like LA with fancy restaurants and, you know, a peaceful setting like this under the trees (Neverland). The houses are abandoned and falling down.

Ava and Erica stated that Michael-people who visit Gary regularly do not stay long because it is

²⁹⁷ Some fans have managed to get inside the mausoleum by pretending to visit the Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda. When the Forest Lawn-guards discovered that MJ-fans were posing as Yogananda-devotees, they increased their surveillance.

dangerous and because there is “nothing to do”. The argument that Gary is less fancy and that there is nothing to do, reveals the fun, glamorous holiday aspect of ‘Michaeling’ thus confirming Stausberg’s aforementioned observation that religious motives often co-exist with other motivations. Another reason why some have not yet visited Jackson’s birthplace is the distance between Gary, Indiana and Los Angeles. This is reflected in Iris’ consideration of visiting Gary. Iris disclosed that even though she would like to visit Gary, she has as yet refrained of doing so because she has been told that it is “a very dangerous neighborhood” and because she does not have the resources to visit both Gary and LA. Those fans in my study who had visited Gary often lived nearby the town, making it relatively easy to visit.

Besides addressing the power of Michael-places, some fans explained how objects that Jackson had worn or touched could retain power. Zoe, for instance, vividly recalled her visit to an auction of Jackson’s belongings: “you were able to actually touch the clothes Michael wore. It was so incredible to see and touch things that he had on his body.” Likewise, the ground, or items that had resided at Michael-places, are believed to store the “magical” quality of the site. By collecting something from the site, the fans can carry this power with them. Jacky always takes a piece of the Neverland-fence as a souvenir when she leaves the site. I noticed that the fans mostly searched for natural elements like stones, soil, water and leaves. At Neverland I was instructed to look for serpentine rocks, a stone type that belongs to the Neverland area which is supposed to have healing energy. My observations resemble Fedele’s findings, who similarly found that the pilgrims in her study tended to gather stones, branches, flowers, and water from the pilgrimage sites.²⁹⁸

The power that the women ascribe to their souvenirs is reminiscent of the workings of relics – conveying the holiness from the body of the saint to the body of the worshipper. Even the slightest part of the saint’s body, as tiny as a drop of blood, is considered to contain holiness.²⁹⁹ Professor Emeritus of Museum Studies Susan Pearce defines ‘souvenirs’ as intimate, personal belongings, which have meaning to the collector and represent a nostalgic longing to a past event. Pearce argues that souvenirs hold a special power because they can carry the past to the present in a direct material way, which is different from words, actions, sights and the other elements of experience.³⁰⁰

About half of the group dedicated a place in their house to the popstar, where they also exhibit their Michael-souvenirs. Monica called the places in her home where she honors Jackson “altars”. I think the word altar is appropriate for many of the fans’ collections. Some have set up one place, whilst others, like Monica, have decorated many places. Collecting is often regarded a typical fan practice.³⁰¹ Cavicchi describes the habit as an attempt to somehow capture the person

²⁹⁸ Fedele, *Looking for Mary Magdalene*, 245.

²⁹⁹ Krueger, ‘The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium’, 5.

³⁰⁰ Susan M. Pearce, ‘Collecting reconsidered’, in Susan M. Pearce ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (Taylor & Francis e-Library 2003) 193-204, 194-196.

³⁰¹ Cf. Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2014).

admired, making him/her part of one's daily identity.³⁰² This also applies to the fans in my study. Bea has collected leaves, stones and flowers from the Michael-places she visited, which she now cherishes in her "little Neverland" at home. "For me that is sacred", she said, "not within the meaning of religion or in a church-like manner, but sacred within the meaning of love." Bea's interpretation of her souvenir neatly fits Pearce's argument that souvenirs continue an emotional movement. By looking at her souvenirs, Bea explained that she can "replay" her pilgrimage-experience, which makes her feel close to Jackson. The power of these souvenirs became clear to me when I sent a serpentine stone from Neverland to aspirant pilgrim Vivian. She later told me that the gift had immediately triggered an intense Michael-dream: "He was standing in a silver-grey Bad outfit with his arms stretched out and with bleeding wounds on diverse places".³⁰³

According to folklorist Kay Turner the practice of altar-making can typically be found among women in the West. She sees a correlation between the eruption of the practice in the late twentieth century and the decrease of the influence of established religions. Turner observed that many of the women she studied engage spirituality as experience and as a means of personal transformation. Their altars, and the way they are used, reflect their maker and her direct intimacy with what she regards as sacred.³⁰⁴ Turner argues that the making of an altar enhances self-empowerment, because it works as a means of overcoming "societal, religious, or family histories", such as the exclusion from full participation in male-dominated religions.³⁰⁵ Fitting the observations of Turner, the meaning and exterior of the fans' altars is not given. They expand and change – items are added or subtracted – for example after a pilgrimage. At their altars, the women bring together images of Jackson, candles, flowers, souvenirs from Michael-places, and other decorations. They perform rituals such as lighting candles and burning sage and some take into account special occasions, for example commemorating his birthday by cutting a cake.

My discussion of Michael-sites and the meanings that fans attach to them demonstrates that the fans feel drawn to such sites because they experience these places to radiate an extraordinary energy that they connect to Jackson. The journeys, the fans say, contribute to their relationship with the popstar because they mediate a closeness with him and his message. A significant number of my interlocutors furthermore attested to an experience of the transcendental. 'Michaeling', however, is a strenuous undertaking; it can be an assault on the body and this also shapes the journey. In the next part, I want to reflect on unmet expectations, disappointments and irritations that can occur during 'Michaeling'.

³⁰² Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 91.

³⁰³ In Vivian's dream there are allusions to stigmata that resonate with the stigmata of Christ. It is more common for visions of stigmata to appear in dreams. Cf. Salome Sticken's vision of Christ: Van Dijk, 'Navolging van Christus voor vrouwen verklaard', 39.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (Thames & Hudson 1999) 34.

³⁰⁵ Idem, 22, 61.

3.7 To Pee or not to Pee: battling spiritual and physical needs and unmet expectations within ‘Michaeling’

Before we headed off to Neverland for the first time, Ava and Erica gave me a heads up: “there are no toilets in the vicinity of Neverland”, they told me. The women, however, assured me that they almost never had to pee when they were at Neverland. Somehow being there repressed this physical need and it was not uncommon that a whole day went by without anyone having to go to the bathroom. Luckily, they turned out to be right: only once within our four days at Neverland we had to drive back-and-forth to Los Olivos for a bathroom break. Yet, after we had spent a whole day at Neverland – which could easily span 8 to 9 hours – we were all sitting cross-legged in the car and upon our arrival at one of the restaurants we made a run for the restroom. We also did not drink or eat much during our Neverland-visits. This, in combination with the warm weather, probably contributed to our bladder-control.

The fact that eating and drinking was not a top priority became somewhat of a running gag throughout our journeys. The primary focus was on Michael. After my return home in 2018 I had lost six pounds. Sleep was likewise considered negligible. During our 2018 trip, it soon became clear to me that I had seriously underestimated the energy-level of my travel companions. The women stayed up till the crack of dawn to experience and enjoy every minute of their journey. I realized that if I wanted to fully participate, this meant no more than 3 to 4 hours of sleep per night and no time to write down my observations or work out my notes. My travel companions did not seem to be affected by the few hours of sleep; they were euphoric and “high on Michael”. Hellen explained that they were rested with so little sleep because they recharged by soaking up the special Neverland-energy.

The fans’ apparent indifference towards food and sleep made me think of (in)voluntary bodily hardship which is a common feature of pilgrimage in many religious traditions, for example as part of a supplication or fulfilment of vows.³⁰⁶ In the case of ‘Michaeling’ I think that the neglect of bodily needs is in the first place simply a result of a lack of facilities at Neverland. But I noticed that the women also experienced their “high on Michael” as liberating.

³⁰⁶ Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman, ‘Introduction: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage’, in: Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman eds., *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 2005) ix-xxxvi, xxiv-xxv; Eade and Sallnow, ‘Introduction’, 21.

It appeared to bring about an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Medical anthropologist Michael Winkelman and Dubisch note that some pilgrims deliberately induce ASC to inflict a certain bodily response such as relaxation or reduction in stress.³⁰⁷ This might explain why the women found themselves in a state of “bliss”, under irregular circumstances. The fans mentioned that at home they would never be able to handle the lack of food and sleep. In this sense, the voluntary neglect of basic needs is not a form of penance or a way to safeguard a favor of Jackson. Instead, I think it is a mirror of the spiritual state of the fans. They are in “Michael’s world” and on “Michael’s energy” – and that is far different from home. Michael’s energy did not always suffice. Although the women kept repeating that they felt “fantastic”, I also observed some signs of fatigue and dehydration as time passed – resulting in headaches and dizziness. Moreover, the slight discomfort at Michael-sites was compensated by the comfort of sleeping in luxurious hotels and dining at nice restaurants, which were not regarded as obstacles to spiritual experiences.

Fans often have particular expectations of Michael Week and want things to go a certain way. It can be disappointing or frustrating when such expectations are not met. Most studies approach pilgrimage as a potentiality; a promise of change and improvement after which the pilgrim will continue her life from a new perspective. Literature seems to be silent on disappointments in pilgrimage. Studying pilgrimage as a part of everyday life, however, should also reflect on how the hopes and dreams of the pilgrim correspond with reality, which can include disappointment and conflict. A focus on disappointment lays bare what pilgrims had hoped for, and contestations potentially reveal what people consider to be sacred.³⁰⁸ An example of a great disappointment was when a camera with motion-sensor was installed at the Neverland-gate. This was a thorn in the flesh of fans who visit Neverland at night to see the stars and enjoy the stillness. At the slightest movement a big light turned on, interrupting the fans’ alone-time in the dark.

The major sites for possible conflict and disappointment occur within a travel group and between competing fan groups. Contrasting with an ideal of *communitas* that I found in the accounts of all of my interlocutors, I observed that the large fan community is actually subdivided into different small groups that tend to stick together without mingling. In the next section I argue that *communitas* and contestation are both a part of the ‘Michaeling’ experience.

3.8 Communitas vs contestation during ‘Michaeling’

Although scholarship on pilgrimage has shown that the Turnerian concept of *communitas* should not be taken for granted as an integral characteristic of pilgrimage, many studies still find the term useful to describe a dimension of the social experience during pilgrimage. So do I. Although

³⁰⁷ Dubisch and Winkelman, ‘Introduction: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage’, xxv, xxxiv.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 28.

it is not necessarily fully realized on the ground, I have found that *communitas* is nonetheless an ideal that the fans strive for, and many also declare to experience it during ‘Michaeling’ – both in the sense of belonging to a community and the feeling of unity.

Dubisch and Winkelman have shown that the contact between like-minded people on a common mission offers the possibility of sharing emotions and feelings, something that can be experienced as beneficial. They interpret the trust between fellow pilgrims as central to the healing power of pilgrimage, because this connection enables expression and validation of identity, reinforcing a sense of self and self-worth.³⁰⁹ Dubisch calls this “the paradox of individualism”: in the interaction with a wider community, the individual forms and realizes his or her identity.³¹⁰ Contrary to the findings of Margry, who stated that the Morrison-pilgrims prefer to travel alone or with a close friend, most fans I met travel with a group of friends.

The women’s accounts show that ‘Michaeling’ evokes a social, vacation-like atmosphere. Fans frequently referred to Michael Week as a “family-reunion”. My findings support the thesis of Winkelman and Dubisch that pilgrimages can reinforce a sense of self and self-worth, which contributes to the wellbeing of its participants. Many of my interlocutors expressed their gratitude for being able to “freely be themselves” and share experiences with likeminded people. The annual reunion with fellow-fans validates- and strengthens their identity as fans. Page, for instance, commented:

There was an unspoken understanding among the fan community of the love and grief everyone was experiencing, and it was so liberating to be able to express that fully without any concern of judgment from those who don’t understand the strong connection to Michael that we all felt, and the pain of losing him.

Many more touched upon the liberating effects of visiting Michael Week. It provides them with the opportunity to express their fandom without fear of judgment. Sophie, for instance, reflected that throughout the year she mostly relies on her online MJ community for discussing Jackson. Pilgrimages are an opportunity for her to “share openly our love and devotion to this remarkable human being” without having to be “guarded”.

During my fieldwork I experienced myself the inclusive atmosphere of Michael Week; I observed a general attitude of comradery and was warmly welcomed and hugged by people I had never met before. I was furthermore struck by the openhearted conversations between fans who sometimes had not seen each other in years.³¹¹ I discovered that ‘Michaeling’ can be a time to face dimensions that one is unhappy about in one’s life and vent one’s emotions over them. Some

³⁰⁹ Dubisch and Winkelman, ‘Introduction: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage’xxxiiPilgrimage’, xxxii.

³¹⁰ Dubisch, ‘Heartland of America’, 124.

³¹¹ Of course many are in online contact with each other throughout the year

of the get-togethers I witnessed resembled a support group. The women in my travel group, for example, used their Michael-time to share personal problems and dilemmas. They encouraged each other to listen to their “inner voice” and stand up for oneself.³¹²

Another expression of being a close-knit fan community is that MJ-pilgrims tended to act as representatives for friends who could not travel, by carrying their gifts. Moreover, there were special events during Michael Week – like the beforementioned One Rose 4 Michael – that aimed to include those back home.

One of the reasons why Erica and Ava stayed up late during Michael Week 2018 was because they sorted all the cards and letters they had received through Facebook from fans who could not travel to Michael Week. The women estimated that they had received about 160 cards and posters. To be able to bring all the gifts they had brought extra suitcases. The women told me they felt responsible for those fans at home. Generally, these absent fans requested their gifts to be left at Neverland or Forest Lawn. As evidence that their contribution had, in fact, reached its chosen destination, the women photographed every single card to send personally to the fans back home.

It is not uncommon for pilgrimages to be undertaken on behalf of others.³¹³ In her research on motorcyclists who make a pilgrimage to the “Wall” in commemoration of the Vietnam war, Dubisch states that the carrying of objects on behalf of others connects communities across America to the destination of the Wall. Similarly, objects may be taken to a pilgrimage place and then back across the country, thus connecting the pilgrimage destination to those back home.³¹⁴ This was also done by the fans. Monica, for example, could not travel in 2018 and 2019 and asked her fellow-fans to “charge” her angel-statue at Neverland and Forest Lawn, thus soaking in the energy that she believes is stored at these sites.

The fans not only brought gifts for Michael. It is a common gesture during Michael Week to give each other Michael-related presents. Through giving and sharing the fans create a feeling of unity among the Michael Week participants. Divina, for instance, handed out red bracelets at

³¹² Anderson makes a similar observation about the female Duran Duran fans in her research whose community atmosphere she describes as “therapeutic”: Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight*, 116.

³¹³ Cf. Dubisch and Winkelman, ‘Introduction: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage’, xxv; Richard C. Martin, ‘Pilgrimage: Muslim Pilgrimage’, in: Lindsay Jones ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2nd ed 1987 edition (Detroit: Macmillan 2005) 7154-7161, 7156. Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2005) 23.

³¹⁴ Dubisch, ‘Heartland of America’, 123.

that when they leave their gifts at Michael-sites there is a good possibility that these might get stolen. The issue of stealing profanes the sacred ideal of humanitarianism – which translates into the fans' focus on love, unity and giving.³¹⁶ I heard fans describe stealing as a “sacrilege”. Another situation that can trigger potential conflict is when (groups of) fans with different perceptions and needs have to share a Michael-site. If there is a discrepancy between pilgrims' motivations, Michael-places can become contested sites. I already gave the example of June 25 as a moment that fans can collide regarding their expectations of the day. Nevertheless, I would typify a situation like June 25 as, what scholar Megan Havard has called, “conflict within *communitas*”, because in spite of the diversity in perceptions, the commemoration is clearly marked by a feeling of unity among fans, who feel “one” in their communal love for Jackson.³¹⁷

My study confirms the findings of the anthropologist Michael Sallnow, who observed that at local shrines in the central Andes different groups of pilgrims maintained their separateness, and never coalesced into a single unified congregation.³¹⁸ I observed that fans who belonged to different fan groups, generally stayed with their group. This was exemplified by an occurrence during Michael Week 2018 when the women of my travel group decided to visit Neverland early so they would have some quiet time with each other and Jackson's energy. Their needs and expectations were contrasted with the unexpected arrival of a group of other fans who put on Jackson's music while settling on the grass to catch up. With the arrival of the new fans, Neverland turned into a contested site because the visitors did not agree on how to use the place.³¹⁹ Those who looked forward to socializing with other fans and celebrating their reunion with Neverland broke the ritual frame of my travel companions, shifting the contemplative atmosphere into a ‘fannish’ festive reunion. I noticed how my travel companions were taken aback by this interruption and found it difficult to shift from their introspection to socializing. I found it interesting to observe that the same group of people with whom my travel group was expecting to socialize with at Holly Terrace, were experienced as intruders when they suddenly appeared at Neverland. Neverland was no longer the right setting to contemplate or perform readings and personal discussions. At the same time, the solemn atmosphere that the women had created and their reluctance to participate in the festivities of the new fans probably also contrasted with the expectations of those who has just arrived, possibly affecting their behavior.

The above example points to the importance of finding the right companions during ‘Michaeling’. Most of the women in this study travel in groups. Often – especially in the beginning – these fans journeyed with people they had only met online. One can imagine that the mix of particular personality traits (and sometimes cultural backgrounds), multiple motivations and different views on how to spend Michael Week make ‘Michaeling’ a potentially conflicting

³¹⁶ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 26, 28

³¹⁷ Havard, ‘When Brother Becomes Other’, 89-90.

³¹⁸ Sallnow, ‘*Communitas Reconsidered: The Sociology of Andean Pilgrimage*’, 176.

³¹⁹ Digance, ‘Pilgrimage at Contested Sites’, 144.

journey. Although I think conflicts *within* travel groups are not unique to ‘Michaeling’, I could barely find any scholarship on interpersonal conflicts within or between pilgrim travel groups. Regarding in-group conflict I found an enlightening study within the field of tourism studies by tourism expert Bente Heimtun and anthropologist Fiona Jordan, who argue that holidays are eminent sites of conflict because it is more difficult to ignore and to escape from interpersonal conflict.³²⁰

On the basis of the stories of the fans in my study and my observations during ‘Michaeling’, I frequently found interpersonal conflicts that influenced group dynamics and decision-making. Fans told me that, especially when traveling with a big group, a lot of time can be wasted on waiting, practicalities, or disagreements about where to go. I even heard stories about entire pilgrimages being ruined because of conflicts of interest within travel groups. Clashing personal habits could also cause annoyance, for example when fans shared a room and one insisted on sleeping with a sleepcast while the other preferred silence. My findings confirm Havard’s observations that differences in personal and group identity may become more deeply inscribed when pilgrims are somehow dependent upon one another.³²¹ This was especially the case regarding transportation. It sometimes happens that someone who had hoped to spend a whole day at Neverland, can only spend a couple of hours there because others want to shop. Iris is an example of a pilgrim who unfortunately picked the wrong travel group two years in a row. Her group did not see eye-to-eye on where to go or how to spend their time. Iris learned from her negative experiences that she has to make clear agreements with fellow travelers before traveling together. Erica and Ava agreed that conflict and disappointment can be avoided by good pre-pilgrimage planning.

Although ‘Michaeling’ can cause irritation and conflict, all fans dread the moment their last day has arrived and they have to leave. In the next and final section of this chapter, I focus on how the fans look back on their ‘Michaeling’-experiences as a confirmation of their way of life.

3.9 Returning home: transformation and reaffirmation

Many of my interlocutors expressed that they return home feeling transformed and inspired. I often heard fans say that after a ‘Michaeling’-journey they felt kinder and more focused on Jackson’s message of love. Their stories illustrate two effects of ‘Michaeling’: (sudden) transformation and (gradual) growth and development. The anthropologist Alan Morinis has stated that:

³²⁰ Bente Heimtun and Fiona Jordan, ‘Wish YOU Weren’t Here!': Interpersonal Conflicts and the Touristic Experiences of Norwegian and British Women Traveling with Friends’, *Tourist Studies* 11:3 (2011) 271-290, 284. Heimtun and Jordan understand ‘in-group’ as tourists holidaying together and ‘relationship-based interpersonal conflict’ as “disagreement with another person’s values or preferences, for instance disagreement about how to spend time together”: page 275.

³²¹ Havard, ‘When Brother Becomes Other’, 89-90.

The return to the everyday is a component of almost every pilgrimage. While the sacred place is the source of power and salvation, it is at home once again that the effects of power are incorporated into life and what salvation is gained is confirmed. The return journey and the reincorporation of the pilgrim into social life are the test of the pilgrimage. Has there been change? Will it last?³²²

Dubisch suggests that transformation is an important part of pilgrimage, whether this be physical, emotional or psychological. She contends that:

at the heart of a pilgrimage (...) is the idea of a journey, and at the heart of the journey is the idea that traveling to a different or special place will bring about a change in one's life, in one's viewpoint, in one's state of being.³²³

Indeed, the fan statements often underlined the transformative power of 'Michaeling'. Page, for instance, called her 'Michaeling'-experiences "life-changing". At the same time, she also pointed to an overall gradual effect of all her pilgrimages, which she called "the opening and expansion of my heart". Many others described 'Michaeling' as highly impactful. The fan statements demonstrate that most women consciously try to hold on to the experience (energy) of their pilgrimage to bring it more fully into their life and the things they do. Especially the fans in my study who self-identify as "disciples" explained that through their hyper-focus – which the format of pilgrimage enables – they could (re)connect with Jackson's energy, which made them feel renewed, empowered and spiritually connected. Afterwards the fans bring this energy back home in the form of a spiritual renewal and souvenirs they collected at a Michael-site. This achievement confirms Victor and Edith Turner's proposition that the returned pilgrim is likely to have grown in piety.³²⁴

The fan accounts demonstrate the adaptability of the ritual of pilgrimage. The women in my study appropriate 'Michaeling' to fit their needs and goal of self-actualization. Dakota is a prime example of this. She summarized her general take-home message as "coming up higher" and "expanding who you think you are". Dakota embraces 'Michaeling' as an opportunity to break free from the structures of "industrialized society" and as a means to find her "own authentic self" and purpose in life. Another example is Hellen who uses her 'Michaeling'-time foremost as a means to "face life", which she described as critically tracking each other's ethical progress within her travel group. This focus on self-improvement was a common take home message among my interviewees.

³²² Alan Morinis, 'Introduction: The Territory of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage', in: Alan Morinis ed., *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (London: Greenwood Press 1992) 1-28, 27.

³²³ Jill Dubisch, 'Vietnam Veterans' Motorcycle Pilgrimage', in: Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman eds., *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 2005) 135-154, 144.

³²⁴ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 15.

The anthropologist Nancy Frey argues that although returned pilgrims may find themselves viewing daily life with different eyes, pilgrimages may just as well be oriented toward renewing or expressing faith and local identity.³²⁵ Indeed, the women's descriptions of 'Michaeling' illustrate that, even though the journey can evoke new insights, the ritual can be seen as a confirmation and continuation of their way of life. Frey contends that the lasting effect of pilgrimage in one's daily life depends on the pilgrim. The scholar has found that many modern-day pilgrims repeat their pilgrimage "to renew the feelings, to meet friends once again, to continue the path of self-discovery, to try new routes, and to revise how the first pilgrimage was made, as well as to avoid the present of their quotidian lives."³²⁶

I recognize Frey's statement in my data. I stated earlier that Erica described the deeper meaning of pilgrimage as "a way of life". I found this sentiment to be widespread in the women's stories. In their own terms, the fans talked about their pilgrimage as an affirmation or incentive of their (ideal) lifestyle. When I spoke to Elena in 2019 at Neverland, we talked about the effect of her first pilgrimage in 2014:

Fardo: what were you hoping for?

Elena: hm... to come and to feel his essence and to bring that essence with me *forever*.

Fardo: (laughs because of Elena's emphasis on forever)

Elena: (laughs) *forever*.

Fardo: did you succeed?

Elena: yes, I think so. There are times when life gets hard. But he is there. Like I said, when my father was in hospital he didn't know where he was, who I was and he looked at my T-shirt and said "that's Michael Jackson, isn't it?" and well he's there. He is saying "don't worry".

Fardo: does he make you feel safe?

Elena: Yes. Safe, protected. Sometimes I hear his voice saying 'you are not alone' (...) I feel he is beside me and sometimes it's just a second that I feel him. I feel his presence. (...) Michael is forever in my life. So, it doesn't matter to me anymore if I go to meetings, I go to, I gather with other fans. It doesn't matter to me anymore. He is inside of me.

Instead of being a tool for transformation, I think 'Michaeling' is mostly a means to start afresh with one's renewed values in mind. The practice feeds into the particular ethical habitus that the

³²⁵ Nancy Frey, 'Stories of the Return: Pilgrimage and Its Aftermaths', in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman eds., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2004) 89-109, 99-100.

³²⁶ Idem, 101-102.

fans have created and build upon because it fosters a focus onto the values that the fans attach to Jackson.³²⁷ This was, for instance, formulated by frequent traveler Brooke. She explained that her reflection at Michael-places, in combination with the sensation of love and peace, make her happy and stimulate her to “continue to work at being a better person”. Many others in my study echoed this effect of ‘Michaeling’.

‘Michaeling’ was also described to me as empowering. I found that the practice contributes to self-growth and confidence which could enhance independence and agency. Jennie, for example, overcame her fear of flying when she took a helicopter flight over Neverland. Similarly, Elena and Monica explained that through ‘Michaeling’ they had broadened their horizon. For both it was the first time they traveled with someone who was not a spouse or family. Looking back on her adventurous pilgrimages, Monica remembers it felt like she was “finally branching out and trying new things.” Likewise, Elena said she felt empowered by traveling alone to Los Angeles away from her family to meet women she had only met online:

I met my husband and we started being together when we were so young. We grew up together. We did *everything* together. That was the first time I traveled without him. So that gave me confidence: I can go abroad, I can get on a plane and for such a long time. I can do it!

‘Michaeling’ thus has the potential to be emancipatory as it gives these women two weeks of Michael-time, which take them away from the demands and structures of daily life – whether this be work, taking care of (grand)children or looking after a dependent partner or parent. The emancipating function of ‘Michaeling’ is nicely illustrated by Lindsey: a woman in her thirties who I met at Forest Lawn in 2019.

³²⁷ Cf. Mahmood, ‘Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, 837-866.

It was the second time that Lindsey flew across the country to visit Forest Lawn to be with Jackson. It turned out that Lindsey had another reason to leave her home; she was having trouble in her marriage. Whilst sitting on the ground next to the Holly Terrace doors, she shared her problems in a small circle of confidants. Lindsey voiced that she hoped for a sign from Jackson, an answer to her dilemmas. She explained that she felt her husband restricted her and did not take her relationship with Jackson seriously. The women encouraged her to centralize her own needs. They agreed that it was an important step for Lindsey to be at Forest Lawn and convinced her that this ‘Michaeling’-journey symbolized a new beginning. She needed to take her insights back home and “face” her husband.

This vignette again demonstrates how, similar to feminist support-groups, the fans use Michael to reflect on their lives and on who they want to be to stand up for themselves. With each other as a sounding board, they stimulate and support each other to put themselves first.

The act of stepping out of one’s accustomed life to be a part of Michael’s world for two weeks gives fans the opportunity to (re)connect with Jackson and others, as well as space to reflect on life back home. Although I certainly see transformation as part of ‘Michaeling’, looking at the fan statements and stories, I rather interpret ‘Michaeling’ as a reaffirmation of a way of life. It enables free expression and validation of identity, hereby reinforcing a sense of self and self-worth. It also gives an incentive to the ideal of living Mike-Like, that throughout the year can become overshadowed by other priorities, like work or family life. The temporary conscious focus on positive, healing love, that Michael Week allows for, not only establishes temporary feelings of connectedness with Jackson and fellow travelers, but affects the fans more profoundly by strengthening their moral focus in daily life. Although the end of Michael Week is always a difficult moment, the women leave with new insights and a renewed bond with Jackson and each other. The inspiration Michael Week has offered them can be tapped into once they return to daily life at home. Furthermore, the women console themselves with the knowledge that it is not a final good-bye. Upon leaving to go home, they already look forward to the next journey. In the meantime, there is the online community for support and Jackson’s music and poetry as vehicles to “bring him in”.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the phenomenon of 'Michaeling' based on my fieldwork during Michael Week 2018 and 2019 and my analysis of the 'Michaeling'-experiences of my 26 interlocutors. Most fans travel during Michael-week; a grassroots event during which all sorts of activities are organized in honor of Jackson. Although fans from all ages – both male and female – visit Michael Week, the women in my study are part of a community of 'habitual pilgrims' in which middle-aged women form the majority. These women travel regularly to Michael Week to visit the same places that have come to feel like "home".

At first sight, fans on a 'Michaeling'-trip might look like tourists; they travel in cars, sleep in hotels and photograph Michael-places. Although tourism and entertainment are certainly a part of the journey, it transpires that 'Michaeling' is more complex and also includes patterns of ritualized behavior, introspection and social activism. Despite the general consensus that Neverland and Forest lawn are the most important places, 'Michaeling' can be understood as a 'linked pilgrimage circuit': there is not one specific goal and according to the fans, Jackson's "magical energy" can also be experienced at places that are not memorial sites. This is reflected in the itinerary of Michael Week which consists of diverse events and places. This does not mean that it is an incohesive journey: Michael Jackson is the glue that binds the different places and events together.

For most of the fans in my study visiting Michael-places started as a way to cope with their loss. Yet, their stories exemplify that their motivation for traveling has shifted over the years. Throughout the years they have slowed down and created more room for introspection and contemplation. Today, it is not so much a 'pilgrimage of loss', as it is a way to connect with Jackson and fellow-fans and to internalize and continue Jackson's humanitarian legacy. As a token of their gratitude and dedication fans leave gifts at Michael-sites, like letters and flowers. In return they collect souvenirs, such as a stone from Neverland or a dried-up rose from Forest Lawn, that are displayed on altars back home. These items physically connect the pilgrim with the powerful Michael-place and thus continue an emotional movement.

One of the reasons why 'Michaeling' is so powerful is that it successfully mediates the energy that the women ascribe to Jackson. Although movement is an inherent feature of 'Michaeling', I would say that the journey is foremost about standing still: the most important thing is to simply be and soak in the peaceful energy that is inherent to these places. Furthermore, the fans borrow the ritual of pilgrimage for their self-development and search for meaning and inspiration in the here and now. Research within the field of pilgrimage studies has shown that these are motives that more generally underlie contemporary pilgrimage. Reader has argued that pilgrimage is an apt ritual to encounter the spiritual on a personal level and provide a way of dealing with

individual needs without commitment to organized traditions. The ritual thus neatly fits the subjective turn, in which people centralize authentic, autonomous self-exploration. Indeed, the liminal time of 'Michaeling', set apart from the chores of ordinary life, forms a period during which the fans can give their undivided attention to commemorate their idol and to reflect on their own self-growth. The fans' take home message can include practical insights about work or relationships, but it can also be about more deep ethical questions, including how to live in love, openness and with attention to others.

Although fans frequently talked about feeling transformed after 'Michaeling' in the sense of feeling (spiritually) renewed, inspired and empowered, I consider 'Michaeling' more an incentive to- and a continuation of a bigger life-ideal of ethical and spiritual growth. In this sense, the ritual is not so much set apart from the ordinary but can be considered intertwined with the fans' day-to-day lives. The repetitiveness of the ritual enforces their ideal to live Mike-Like. This approach to pilgrimage also explains why the fans are not done after one epic journey. In fact, they are never done; as I will show in chapter four, emulating Jackson takes constant effort.

This chapter again demonstrated the importance of the community for the fans' worldview and identity. The women expressed the need to meet other fans to share experiences and commemorate Jackson together. Many stated that this togetherness intensified their 'Michaeling' experience – thus showing the importance of the social for the workings of ritual. Moreover, the trust between fellow fans enables expression and validation of identity, reinforcing a sense of self and self-worth. Sharing experiences and principles also strengthens the fans' common mission to clear Jackson's name and to continue his humanitarian legacy. The fans in this study are motivated to experience a feeling of unity with the larger fan community. Moreover, 'Michaeling' is connected to the fans' wish to contribute to making the world a better place, the ritual is thus focused on a common good. As I will show in the next chapter, this finding defies the individualization-thesis that is commonly found in research on SBNRs. The women's focus on community is enforced by their fandom, together they are part of the same group, a membership that has only grown in importance since public's opinion of Jackson has shifted. In their description of Michael Week, the fans spoke about feeling one without conflict or rivalry. My observations partly confirm this. Michaeling', however, is not only bliss. Michael-places can become contested sites when pilgrims with different motivations and intentions meet. Furthermore, tensions might arise due to differences within the fan community regarding the interpretation of Jackson's ideology.

The stories of the women in this study show how they build on their never-ending journey. Each year life presents itself with new challenges and 'Michaeling' is adapted to fit the fans' individual needs. Simultaneously, 'Michaeling' gives an incentive to an idealized lifestyle that is aimed at internalizing Jackson's messages of love, unity and social activism. Through Michael

Week the pilgrims stimulate each other to be mindful of helping others and they express Mike-Like behavior through raising money for social causes that echo the concerns that they attach to Jackson. The publication of the documentary *Leaving Neverland* has intensified the contrast between fans and non-fans. The film even resulted in the loss of friendships and disputes within families. This has increased both the social and activist function of 'Michaeling'. More than ever Michael Week 2019 was a way to honor Jackson publicly and to show the world that the King of Pop was a good man. The fans regard the documentary as proof that there is still a lot of work to do on their part to defend Jackson and his legacy. And so they square their shoulders, because Jackson has taught them that together they can change the world.

Having presented the concrete case studies of the MLP, MJ's LEGACY and Michael Week, I want to use the next chapter to give more insight into the context that has enabled these expressions of a flux of faith and fandom. Chapter four will more closely consider the life stories of the 26 female MJ-pilgrims who were central in this chapter. I will explore how these women have come to incorporate their fandom of Michael Jackson in their worldview. The majority of the women in this study self-identifies as "Spiritual but not Religious" (SBNR). I will outline what they mean when they use this sentence and how their approach to spirituality and Jackson fits the 'modern subjective turn' that scholars of contemporary religion trace, especially in North-America and Western Europe. The next chapter starts with the story of Ava, one of the fans who self-identifies as SBNR and articulately described her lifelong search for an intimate relationship with the divine, which culminated in her awakening to Jackson.

CHAPTER 4

“What would Michael do?”
The worldviews and fandom
of female MJ-pilgrims

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear

Ava is a fifty-year old artist who lives with her husband and dogs in a rural area just outside a big town in North America. In our conversations, she systematically distinguished her narrative between her life “before Michael” and her life “after Michael”. Until she was 39, Ava’s life story is marked by a striving for autonomy and a successful career. Her “awakening to Michael” in 2009 changed her perspective on life and marks a turning point in her biography. Since Jackson has entered her life, her main goal is to become the most loving person she can be and she approaches all events in her life as potential opportunities to get there. Jackson is her spiritual guide who personifies wisdom and a closeness to God to her. He fits in well with her pursuit to understand the world better and to become enlightened.

Ava looks back on a stable and happy childhood. Born in England, her family emigrated to North-America when she was two years old. In the next decade they would move about ten times. Although her Catholic parents kept her and her sister away from religion – which they had experienced as “very rigid and abusive” – Ava recalls to have always been “a spiritual person”. She attended church with friends and, as she got older, went to a church of her own choice. Despite the fact that she enjoyed attending services, Ava explained that she did not feel a close relationship with God and found it difficult to understand some of the Christian teachings. Nevertheless, she “followed the rules” by reading the Bible and looking for Jesus. “I thought that was where I was supposed to look”, she explained.

When she was 13 years old, Jackson’s *Thriller* album was released and Ava has been an MJ-fan ever since. She appreciated Jackson’s “musical genius” and the way he did not follow the crowd. Ava also felt “a little bit different than anybody else”. She characterized her teen-self as: short-tempered, withdrawn, gentle, and shy, with a love for animals and nature, but a distrust for people. An important life event happened at age 19, when Ava moved to the other side of the country for work. It was a new beginning away from her family and friends. Reflecting on the impact of this decision, she explained how her moving away resulted in not having an adult relationship with her mother for many years. Although she regrets this, her decision brought her together with the man she would marry and it gave her the opportunity to start her own business.

In 2009, Ava watched the documentary *This Is It*. At the time, she lived a successful life; she was happily married and ran a profitable company. Nevertheless, she had never stopped seeking an intimate relationship with God. “You know the saying ‘when the student is ready the teacher will appear?’”, she asked, “that’s what happened (upon seeing *This Is It*, FE)”.

Ava called her awakening the biggest turning point in her life. It changed her entire view on her day-to-day life thus far, which she described in retrospect as “going through the motions”. Ava explained that she saw God in the face of Jackson. It was precisely the connection she had always longed for and she “finally felt a part of something bigger”. Although thrilled by her discovery, Ava also felt utterly confused. Ever since her youth she had focused on the Christian teachings, expecting to find a personal relation with God in Jesus. Her unanticipated connection to Jackson stimulated her to study him to make sense out of her feelings.

In her search for answers, Ava found out more about the artist’s humanitarian efforts and realized that: “Michael dedicated his life to healing and helping others. He used his art as a platform to awaken us to the state of our planet, to inspire us to believe in ourselves and one another, and to teach us about oneness and the importance of love.” During her study of the King of Pop, Ava unexpectedly started to mourn, which she experienced as inappropriate because she had not known him personally. Today, she interprets her grief as “sublime pain” caused by “a proximity to God”. “I always say ‘I did not know God until I knew Michael’”, she narrated. Ava does not separate the artist from God, she commented: “Is he a messenger, is he an angel, a God incarnate? It doesn’t matter because I don’t have any religious hang-ups. I can just say my experience from God comes from Michael. That’s all I need to know.”

Even though she expressed feeling grateful for her epiphany, it has not always been easy. The people in her immediate social circle were at first concerned about her apparent obsession with a celebrity and she even lost a couple of friends. Since nobody in her environment shared her experience, Ava has felt “very alone” and even questioned her sanity. Luckily, she found people on social media who voiced parallel stories and confirmed her experience. Once her friends and family saw the changes in her, they became accepting. Ava is convinced that because of her awakening she has become a better person. Her spiritual journey also triggered deep conversations between her and her mother, which resulted in a “very close” bond during the last two years of her mum’s life. She expressed feeling guilty for not having been kinder as a teenager and then growing more distant when moving to the other side of the country. Now, she has “the peace of mind of knowing that we had a loving relationship”. “So he saved my life”, she said, referring to Jackson.

In our conversations, Ava kept returning to the ideal of self-growth. She explained how, with Jackson as her teacher, she has expanded her capacity to love and trust. Ava reads from *Dancing the Dream* every day. Whenever she does so, she thinks about how it applies

to her life or to what she needs to work on: “It is scripture to me. I can read the same poem and get something completely different from it.” Reflecting on her “inner work” also increased her tolerance and compassion for others, which made her feel less separate from other people. Jackson gave Ava “inner peace”, which she described as “feeling safe” and “strong”. Not under the delusion that nothing can ever happen, but that whatever happens is right. Because of this “underlying foundation”, Ava feels more capable of handling life, including traumatic events such as her mother’s death: “Not because he just miraculously came into my life, but because of the work that he’s inspired in my own self.”

Because her outlook on life changed, Ava’s everyday life has also transformed. Jackson pushes her “outside of her box” and stimulates her to become “the best human being” she can be. Ava quit her business and, although she never painted, started to focus full-time on creating art. Painting portraits of Jackson is an important way for her to connect to him and “expand”. Ava believes Jackson used his art as a channel to God and hopes that likewise her art can be a place where people can have a spiritual experience with Jackson. She furthermore creates awareness of him through social media and pilgrimage. But foremost, Ava “pays Michael’s love forward” by emulating him in her everyday behavior. She tries to bring the artist “into everything” by always being loving and conscious of others, which includes doing charity work and appreciating the earth and the environment. Living Michael-like, however, takes daily effort and is a continuous process. She admitted how, at first, she “did not feel it”. But gradually she altered herself based on her desire and conscious behavior: “I would be loving, I would act it out and my heart changed eventually.” Ava’s ideal is for the world to be transformed like she was, which is why she feels responsible to live Jackson’s message. “I just live my life for him”, she said, “because it’s all I can do. It’s the way I serve”.

Introduction

Ava is one of the 26 women whose voices are central in this chapter. I will reflect on their fandom and worldviews and how their interpretation of Jackson influences their lives. Twenty-three of my interlocutors have gone through an “awakening” to Jackson, which most interpreted as a spiritual experience. They have jobs, families and most were just as surprised by their sudden awakening to Jackson as the people in their environment. In Ava’s case, the Christian teachings on which she had focused since her childhood could not explain her mystical connection to Jackson when she saw *This is It*. Like Ava, many fans tried to make sense of their grief – and sometimes mystical experience – which they could not always untangle with their former frames of reference.

The women frequently described a period of “complete obsession” with Jackson right after his passing. Ten years later, their mono-focus has gradually made way for a lifestyle that incorporates the popstar in their daily lives. This chapter zooms in on the experiences of these women who, in one way or another, are on a journey with Jackson and who were willing to share their stories about this journey with me. ‘Identification’ is an important etic concept in this chapter. The multidimensional Michael Jackson, with his career spanning four decades, invites fans to select and construct their own “Michael”, thus influencing the role he plays in their life story. For lifelong fans like Ava, there sometimes have been multiple Michaels who have played different roles at different times.

The majority of the women who feature in this chapter is North-American (19). Many of them grew up in middle-class households in the late 1960s and 1970s and were brought up in mainstream religious traditions – mostly Christianity. Today, most of my interviewees find that the category of spirituality gives them more freedom to express themselves. Throughout their stories, I observed a strong wish for autonomy, authenticity and self-actualization. The connection of Jackson to the supernatural is another remarkable feature in many of their reports. This chapter will demonstrate how the fans are influenced by the subjective turn and the ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’-movement (which I will shorten from now on to SBNR for the sake of convenience). I argue that these societal trends, in combination with the fans’ strong identification with Jackson, have made them receptive to follow Michael Jackson as a charismatic ethical leader – thus bringing forth an exciting mix of fandom and faith.

This chapter follows the approach of historian of religion Andrew Crome, who suggests to study the synthesis of faith and fandom. This translates into exploring the ways in which faith is used in individual fandom and analyzing how fandom serves as a resource for the construction of faith identity.³²⁸ I will argue that the SBNR-worldview offers a fruitful ground to incorporate Jackson as an inspirational teacher. I will also address how the women’s fan attachment has impacted their self-understanding and how they use their interpretation of the artist to nurture

³²⁸ Crome, ‘Reconsidering religion and fandom’, 400-401, 414.

confidence and agency. Although the women in this study generally did not use the term conversion, they would frequently refer to their (re)discovery of Jackson as “transformational” and often came up with similar awakening-stories. In this sense, as an etic concept, ‘conversion’ is useful to make sense of the fans’ change of heart. Anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk notes how, in the process of telling and retelling conversion experiences, a particular narrative model develops both at the individual and group level. Following Van Nieuwkerk’s approach to the analysis of such conversion stories, this chapter will unravel the following two issues: 1. the meaningfulness of the awakening for the fans’ identity, worldview and belonging and what made them susceptible to following Jackson; 2. the factors that explain why the fans chose Jackson as their particular solution and how they make his message(s) specifically meaningful for their life story.³²⁹

Before I present the fans’ appropriation of Jackson, I will first outline what makes Michael Jackson an apt popstar to be adopted as a personal mentor. The next section discusses some of the more common ways in which the fans depict Jackson, including some topics they choose not to address – such as his sexuality and skin color.

4.1 Many Michaels

With a career spanning four decades and ever changing looks, there are many ways to remember Michael Jackson. His body is one of the most photographed and videotaped in history and his physical appearance has been much debated both during and after his life.³³⁰ Scholar of literature Willa Stillwater argues that Jackson is so suitable for many different interpretations because he consciously represented his face as a “blank screen” over and over again: “our minds filled in the absence with the labels we ourselves imposed on him based on our own particular interpretation of his life: pedophile, victim, icon, freak, Wacko Jacko, genius.”³³¹ Especially now that Jackson is dead, fans can choose themselves how to remember him. According to the women in this study, there is power in Jackson’s multidimensionality. They described it as one of the reasons that accounts for his universal audience. “Without the benefit of internet, Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook (he) built a World-wide following of Millions of fans”, said Reese. Quite a few of my interlocutors presented Jackson’s fluid identity as proof of his divine nature. Vivian, for instance, thinks God had a special soul-plan for Jackson:

³²⁹ Karin van Nieuwkerk, ‘Introduction: Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West’, in: Karin van Nieuwkerk ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2006) 1-16, 4, 10-11.

³³⁰ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance*, 210.

³³¹ Willa Stillwater, *M Poetica: Michael Jackson’s Art of Connection and Defiance* (Kindle Edition 2013) 1691-1699.

He was not black, he was not white, he was not man, he was not woman, he was all in one. Also his sexuality. He was indefinable and was able to address a large audience to get his message across.

Besides referring to the popstar's versatility to explain his extraordinary nature, many used his ambiguous presentation to their own advantage. I noticed a high level of subjectivism and identification in the fan accounts; each fan had her own way of envisioning Jackson, which usually corresponded with her individual appearance, self-interpretation and personal narrative.³³² It struck me that the women often projected their own needs and struggles onto the 'blank slate' of Michael Jackson, as well as the ideals they wanted to develop in themselves. The fans gave him different roles in their lives, including that of teacher, messenger, humanist, and friend. Many of these roles facilitate both individual accomplishments and relationships and can be related to certain sacred values in the fans' lives like autonomy, self-improvement, love, unity and compassion.

Apart from being drawn to a particular Michael, there were also similarities in how the fans typified Jackson. All described him as pure, innocent and gentle-spirited, which they see reflected in his ideal of healing the world with love. In addition to lauding the artist's character, many spoke appreciatively of his appearance, calling him “angelic” and “beautiful”. With his soft voice, long hair, make-up and cosmetic surgery Jackson displayed what in Western societies are considered traditional feminine traits. The (sexual) appeal of androgyny is demonstrated by the attraction of boybands and pop idols like Justin Bieber. Media and culture expert John Izod characterizes the stereotypical interpretation of the alluring androgynous pop star as follows:

The androgynous star, whether David Bowie, Annie Lennox or Boy George (...) has an image that displays male and female sexual characteristics with dual emphasis. It is sometimes argued that s/he projects an unthreatening sexuality because of these features. Young girls in particular are said to be able to identify with the androgyne before they attain their own full sexual maturity.³³³

In her discussion of androgynous K-pop male performers, expert of performance studies Chuyun Oh also postulates that it is the combination of masculinity and vulnerability that is sexually appealing to women, because it allows them to “re-imagine, dream and create a wide range of sexual orientations, fantasy and relationships with alternative masculinity that would not be

³³² It is common for (celebrity) fans to identify with their objects of fandom. Anderson observed how Duran Duran fans tend to form strong identifications with particular band members and also attempt to emulate them, for example regarding political philosophies: Tonya Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight: Lifelong Pop Music Fandom* (Doctoral Thesis University of Sunderland 2012) 93-95.

³³³ John Izod, 'Androgyny and Stardom: Cultural Meanings of Michael Jackson', *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 14:3 (1995) 63-74, 63.

possible within the structure of heteronormative white masculinity.”³³⁴

By defining Jackson as feminine, my interviewees characterized him as safe and approachable. However, unlike the suggestions of Izod and Oh, their stories do not point in the direction of a connection between androgyny and sexual attractiveness. In fact, the majority of the fans explicitly stated not to think of Jackson in a sexual manner, instead underlining his shy nature. What is more, they approach his child-like spirit as an ideal state of mind and sometimes as a gateway to divinity. When I addressed the artist’s provocative stage performance, the women often separated “Michael the artist” from “Michael the person” and interpreted Jackson’s sexual performance on stage as a sign of good showmanship. The fans’ near silence on the topic of Jackson’s sexuality may be related to the problematic and persistent portrayal of female fans as “groupies”.³³⁵ Their stress on Jackson’s purity and modesty could also be a tactic to steer attention away from suspicion due to the allegations of sexual child abuse.³³⁶

Sexuality was not the only topic that was off limits in my conversations with the women. Jackson’s skin color was similarly hardly ever referred to. Although some described Jackson as an African-American, many stated that they “did not see color” or claimed that Jackson transcended race. Professor of American Studies and Art History Nicole Fleetwood explains how some people understand Jackson’s “transraciality” to mean his crossover status and his universal success at the peak of his career. Fleetwood continues that others approach it in terms of a broader boundary crossing that:

moves beyond race and gender and moves the icon into the realm of the nonhuman, either as one so innocent and vulnerable that he was not accustomed to social norms or as one whose sense of risk-taking imagined life and possibilities outside of the strictures and norms of human life.³³⁷

Fleetwood’s categorization is in line with how most women who participated in my research depicted Jackson. I would argue however, that there is more to the women’s avoidance of the topic of skin color.

Most women in the group – including myself – are white and middle class. Many were brought up in segregated communities; only a few fans remember having colored friends in school. I would contend that the social background of these women and their whiteness grants them the privilege not to have to think much about how race and racism shaped their own lives

³³⁴ Chuyun Oh, ‘Queering Spectatorship in K-pop: Androgynous ‘Flower Boys’ and Western Female Fandom’, *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3:1 (2015) 59-78, 74. Cf. Gayle Ward, “‘I Want It That Way’: Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands’, *Genders* 35 (2002).

³³⁵ Hill, *Gender, Metal and the Media*, 83, 85.

³³⁶ Vivian was the only one who avowed that she has fantasized about an amorous relationship with Jackson, but she consequently emphasized the deeper, “higher”, love she feels for him, which she connects to a spiritual union.

³³⁷ Fleetwood, *Troubling vision*, 212.

or that of Jackson.³³⁸ Since whiteness is often the norm, race is visible most clearly to those the norm definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence.³³⁹ This also comes to the fore in the women’s approach to the message in Jackson’s music. Even though Jackson directly addressed racial equality in his art by underscoring the importance of unity, most of my interlocutors did not interpret unity in a political way. Instead, the majority of fans approached the ideal of unity as a spiritual, pantheistic, state of mind.

Fueling the women’s hesitance to address Jackson’s skin color might well be the politically ‘correct’ dominant discourse of color evasiveness in the West. Sociologist Ruth Frankenberg defines color-blindness as a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not “see” or at any rate not to acknowledge racial differences. Frankenberg, however, notes that this color evasion actually involves a selective engagement with difference, rather than no engagement at all.³⁴⁰ The ideology of color-blindness leaves little space for socially sanctioned speech about race-related matters.³⁴¹ Indeed, I experienced awkwardness myself and found it difficult to introduce the topic without triggering the response “I am not a racist”. However, there were also fan statements that revealed that their fandom of Jackson had inspired ‘race cognizance’: the notion that race makes a difference in people’s lives and that racism makes a difference in society.³⁴² Page, for instance, explained how her awakening to Jackson has expanded her view “beyond the United States, beyond my own race, religion and species”. This expansion has made her feel “more connected to all people”, “more sensitive” and more “humble”.

The fans’ investment in and reflections on their own life story and their wish to find their inner voice and purpose can be understood from what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called “the massive subjective turn”: “a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.”³⁴³ This shift in modern culture towards an expressive culture values what is considered an authentic, autonomous self and centers on someone’s own choices, individualism, and self-actualization.³⁴⁴ Part of the subjective turn is, what Taylor calls, ‘the ethics of authenticity’; people are called upon to self-explore in order to find their own unique purpose.

³³⁸ This was confirmed by the narrative of an African-American fan, whose story I did not include in this research because she passed away before this study. In her story, she addresses how empowering it was for her as a little girl to hear Jackson say to the black community “you are able, you have value”. She called Michael an “African American hero for those of us who lived in a world with no visible hope. Michael had the effect of Martin Luther King, and other civil rights leaders.”

³³⁹ Cf. Ruth, Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993) 228-229.

³⁴⁰ Idem, 147-148.

³⁴¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2014) 103.

³⁴² Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 159.

³⁴³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991) 26.

³⁴⁴ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell 2005) 2, 95. Maslow understands self-actualization as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming”: Abraham H. Maslow, ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’, *Psychological Review* 50:4 (1943) 370-396, 383.

Taylor describes this moral ideal – together with its goals of self-fulfillment and self-realization – as something relatively new and specific to modern culture.

4.2 The Subjective Turn and being “Spiritual But Not Religious”

People used to have little say in their way of life or values, which were to a large extent dictated by external authorities, like religion, family, or traditional laws. Taylor attributes the subjective turn to a breaking free by modern people from subservience to such older moral views. Contemporary people model their life and morality on their inner convictions. The realization of one’s own originality – the view that every human being has something of their own to say – elevates the importance of discovering and articulating one’s ‘true’ identity. This, Taylor argues, has become the whole point of life.³⁴⁵ It is precisely this take on life that I recognize in the statements of many of my research participants. Ava, for instance, stated: “You don’t need people to give you rules because your ethical decisions are inside of you”. Just like Taylor points out, Ava stressed that people have a *responsibility* to explore and develop their unique identity because it is the essence of life.

The ethics of authenticity implies a conception of freedom that leaves little space for the demands of traditional forms of religion which request adherence to a higher authority (God) and ask people to subject themselves to some higher good.³⁴⁶ As Woodhead and the anthropologist/sociologist Paul Heelas have demonstrated, instead the subjective turn “favors forms of religion and spirituality which promise to put people in touch with their inner wisdom”.³⁴⁷ Indeed, one manifestation of the subjective turn is the rise of people who profess to be “Spiritual but not Religious”. Generally, these people associate the word religion with an institution, while spirituality points to something personal.³⁴⁸ The majority of the fans in my study belongs to this – still growing – category. The SBNR-trend can be traced particularly in the United States, Canada and Western-Europe where scholars of religion have observed a decline of churchgoing from the 1960s onwards, together with a growing number of people who refuse to self-identify

³⁴⁵ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 3, 17, 25-29, 81. Cf. Woodhead, ‘Sex and Secularization’, 239.

³⁴⁶ Linda Woodhead, ‘Trends in Church Life: The Spiritual Revolution, Theology in Scotland 7:2 (2005); 5-22, 8. Cf. Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, ‘Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47:2 (2008) 259-276, 264; Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons 2009) 38.

³⁴⁷ Woodhead, ‘Sex and Secularization’, 239.

³⁴⁸ Harvard Divinity School, ‘The Future of ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ Public Panel’ (April 13 2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=0g2SSczJ_XI (accessed 29 April 2020).

as belonging to (only) an established religion.³⁴⁹ The SBNR-group is commonly characterized as turning away from scripture, ritual, and participation in traditional communal organizations. Theologian Linda Mercadante has argued that because of their anti-institutional bend, SBNRs do not have a vehicle – like organized religion has – to act on their social active stance.³⁵⁰ Instead, SBNRs tend to favor individualism, inwardness, free exploration, and immediate spiritual experiences. Additionally, SBNR-people on the whole tend to be pantheistic/monistic in outlook and have an interest in Eastern philosophies.³⁵¹

Recent surveys in America have shown that “at least 18% (and some have it closer to 30%) of the current U.S. population confesses to being SBNR.”³⁵² Kripal, Mercadante and the scholar of religion Robert Fuller interpret the SBNR-motto as a boundary setting activity; the people who use the phrase SBNR often simply want nothing to do with religion. Absolute authority seems to be one of the greatest bottlenecks. Based on interviews with 100 people who self-identified as SBNR across the United States, Mercadante notes that all her respondents rejected the idea of an “inscrutable God” that they felt Christianity presented and nearly all hesitated or completely avoided using the word God.³⁵³ Research indicates that in the West, women in general take the lead in creating new forms of spirituality. According to sociologists Tony Walter and Grace Davie this is because “women have been particularly subject to the male authority of churches.”³⁵⁴ Woodhead and Eeva Sointu connect the appeal of spirituality for women to self-empowerment because it offers them “a means of negotiating contemporary dilemmas of selfhood, including the contradiction between “living for others” and forging “a life of one’s own”.”³⁵⁵

The vast majority of my interlocutors grew up in Christian families. Four fans were raised unchurched. Zoe, Nicole and Jennie did not provide their religious background, but they did

³⁴⁹ Cf. Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*; Woodhead, ‘Sex and Secularization’, 239; Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe, ‘Introduction: Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality’, in: Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe eds., *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (New York; London: Routledge 2013) 1-27, 2; William B. Parsons ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* (Taylor & Francis Group 2018); Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford Scholarship Online University Press 2014).

³⁵⁰ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 238.

³⁵¹ Robert C. Fuller and William B. Parsons, ‘Spiritual but Not Religious: a brief introduction’, in: William B. Parsons ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2018) 13-28, 22; Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 12; William B. Parsons, ‘Introduction: Framing the volume’, in: William B. Parsons ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2018) 1-11, 1-2.

³⁵² Parsons, ‘Introduction: Framing the volume’, 1. According to theologian Linda Mercadante these SBNRs now outnumber even the largest Protestant denominations in America: Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 2.

³⁵³ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 115-117. Cf. Parsons, ‘Introduction: Framing the volume’, 1. Already in the nineties, sociologist Mark Chaves pointed out that in the USA there was not so much a decline in religion as much as a declining scope of religious authority. See: Mark Chaves, ‘Secularization as Declining Religious Authority’, *Social Forces* 72:3 (1994) 749-774, 750.

³⁵⁴ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2011) 58. Quote of Tony Walter and Grace Davie, ‘The Religiosity of Women in the Modern West’, *British Journal of Sociology* 49:4 (1998) 640-660, 656.

³⁵⁵ Sointu and Woodhead, ‘Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood’, 268.

attribute a spiritual dimension to Jackson. At the time of my research, four fans self-identified as Christian. Their dedication to one religion stands out within the group, in which twenty-two described themselves as “spiritual”, six of whom currently also practice a faith. I recognize many of the above mentioned SBNR-characteristics in those within my research group who identify as “spiritual”. Generally, these women reported a distrust of institutionalized religion – usually implying Christianity – because of its prescriptive nature, patriarchy, hypocrisy and dogma. Corresponding with Mercadante’s findings, these women also opposed the theological concept of sin, instead stressing that humans are inherently good. The fans’ common understanding of spirituality centered on a wish for direct, autonomous contact with the divine and was often equated with freedom, exploration and self-growth. Nonetheless, I would typify the women’s belief system as inherently social; they gather in collective rituals and form communities – as was already demonstrated by the previous three chapters. Thus my findings confirm the critical observation of sociologist Hubert Knoblauch who has argued that spirituality need not necessarily be individualistic.³⁵⁶ The same has been argued by the anthropologist Hillary Kaell who concludes, based on her ethnographic study of the experiences of American pilgrims who travel to the Holy Land, that:

They describe the trip as a choice undertaken to enhance their own relationship with Jesus. However, almost all of them also see themselves as the spiritual center of a web of relationships at home. In other words, as in American religion broadly, individualism is misunderstood if it is viewed in opposition to collectivity.³⁵⁷

The fan accounts illustrate the evolution of the fans’ worldviews. Monica and Sandra, for example, were respectively raised as Catholic and Methodist but explained how they have distanced themselves from Christianity since. Monica now identifies as spiritual and claims to never set foot in a church again because of her disillusionment with the hypocrisy of her former fellow churchgoers. Nevertheless, she still believes there is a God. It is her *way* to God that has changed, from attending church to following Michael Jackson. Sandra, on the other hand, still feels drawn to churches and also continues to call herself “Catholic”. However, she emphasized that at heart she feels closest to a “Pantheist/Animist”. She connected her spiritual change to growing older and going to college. The examples of Sandra and Monica agree with Woodhead’s contention that most modern people today:

³⁵⁶ Hubert Knoblauch, ‘Popular Spirituality’, in: Elisabeth Hense, Frans P.M. Jespers and Peter J.A. Nissen eds., *Present-day Spiritualities: Contrasts and Overlaps* (Leiden: Brill 2014) 81-102, 85. For this reason, Knoblauch rather speaks of “subjectivism” instead of individualism in connection to spirituality.

³⁵⁷ Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: New York University Press 2014) 204. Kaell here refers to: Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: the story of a late-twentieth-century awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001) 13.

do not necessarily become atheists, or abandon the belief that there are things beyond this life which give it meaning. Most do not abandon all aspects of their inherited religions to become neatly and hygienically secular.³⁵⁸

Fans frequently give their own twist to practices and beliefs – often borrowing from multiple religions and philosophies – that for them simply work. Fuller and Parsons call this ‘combinativeness’: the ability “to synthesize beliefs and practices that tradition-bound theologians deem incompatible.”³⁵⁹ A case in point concern those fans in my study who assume there to be a heaven while also keeping an open mind towards the possibility of reincarnation – thus merging a Christian interpretation of an afterlife with Eastern philosophies. The women did not appear to struggle with such theoretical inconsistencies.

My observations tie in well with the findings of Walter and Davie that spirituality is appealing to women because it is a counterresponse to the patriarchy in religion. Miranda, for example, stated that she already rejected the Catholic church and religion by the time she was eight-years old because she deemed it “too male-oriented”. The fans’ aversion to patriarchy and authority is also reflected in their approach to God. Hardly any of the SBNRs interpreted God as a punishing anthropomorphic entity, instead conflating God with the cosmos or a “life force”. Contrary to Mercadante’s interviewees, the fans in my study rarely had trouble with using the word God or Jesus for that matter. This confirms the thesis that SBNR is often a rhetoric that is not necessarily confirmed in people’s everyday lives. My analysis indicates that most of my interlocutors were not so much bothered by religion as such; for them the problem seemed to be mostly with the exclusivist truth-claims in institutional religion. Sophie, for example, admires Jesus’ original teachings but opposes “the church” which she connected to hierarchy, hypocrisy, and rules. Elena articulated a sentiment that I noted among many of my interlocutors. When I asked her to clarify the difference between religion and spirituality, she explained that spirituality is about authenticity: “to explore and listen to your inner voice”. She set her ideal of free exploration against the dogma that she associates with religion: “religion is jail”, she said, “it is about rules and orders”.

The fan accounts demonstrate how worldviews are embedded and negotiated. The women’s stress on autonomy, free exploration and expressivism shows us the influence of the subjective turn as identified by Taylor. I also recognize Taylor’s argument about an ethics of authenticity in the women’s stories; many of my interlocutors expressed the wish to find their inner voice and to live “authentically” whatever this may mean for that person. Most fans in my study identify

³⁵⁸ Woodhead, ‘Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-differentiation: the British Example’, 45.

³⁵⁹ Fuller and Parsons, ‘Spiritual but Not Religious: A Brief Introduction’, 20. Cf. Peter L. Berger, ‘Secularization and de-secularization’, in: Linda Woodhead et al., *Religions in the Modern World. Traditions and Transformations* (Routledge 2002) 291-298, 295.

as SBNR, but their stories show that their current take on the world is informed by the belief system that they were brought up in. In spite of the women's appreciation of freedom and their aversion to authority, all loyally follow the teachings of Jackson. The fans set him apart from other entertainers in that they attribute to him an innate magnetic (sometimes healing) energy. In doing so, I argue that they ascribe a charismatic leadership to Jackson. In the next section, I will explain how the women's approach to Jackson can be understood as a response to the subjective turn.

4.3 Michael and charisma: power, controversy and innocence

In a Western context, the interpretation of 'charisma' as an extraordinary quality that certain individuals possess brings us back to the New Testament writings of Paul, who referred to something like charisma as "the gift of God's grace".³⁶⁰ The most popular contemporary meaning of charisma, however, is rooted in Weber's re-conceptualization of the term. Weber defined charisma as "a certain quality of an individual's personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."³⁶¹ In his analysis of charisma and celebrity, media expert John Potts widens Weber's notion of charismatic leadership – connected to religious and political leaders – to include a wide range of special individuals who are thought to have a "magnetic" personality, including entertainers and celebrities. According to Potts an individual can be made into a celebrity, but charisma cannot be manufactured. It is a 'genuine quality' and thus the rare performer who has charisma 'transcends celebrity'.³⁶²

The statements of the fans in this study are in agreement with Pott's distinction. Many linked Jackson's special aura to authenticity and spoke of his qualities as innate. The women furthermore distinguished Jackson from other entertainers because of his "God-given talents" and his special energy that, they argue, emanates directly from Jackson. Many also attributed Jackson's uniqueness to his charitable work. Zoe, for instance, pointed to how Jackson donated all the money he made on the *Victory* and *Dangerous* tours to charity: "What other famous person has ever done that?!", she rhetorically asked. Because of what they perceived as his pure and powerful energy, some fans argued that Jackson could heal. Stories about miracles circulate in the fan community about how the King of Pop cured fans from cancer. Others, like Hellen, expressed that, as a spiritual master, Jackson gives people the tools to heal themselves. Although

³⁶⁰ John Potts, *A History of Charisma* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009) 23.

³⁶¹ Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building. Selected Papers, Edited with an introduction by S.N. Eisenstadt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968) xviii.

³⁶² Potts, *A History of Charisma*, 2, 178, 215.

the average meaning of charisma no longer refers to a ‘spiritual gift’, the fans’ description of Jackson’s healing energy and his talent as “God-given” resonates with the description of “the gift of God’s grace” in Paul’s biblical writings.

An integral aspect of charisma is that it is most powerfully experienced directly in “a live environment”.³⁶³ This also came to the fore in the accounts of my interlocutors. “He was so pure”, remarked Vivian, “people always said “when you were near him, you experienced such love that you could only fall on your knees and be moved to tears.” Although most fans did not use the word charisma, the way they described Jackson’s “magnetic aura” is reminiscent of the concept. The women are not alone in their observation. In his description of the King of Pop, cultural critic Joseph Vogel echoes the fans’ characterization: “From producers to assistant engineers to fellow musicians, they described him as possessing a certain “aura.””³⁶⁴ Those of my interlocutors who had seen Jackson in concert, described how he “emanated a great power” on stage. “There was an energy like no other present”, said Hellen, “people were allowed to swim in it and be forever changed. Not just changed because it was the greatest concert ever, (but, FE) forever changed.” Nevertheless, fans who had never seen Jackson perform themselves, were equally able to experience his mediated charisma, for example through television. Sophie recalled being blown away when she watched the *Dangerous* concert:

I had never seen anything to compare to the raw energy that man emitted on a stage!
And I’m not talking just about the energy he expended, I’m talking about the energy he transmitted – through a television screen half a world away by live broadcast.

Rather than considering charisma a quality that emanates directly from a special person, anthropologists conceive of charisma as being necessarily relational: its power comes from a particular bond between a leader and his/her followers and the charismatic leadership depends on the loyalty of those who set that person apart as special or holy. Whether charismatic figures indeed possess those qualities is not the point. What is at stake is that others attribute these to them and subsequently conceive of them as a leader.³⁶⁵ According to Weber, a charismatic leader arises in time of need.³⁶⁶ People have to be receptive for a certain message of a charismatic leader and looking for someone to give direction.

³⁶³ Idem, 181.

³⁶⁴ Vogel, *The Man in the Music*, 12.

³⁶⁵ Mirjam de Baar, ‘Charismatisch spiritueel leiderschap: Antoinette Bourignon en Jomanda’, in: Marcel Becker ed., *Charisma: De Fascinatie van Leiders* (Nijmegen: Damon 2006) 48-67, 50-51; Kripal, *Comparing Religions* 213. Cf. Yme Kuiper, ‘Charismatisch leiderschap: Van Lou de Palingboer tot Barack Obama’, in: Justin Kroesen, Yme Kuiper en Pieter Nanninga eds., *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland: Observaties en Interpretaties* (Assen: Van Gorcum 2010) 101-109, 106.

³⁶⁶ Weber has argued that “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political stress” individuals may turn to a leader: Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Taylor & Francis Group translation by H. H. Gerth and Wright Mills (London; New York: Routledge 2009) 245.

In a socio-cultural environment that emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-exploration, it seems counterintuitive for a person to voluntarily subject herself to the teachings of a pop idol. Yet, according to the sociologist of religion Henk Tieleman it is perhaps precisely individual freedom that makes people yearn for something outside the self. He sees this desire rooted in an inability to create a personal story about politics, faith, ideals, and a way of life.³⁶⁷ Historian Mirjam de Baar states that to understand why a group of people believes or follows a certain charismatic person we need to look at the context-specific process of how the public that is addressed actively appropriates the delivered message and accepts it as meaningful.³⁶⁸ In pluriform societies, where many different values and needs coexist, inevitably some groups feel unheard. Philosopher Sjaak Koenis states that such situations offer space for a charismatic leader to stand up. As the focal point of collective agitation such a charismatic personality can have the power to unite and mobilize the particular group, Koenis argues.³⁶⁹

In accordance with Tieleman's argument, historian of religion Kathryn Lofton has argued that the increase of iconic celebrities can be explained because these figures offer people concrete solutions for choosing between the boundless options available. In her report on American contemporary culture, Lofton touches indirectly upon the subjective turn. She sees the goals of individuation and self-realization as a typical American ideal rooted in a society that is obsessed with change.³⁷⁰ Taking the Oprah Winfrey show as a case study, Lofton argues that the show plays into American consumerism: Oprah encourages her audience to buy and invest in themselves "because they are worth it" and because it will make them feel better than they did before.³⁷¹ Lofton furthermore connects Oprah's spiritual project of (internal and external) self-change to material prosperity. This marks a difference between the 'Oprah-consumers' and the group of fans I study. Although buying Jackson-merchandise is definitely an expression of their fandom, the self-growth of my research participants is not achieved by buying products per se. The women mainly invest in Jackson because they are inspired by what they understand to be his ethical way of life and the messages in his art.

It struck me that most women I spoke to were critical of the zeitgeist of their time, many bemoaning a shortage of morality. They explained that Jackson successfully delivered a counter voice to individualism and polarization by preaching a message of love, unity and activism. The fans take this message to heart. Their accounts portray Jackson as the embodiment of both their discontent and their vision of an ideal world. This came to the fore in the way the fans use his songs and

³⁶⁷ Henk Tieleman, 'Charisma is in the eye of the beholder', in: Marcel Becker ed., *Charisma: De Fascinatie van Leiders* (Nijmegen: Damon 2006) 162-168, 167

³⁶⁸ De Baar, 'Charismatisch spiritueel leiderschap', 60-61, 63.

³⁶⁹ Sjaak Koenis, 'Over charisma en het verlangen naar gemeenschap', in: Marcel Becker ed., *Charisma: De Fascinatie van Leiders* (Nijmegen: Damon 2006) 169-177, 175-176.

³⁷⁰ Lofton, *Oprah: the Gospel of an Icon*, 209, 211.

³⁷¹ Idem, 37.

poems to critically address the world around them, for instance to protest against the exploitation of animals and natural resources. As I already mentioned in chapter two, the fans respond to the ‘social body’ of Jackson, meaning the mediatized icon. From the beginning of his career, Jackson was successful in branding his image by setting himself apart. Vogel sums up the artist’s signature traits:

The single glove, the fedora, the red leather jacket, the black pants and white socks; the kicks, spins, and toe-raises; the moonwalk; the choreographed dances; the sculpted face, the aviator sunglasses, and Jheri curl.³⁷²

Furthermore, Jackson was a shrewd business man who knew how to promote his image of benefactor. In the eighties he purchased the Beatles/ATV Catalog, collaborated with Pepsi and connected his song “Beat it” to a campaign against drunk driving, for which he received an award by president Reagan.³⁷³ The image that the fans create of Jackson is based on the brand Michael Jackson.

Charismatic leaders usually do not belong to the ruling elite, but are figures who the public believes can help them.³⁷⁴ Kripal describes charisma as “playing with the codes” of the culture in question. Charisma destroys the old in order to create the new and thus fuels social change and creativity. The respective religious and social authorities in power not always agree with the recommended change and “may well see as a kind of “virus” that has invaded the stability and proper order of things.”³⁷⁵ Kripal’s observation of charisma resonates with the fans’ description of Jackson as “misunderstood”. The women often told me that they knew the ‘real’ Michael. Miranda, for example stated: “Those of us who saw the true Michael saw Him as love - pure and simple.” The message in their stories is that *they* recognize him as a visionary, but society – especially the media – chooses not to acknowledge his teachings. In fact, the fans often mentioned how the world tried to actively destroy Jackson.

Kripal draws a strong relation between charisma, eroticism and controversy. According to the scholar it is a misconception to think of gurus as automatically ethical, hereby pointing to the numerous examples of problematic sexual relations between charismatic teachers and their disciples. Kripal calls the complicated relationship between the moral and mystical “the Transmoral Mystic”. He argues that accepting that a guru can be both good and bad acknowledges the profound religious effects that these teachers have on their followers, whilst this approach also

³⁷² Vogel, *Man in the Music*, 68.

³⁷³ Idem, 68, 198.

³⁷⁴ De Baar, ‘Charismatisch spiritueel leiderschap’, 50-51.

³⁷⁵ Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms*, 215.

allows to criticize ethically dubious behavior.³⁷⁶ Without referencing Kripal, academic Margo Jefferson applied the notion of “the Transmoral Mystic” to Michael Jackson³⁷⁷:

Is he a good man or a predator? Child protector or pedophile? A damaged genius or a scheming celebrity trying to hold on to his fame at any cost? A child star afraid of aging, or a psychotic freak/pervert/sociopath? What if the “or” is an “and”? What if he is all of these things?³⁷⁸

The idea that Jackson might be both good and bad is not accepted by the fans who unanimously refute the allegations of sexual child abuse. Until 2019 this stance was not too hard to defend. The memory of the trials had faded – which was reinforced by the artist’s death. However, after the global broadcast of *Leaving Neverland* public opinion shifted to a distrust of Jackson. As was to be expected, the fans were greatly affected. Although most fans I spoke to had not seen the film, they all expressed feeling deeply grieved. Because the documentary was published unannounced, Dakota described the fan community as “blind sighted” and “pierced to the core” by, what she called, “crucifying Michael”. I felt little room to openly discuss the film among my interlocutors. It seemed to me that they approached it as a profanation, threatening to destroy Jackson’s image. The fans responded by posting “the truth” on social media and traveling to Michael-places to publicly demonstrate their loyalty.³⁷⁹ With Jackson gone, the fans expressed that they are the ones who have to defend him as well as themselves as fans of an alleged child molester.

Jackson was not the first celebrity to fall from his pedestal because of accusations of sexual abuse, recent other examples in the United States being Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby and R. Kelly. Scholar Bethan Jones has examined the responses and coping of fans of the Welsh rock band Lostprophets when their lead singer Ian Watkins was found guilty of multiple counts of child abuse and was sentenced to prison in 2013. Jones observes how initially many fans were in shock and disbelief after hearing the charges against Watkins. Many maintained his innocence until the singer himself pleaded guilty, which resulted in the end of their fan attachment. Interestingly, Jones points to the difference between Jackson fans and Lostprophets fans, arguing that the fact that Jackson was not convicted may have allowed his fans to defend him after his death.³⁸⁰ The absence of a confession is key to the fans’ persistence in their defense of Jackson.

³⁷⁶ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2017) 83-84.

³⁷⁷ Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson* (Granta Publications 2006 Kindle Edition) locations 857, 1106, 1259-1271.

³⁷⁸ Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*, location 259.

³⁷⁹ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 18, 28, 47-49.

³⁸⁰ Bethan Jones, “‘My Music Was on Shuffle, One of Their Songs Came On, and I Had to Hit Next . . .’ Navigating Grief and Disgust in Lostprophets Fandom”, in: Rebecca Williams ed., *Everybody Hurts: Transitions, Endings, and Resurrections in Fan Cultures* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2018) 43-55, 44-46, 52. NB. Jones’ article was published a year before the release of *Leaving Neverland*.

One fan specifically expressed this: “if Michael said “I did fondle this little boy”, I would stop immediately.” Although the recent documentary is disturbing, it is, according to the fans, still Jackson’s word against that of the alleged victims. And they choose Michael.³⁸¹

The fans who consider Jackson as an exemplar are convinced of their view and are willing to fight for it. To further understand what made them receptive to follow Jackson’s message and the influence of their fan-attachment on their worldview, I will now take a step back and reflect on how the women became fans and how their fandom evolved. Here, Jackson’s death takes center stage because it is the moment that turned the women from fans into followers.

4.4 ‘Michael story’

The vignette that opened this chapter presents Ava’s ‘Michael story’: a personal narrative about how she became a fan.³⁸² ‘Becoming-a-fan stories’ is a popular research topic within fan studies because it tends to capture a fundamental transformation of the fan’s self, reshaping “one’s identity, daily activities, and life trajectory”.³⁸³ Indeed, the women in my study could clearly recall how and when they became fans and often stated that from this moment onwards Jackson was part of their lives.³⁸⁴ In this chapter, I apply the term ‘Michael stories’ in a broad way, not just focusing on the women’s transition from non-fan to fan, but also on how their lives with Jackson evolved over time. This includes a reflection on the fans’ responses to Jackson’s death and the impact of *Leaving Neverland*.³⁸⁵ According to sociologists Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby, fans’ life course developments are rarely studied within fan studies. A missed opportunity, they argue, since a life course perspective can deepen our understanding of (the transformation within) adult and later-life fandom, including the impact of the ageing body and mind.³⁸⁶ According to psychologist Dan McAdams every person creates a “personal myth”: a special kind of story through which we bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a

³⁸¹ The documentary triggered world-wide shock. Afterwards people, including celebrities and scholars, took sides; some distanced themselves from Jackson, like Oprah and Margo Jefferson, while others such as Joseph Vogel and Jackson’s producers – let alone his family and fans – defend Jackson’s innocence.

³⁸² The term ‘Michael story’ is inspired by cultural historian Daniel Cavicchi who noticed that Bruce Springsteen fans called their becoming-a-fan stories “Bruce stories”. Cavicchi describes these stories as “personal narratives that center on a “conversion” or a significant change in one’s attitude and behaviour toward the music and image of Springsteen: Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998) 42.

³⁸³ Harrington and Bielby, ‘A life course perspective on fandom’, 434. See for an overview of different studies: C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, ‘A life course perspective on fandom’, 432–433.

³⁸⁴ Likewise, Cavicchi noted that the Springsteen-fans in his study tended to split their life-stories between the time they were not (yet) fans and the moment they became Springsteen-fans: Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 153.

³⁸⁵ Thus, this study fits in well with the recent interest into the (underexplored) aspect of how fans respond to- and cope with transitions or periods of ending within their fandom. Cf. Rebecca Williams, *Everybody Hurts: transitions, endings, and resurrections in fan culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2018).

³⁸⁶ Harrington and Bielby, ‘A life course perspective on fandom’, 434.

purposeful and convincing whole.³⁸⁷ We work on our life stories, consciously or unconsciously, throughout most of our adult years. McAdams is inspired by the work of the psychologist Jerome Bruner, who observed that:

We constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories in the past and our hopes and fears for the future. Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened, and why we're doing what we're doing.³⁸⁸

By focusing on the 'Michael stories' of the women who participated in my research, I wish to shed light on how the women try to create meaning, coherence and purpose in their lives. I want to find out how they involve Jackson – and his death – in their views on “how and why their life evolved like it did.”³⁸⁹ I interviewed the women in this chapter between June 2017 and June 2019, approximately eight to ten years after Jackson's passing. Bruner warns us that our self-making stories get outdated: “not just because we grow older and wiser but because our self-making stories need to fit new circumstances, new friends, new enterprises.”³⁹⁰ Indeed, in the past years, by telling and retelling their stories, the fans have given Jackson's death, and their response to it, meaning and a place within their ongoing construction of personal narratives. By focusing on their experiences, I hope to do justice to the complexity of belief and fandom as embedded in everyday life. Regarding my use of 'everyday', I follow DeNora, who posits that the everyday should be interpreted conceptually as the process of accomplishing the “here and now wherever we are”. Thus conceived, the everyday is a blend of special and routine elements in all aspects of our lives and not a set of places or experiences to be contrasted with the extraordinary.³⁹¹ In what follows, I will first discuss how the fans became fans, and then turn to the way the women have incorporated Jackson in their everyday lives.

About two-thirds of my interviewees became a fan of Jackson in their youth. Many of them talked about “growing up” with the artist and spoke about Jackson as if he were a close friend or a family member.³⁹² “Familial” and “enduring” are the words 62-year-old Reese used to illustrate her love for Jackson, who is four years her junior. Being close in age, she described how she has felt like an older sister to Jackson ever since she was 15 years old and saw him on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. There were more fans who mentioned the impact of this performance, which can thus

³⁸⁷ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guilford Press 1997) 12.

³⁸⁸ Jerome S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press 2003) 64.

³⁸⁹ McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 102.

³⁹⁰ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 65.

³⁹¹ Tia DeNora, *Making Sense of Reality: Culture and Perception in Everyday Life* (London: Sage 2014) x-xx.

³⁹² This is more common within fan communities. Cf. Reijnders, et al., 'Dichterbij Marco', 121, 124.

be described as, what cultural sociologist Ben Green calls, a “peak music experience”: a music experience that leaves a mark on someone’s life and is “especially affecting, important, influential or even pivotal for the individuals involved”.³⁹³ Another “peak music experience” that surfaced in the women’s stories concerns the release of *Thriller*. Retired dermatologist Brooke (57) was in college when the album came out:

We had 1 TV in our house of 40 women. (...) There was a big announcement that they would be playing the *Thriller* video at exactly 10 pm on MTV, so the entire house of women was planning to gather in the TV room. I (basically) never watched TV in college, so it was a big deal for me to succumb to the invitation to see the *Thriller* video with everyone. (...) The hype made it seem historic, so I didn’t want to miss it. The video was like nothing I had seen before.

After seeing *Thriller*, Brooke was “hooked on Michael”. Both Reese and Brooke pointed out what cultural historian Daniel Cavicchi would classify as an ‘epiphany’: a specific moment when someone’s fandom starts that marks an evident turning point in one’s life.³⁹⁴ Nearly all my interviewees went through an ‘epiphany’. Almost 30 years have passed since Sophie’s (69) “journey” with Jackson started. It was the moment she watched his *Dangerous* concert performance in Bucharest on tv. She is one of four in this study who spiritually connected to Jackson before his death. Living in a small rural community, she remembers how her environment frowned upon her fannish infatuation with Jackson:

That was behavior that was confined to pre- and post-pubescent, nubile young women. By the age of forty-two – a mother of two girls aged ten and eight, a wife of thirteen years – a woman should have matured past the point of mindless infatuation with a rock and roll musical genius.

Sophie’s memory directs us to the stigma I discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis. Certainly in the field of music fandom, the stereotype of female fans as “groupies” is persistent. I noticed that many of the women I spoke to had internalized negative stereotypes of (celebrity) fandom and explicitly distanced themselves from connotations such as irrationality and superficiality. Most of my informants did not label themselves a fan and I was often corrected when I used the term. They explained that it did not fit the way they see themselves, because it trivializes their experience and relation to Jackson. Indeed, other scholars have also noted that, because of the negative associations that stick to fandom, “few people take up the label

³⁹³ Ben Green, “I Always Remember That Moment’: Peak Music Experiences as Epiphanies’, *Sociology* 50:2 (2016) 333-348, 334.

³⁹⁴ See for a more thorough explanation of the ‘epiphany’: Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 44-49.

fan without at least some unease”.³⁹⁵ For that reason, media expert Matt Hills stresses that the concept of fandom is mostly useful for researchers to categorize, but that it is not a thing to be found on the ground.³⁹⁶

The women frequently told me they became fans because they were impressed by Jackson as a person. A slight difference can be observed, however, between those who became fans before Jackson’s death and those who did so only afterwards. Fans of the first category often stressed that they were affected by Jackson “the artist”, while also (immediately) feeling a personal connection.³⁹⁷ Fans who stated to be “struck” by Jackson’s death, all emphasized it was Michael as a person who inspired them. Several of the women I spoke to used the phrase “falling in love” when they described their ‘becoming-a-fan stories’. It shows their deep personal connection with Jackson – something that I found to be a general feature of the women’s fandom. The following fan comments reflect the direct, personal relationship that they experience with the popstar:

Aubree: Michael opened my heart to communicate to him. I started to speak to him just the way I would converse with a friend. (...) Michael never failed to memorize me and never disappointed me. He is like a nagging parent. He pushes you to keep going. When you’re tired and want to go to bed, Michael says “no, you have to continue for two more hours and finish your work.” Things like that.

Vivian: (he is) someone you did not know personally, not physically, but with whom you have such an understanding that you think “this is an old friend”, you know. As if you have known that person for a long time, that is what it felt like. Very familiar, very natural. (...) I have done visualization-meditation during which I met him, it was wordless of course but it was just... there is an unspoken understanding of what the other person feels.

It is not uncommon within celebrity fandom that fans develop strong feelings for their celebrity of focus.³⁹⁸ What sets the MJ-fans in this study apart from other fan cultures is the spiritual connection that many of my interlocutors report having with Jackson and their dedication to continue his humanitarian legacy. Instead of using the word “fan”, Sophie prefers to call herself a “student”, “disciple” or “follower” of Jackson. Seven others also self-identified as disciple, including 54-year-old Dakota. Like her fellow-disciples, she sees her relationship with Jackson through a spiritual lens. Yet, she hesitates whether “disciple” fully covers how she sees herself:

³⁹⁵ Laura Vroomen, *‘This Woman’s Work’: Kate Bush, Female Fans and Practices of Distinction* (doctoral thesis University of Warwick 2002) 185. Cf. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 19.

³⁹⁶ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2002) xiv.

³⁹⁷ One should note that they say this after having gone through an ‘awakening’. Perhaps with the knowledge of now, the fans enlarge Jackson’s first impact on them, making the current role he plays in their lives ‘meant to be’.

³⁹⁸ Cavicchi notes how Springsteen fans report feeling close to Springsteen, referring to him as “Bruce”: Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 43–44, 52–53. Tonya Anderson likewise notes the “affective language” with which Duran Duran fans talk about the band with references to being “in love” and “smitten”: Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight*, 67–68.

I struggle to say ‘what are we?’. We have ‘disciple’, I don’t know, ‘follower of Michael’ yeah... maybe. But it’s more the falling in love with somebody and the whole spirit merging with you. You don’t lose yourself, you change. What do you call that? I really think we need to create a word for what this is: ‘Devotee’?

Those who did self-identify as a fan, often used the term when they talked about their adolescence. Brooke’s earliest memories of Jackson took her back to her family’s farm – where she watched the Jackson 5 cartoons on TV as a kid together with her siblings. Reflecting on her current relationship with Jackson – as a retired, 57-year-old woman – Brooke approached him in a different way. Today she sees him as a role model who has been a great influence on her life and who has helped her find direction and joy after her retirement and her mother’s passing. Following Bruner, one could say that Brooke’s childhood-interpretation of Jackson became “outdated”. She adjusted her interpretation of the artist to fit her current life phase. Brooke’s example is representative for how other lifelong fans adapted their understanding of Jackson to fit their current life-phase.

Many women in this study are lifelong fans; some have followed Jackson for over 40 years. A significant number of these fans expressed that there had been a period of time in their lives when they lost track of Jackson. Page, for example, commented: “I was a fan in the ‘80s then lost touch until Michael’s passing.” Such remarks point to what scholar of communication and media Tonya Anderson calls, “gap periods”: periods of time in which fans are less interested or involved in their fandom.³⁹⁹ Indeed, the women’s narratives indicate that, at times, their priorities shifted, for example because of boyfriends, college, marriage, motherhood, and/or career. During these times, the fans report that Jackson was simply there in the background of their lives. Jackson’s death shook them up. Nearly all of my interlocutors underscored the impact of this moment in their biographies. In retrospect, many described it as a wake-up call, calling it an “awakening”. The fans’ ‘awakening-stories’ followed a more or less similar pattern: shock caused by Jackson’s death, followed by months of grief and investigation. Consequently, the fans reported that they transformed themselves through following Jackson as a teacher in spreading unconditional love.

4.5 The Impact of Jackson’s death: awakening to Jackson

Although the fans in this study generally conceived of the moment of becoming a fan as a turning point, I argue that their *rediscovery* of Jackson after his death had an even greater impact on their lives. Again, Ava’s ‘Michael story’ is a good example. Although Ava has been a fan since she was a teenager, it was her awakening catalyzed by seeing *This is It* that divides her narrative into a

³⁹⁹ Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight*, 61.

“before” and “after”. *This is It* provoked Ava to reflect on Jackson and herself, which made her choose “the path of love”. She told me her ‘awakening story’ nine years after it had occurred. Considering the ease with which she reported her experience, I surmise that it certainly was not the first time she shared it.

The experience of profuse grief after Jackson’s death is a recurring theme in the women’s stories. My interlocutors frequently described it as one of the worst moments in their lives, sometimes even more challenging than the loss of friends or family-members. The memory of this event can be regarded as, what McAdams would call, a “nuclear episode” since it represents a key moment in the fans’ understanding of who they were and are.⁴⁰⁰ Up to the days when I conducted my research, many women found it difficult to explain their emotional response in 2009. Donna told me that she had felt lost and confused: “it’s not like Michael was coming home at the end of the day every day and suddenly he’s gone, you know? I didn’t even know him, so how can I feel this much?” In the months following Jackson’s death, the fans tried to wrap their heads around their grief. Based on their narratives I distinguished four recurring themes that (partly) account for the women’s strong emotions following Jackson’s death, namely: a realization of transience; connection of Jackson to their personal histories and memories; guilt for having failed Jackson during his life; and the mourning of others.

Sociologist Aneta Ostaszewska has argued that when the King of Pop died popular culture was deprived of one of its biggest illusions: the immortality of its heroes.⁴⁰¹ The fan reports certainly demonstrate that Jackson’s passing made them aware of the superstar’s mortality. Most women in my study are of the same age group as Jackson. His death inevitably also confronted them with their own transience. It was a returning trend in their stories that the event caused them to reflect on what would happen if they themselves would die. What had they done with their time on earth and what would they leave behind? When Erica heard that Jackson had passed away she was shocked. She was especially moved when she watched Jackson’s memorial service and saw his children who had just lost their father. It reminded her of her own children:

It just broke my heart to think to be without them, to have to leave them. (continues with choked up voice FE) So I was, you know, thinking of myself, just that he is the same age and I saw how much he had done for the world and I just saw how much people loved him.

The descriptions of the MJ-fans concerning their (re)discovery of Jackson remind me of Anderson’s study; based on her research on lifelong Duran Duran fans, Anderson notes that rediscoveries

⁴⁰⁰ McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 296.

⁴⁰¹ Aneta Ostaszewska, ‘Michael Jackson’s Death as a Social Event’, *Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialisation*, 1-15, 1.

– in her study as a result of reunion concerts – often set in motion a renewed dedication to the band, but also a reassessment of oneself and the progress one has made in one’s life up to that point, which can trigger an awareness of mortality.⁴⁰²

The women’s response to Jackson’s death can also be connected to the way they integrate Jackson in their personal histories and memories. According to media expert Rebecca Williams, it is common for fans to respond to the demise of a fan object with grief and sadness since its disappearance can “pose a threat to fans’ sense of self-identity, self-narrative, and ontological security.”⁴⁰³ Similarly, death and mourning expert Margaret Gibson sees “profound identifications” with a deceased celebrity as a partial explanation for the emotional and psychological impact of celebrity deaths. The loss of a celebrity ruptures the continuity of a person’s biography that is interwoven with that of a celebrity. Gibson explains:

One can imagine a person who, upon finding out that a public figure or celebrity who shaped their memories of childhood died, being affected by this death because it renders fragile their own sense of mortality, particularly the mortality of personal histories and memories.⁴⁰⁴

Looking at the fan statements it becomes clear that Jackson’s sudden death interrupted the fans’ routine. In his book *Between One and One Another*, anthropologist Michael Jackson notes that when routine life is interrupted – for example by a calamity – people are triggered to introspect as it gets them “thinking of a way out of or around the difficulty that has arisen.”⁴⁰⁵ My findings confirm the observations of Jackson, Williams and Gibson. Especially the lifelong fans frequently expressed that losing Jackson felt like a piece of themselves had died because he had been a part of their childhood. Dakota, for example, expressed: “I’ve never known life without Michael Jackson. Just how can life go on without Michael Jackson?”. Harrington and Bielby quote Malcolm Jones who found a similar theme regarding Harry Potter fans after the last book was published. According to Jones their sadness:

Has nothing to do with the fate of the characters and everything to do with ... the end of childhood. The readers who have grown up with this series – who have read it, as it were, in real time as it unfolds – are themselves at that end. Saying goodbye to Harry is like saying goodbye to a piece of themselves.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight*, 78.

⁴⁰³ Rebecca Williams, ‘Introduction: Starting at the End’, in: Rebecca Williams ed., *Everybody Hurts: Transitions, Endings, and Resurrections in Fan Cultures* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2018) 1-17, 5. Williams also observes that in response to the ending of a fan object, some fans reiterate their attachment to their fandom.

⁴⁰⁴ Margaret Gibson, ‘Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture’, *Health Sociology Review* 16:5 (2007) 415-424, 421.

⁴⁰⁵ Michael D. Jackson, *Between One and One Another* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2012) 11.

⁴⁰⁶ Harrington and Bielby, ‘A life course perspective on fandom’, 431.

A third explanation that is notably relevant for the lifelong fans is related to feelings of guilt. I showed that the ‘Michael stories’ demonstrate the ebb and flow of fandom and indicate that, for a while, most took Jackson’s existence for granted when other life events took priority. Although this is a common pattern within lifelong fandom,⁴⁰⁷ some women expressed feeling guilty for their distraction and for not having supported Jackson more actively when he was still alive. I think this sense of guilt partly stems from a widespread belief that the popstar’s death could have been prevented. Many are convinced that the artist’s passing was a consequence of his persecution by the media.

Finally, a few fans connected Jackson’s death to other losses. Gibson calls this “transference of grief”: through grieving a celebrity a person actually mourns personal losses that had not been properly mourned.⁴⁰⁸ For Brooke, Jackson’s death is inextricably linked to the loss of her mother:

My mother died of multiple sclerosis on June 24, 2009. (...) As I was reflecting on my mother’s life and death, one of my children told me about Michael. It was such a surreal moment. I honestly couldn’t believe it. First my mom, then Michael. Tears flowed that day for both my mother and Michael.

In spite of the four themes I discussed above, it is remarkable that most of the women emphasized that they were baffled by their sudden, profound grief. Kripal notes that people can get extremely confused by their mystical experiences when they lack adequate mythological and mystical systems to make sense out of their experiences.⁴⁰⁹ Indeed, Dakota remembers struggling with her intellect: she has two master degrees, surely she was not crazy?! Iris was quickly convinced that her response to Jackson’s death had to be spiritual, because she found it “unfathomable” to experience more grief for a celebrity than for the loss of one’s parents. She is not alone in interpreting her response thus. In fact, most of my interviewees look back on their mourning as a mystical experience, interpreting Jackson’s death as the catalyst for a spiritual awakening. I sometimes tried to unravel with the fans what could have triggered the awakening. Stressing the mystical nature of their experience, the women invariably responded that it was inexplicable.

It was a returning theme in the women’s stories that they felt lonely because members of their personal networks could not understand or accept their grief for a person they had never met. The fans’ situation can thus be described as “disenfranchised grief”: grief that “is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.”⁴¹⁰ The concept of

⁴⁰⁷ See for example: Anderson, *Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight*, 71-72.

⁴⁰⁸ Gibson, ‘Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture’, 420.

⁴⁰⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, “‘Comparison gets you nowhere!’ The comparative study of religion and the Spiritual but Not Religious’, in: William B. Parsons ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2018) 253-267, 266.

⁴¹⁰ Kenneth J Doka, ‘Disenfranchised grief’, *Bereavement Care* 18:3 (1999) 37-39, 37.

disenfranchised grief discloses the kinds of “grieving rules” that underlie societies. The loneliness and hardship that came with the disenfranchised grief about Jackson is that although society might not valorize the loss for the women concerned, the fans nonetheless *did* mourn the artist’s death. This made it more difficult for them to cope with Jackson’s passing, especially since rituals that normally facilitate the mourning process were not available – like a funeral or bereavement leave.⁴¹¹

Because most fans could not count on support from their friends or family, the online community played a crucial role in grief counselling. A recurring theme in the accounts is an insatiable thirst for information about Jackson that manifested itself in the direct aftermath of his death, when the fans tried to find out as much as possible about the artist. Through their research, the women found answers, but more importantly, they found each other. Their stories support the argument of Elizabeth Cohen and Cynthia Hoffner that social networking sites can help fans in their grief over a celebrity’s death. Through gathering online, fans can support each other and feel a part of a larger community of mourners.⁴¹² For the fans in this study Facebook became an important platform to share experiences and find comfort. The women often explained to me how reassuring it was to find others who validated their experiences. It seems to me that as the fans counseled each other into understanding what had happened to them, together they developed a “conversion-narrative”.

Sociologist John Thompson has highlighted the importance for fans of being part of a fan community. He notes that to associate with other fans gives fans the opportunity to share their innermost feelings and desires unashamedly with a community of like-minded people, knowing that they will be understood.⁴¹³ My findings resonate with Thompson’s observation. All fans in my study mentioned the relevance of the fan community, which they frequently called “one big family”. Most are active online on a daily basis, in line with a broader trend in society where the web has become part and parcel of people’s everyday lives and social existence.⁴¹⁴ The importance of these virtual encounters should not be underestimated. Studies have shown that self-initiated online communities can become important sources of belonging and support,

⁴¹¹ Idem, 39.

⁴¹² Cohen and Hoffner, ‘Finding meaning in a celebrity’s death’, 645. The studies of Lee Goh and Sanderson and Cheong similarly show how, in the aftermath of Jackson’s death, grieving fans used Twitter to emotionally support one another: Lee Goh, “‘Gone too soon’: Did twitter grieve for Michael Jackson?”, *Online Information Review* 37:3 (2013) 462-478; Jimmy Sanderson and Pauline Hope Cheong, ‘Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online’, *Bulletin of Science Technology and Society* 30:5 (2010) 328-340.

⁴¹³ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995) 224.

⁴¹⁴ Christopher Helland, ‘Ritual’, in: Heidi A. Campbell ed., *Digital Religion: understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (London; New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis 2012) 25-40, 25.

from which meaningful relationships may be born and fostered.⁴¹⁵ This is definitely the case for my interlocutors who consider the friendships they have established online as valuable and foundational in their lives. Erica, for instance, commented that she had found “people who know me better than my own family does.” Nearly all of the women in this chapter are part of the same network(s). Their communities vary in size; some fans stated to be a part of a group of 150 people, whilst others considered their inner circle to be under 10 people.

The fans also pointed out that the fan community is subdivided into different (sometimes competing) subgroups, each with its own center of gravity and ideology. This confirms my findings in chapter two in which I reported on the potential power conflicts within fan communities. Reese attributes the different groups to “personality differences and disputes on principles.” Likewise, Ava said: “everybody kind of claims their way as the right way: ‘We know more’ or ‘our group is more important’.” Most groups go their own way and do not really mingle with the other crowds. I showed in the previous chapter that this was also the case during Michael Week. I observed, however, that the documentary *Leaving Neverland* had a uniting effect on different fan groups. In this moment of crisis they found common ground in their goal to defend Jackson.

Especially those who have gone through a spiritual awakening expressed that their family members and close friends had needed time to get used to their change of heart. Some, like Donna, had to convince their loved ones that they had not gone crazy. Although most fans I met were more or less open about their feelings for Jackson towards their family and close friends, there were also those who kept their fan-identity to themselves or only shared it with a select group of friends. Some have had to pay the price of losing friends and/or turning family members against them. Sophie is one of the fans who encountered negative reactions after she opened up about her feelings for Jackson: “I felt very much alone. My family and friends thought that I had lost my mind completely.” Similarly, Nicole said: “there have been some people who actually shunned me or turned their backs on me (...) that was kind of painful.” Generally, the retirees in my focus group expressed feeling freer to be who they are. Those with jobs generally first checked their colleagues’ stance towards Jackson before opening up. Iris, for example, said that when she was still in the police force she kept silent about her grief over Jackson’s death because she knew her colleagues made fun of Jackson. “That is self-protection”, she explained, “because the moment you say you are a Michael fan, people start talking about his nose, his skin, or about the children...”

Even though she has encountered negative reactions, Miranda is one of those fans who deliberately speak out in the hope it will encourage others to do the same. She commented: “The little ridicule, or pain I might feel from disbelievers or haters, is NOTHING to the pain Michael

⁴¹⁵ Heidi A. Campbell and Paul Emerson Teusner, ‘Internet and Social Networking’, in: John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur eds., *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge 2015) 154-168, 165; Stephen D. O’Leary, ‘Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (1996) 781-808, 794-795.

endured during His lifetime. I can handle it. It’s my duty to honor and defend Him.” Similarly, Erica and Ava decided to publicly protest against the documentary *Leaving Neverland*. They explained that although it was horrible to speak to all the press, it also gave them a glimpse of what Jackson had gone through on a daily basis. By approaching it as an opportunity to “suffer for Michael” they stated it had drawn them closer to him. The way Miranda, Erica and Ava compare their own ‘suffering’ with that of Jackson is reminiscent of the somatic spirituality of medieval mystics. Medieval scholar Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that acts of (physical and mental) self-torture by male and female saints came forth out of a desire to identify with Christ and were described as an opportunity for union with him.⁴¹⁶

The release of *Leaving Neverland* and the public’s response to it has put pressure on the women’s fandom. They are confronted by friends, family and colleagues with Jackson’s alleged pedophilia and feel challenged to respond to the documentary.⁴¹⁷ Some voiced feeling more vulnerable since the documentary came out; they feared that the public anger inspired by the recent allegations would be aimed at them. Iris, for example, used to wear Michael-shirts in public without thinking about it, but the documentary has made her hesitant. Ava recalled a similar situation, when she realized in the grocery store that she was wearing her Michael-shirt and was afraid that “somebody was going to cause a scene”. Ava remembers that by the time she got to the check-out she was shaking. A few fans told me that the documentary had affected their family-relations, one fan shared that it had caused her and her husband to sleep in separate rooms.

Above, we saw that the fans can be moved by Jackson up to the point that they are willing to suffer for him. The way the women read him provides them with answers to existential questions. It gives important input on their worldview and ethical guidelines. In the next part of this chapter I will explore how the fans incorporate Jackson as an inspirational teacher into their beliefs and self-understanding, bringing forth a mix of fandom and faith that helps them to nurture confidence and agency.

4.6 Mixing fandom and faith

Michael Jackson is an artist that can be easily incorporated into the SBNR-ethos. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the popstar voiced a pantheistic approach to the world in his art and interviews, presenting himself as a wounded visionary with God-given talents, searching for a union with “the essence”. The fans in this study follow Jackson’s self-description by presenting

⁴¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Late Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books 1991) 131-132, 182-184, 188.

⁴¹⁷ Jones observed a similar situation regarding Lostprophets fans who were confronted by friends after Watkins was convicted of child abuse. As a result, many only felt comfortable and safe to talk about the band and Watkins with fellow fans: Jones, ‘Navigating Grief and Disgust’, 51.

him as a spiritual messenger who was bestowed with supernatural talent. All women stated they experience Jackson's ongoing presence on earth in one way or another and many talked about the artist in the present tense, some also conversed with him. Twenty-two out of the 26 interviewees connected Jackson's mission to the supernatural: nine believe God sent him on a mission to "teach". Thirteen fans see Jackson himself as a divine messenger and considered him a carrier of divine energy and his art as a channel. These were often the same women who had voiced a more pantheistic outlook on life thus expressing, what Mercadante calls, "horizontal transcendence": the notion that divinity resides within and is present and active within the universe, not outside of it.⁴¹⁸

In sum, my interlocutors affirmed Jackson's importance within their existing faith structures; the SBNRs portrayed Jackson as a spiritual messenger, while those with a different belief-system made Jackson fit their take on life. Bea, who identifies as an orthodox Christian, was the only one who separated her faith from her fandom. Nevertheless, she also described Jackson as a "messenger" who, according to her, showed resemblances with prophets. Brooke, Grace, and Kristin, who likewise identify as Christian, did see a strong interconnection between their faith and Jackson's message, describing the singer as a "guardian angel", "messenger of love", and "Christ-like figure". Brooke wrote that to her Jackson channels God's love in a very powerful way. She explained:

My faith is based on love, from the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments, to the unconditional love of God sacrificing His only Son. Michael exudes love. His music is loving. He did what so many of us cannot do and that is to forgive. He gave grace to so many people in his life. This is a cornerstone of my faith.

I heard more fans state that Jackson channels God's love. More than half of the women in this study expressed that Jackson makes them feel closer to God, and that he paves the way to a spiritual experience. Vivian indicated that she has wrestled with her faith off and on during her entire life, but experienced "real love" for the first time when Jackson passed. He helped her understand the teachings of her church:

They spoke a lot about Corinthians 1.13 about love. Well, I never found love. I am still alone, so that never really resonated with me. I always struggled with that, like what is its deeper meaning? (gets misty-eyed) And because of Michael I suddenly could feel it, I became it, I completely understood what was meant by it: everything is about love.

The way Vivian spoke about her relationship with Jackson shows fandom's potential to allow

⁴¹⁸ Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 118.

for a tangible spiritual experience. Likewise, Sophie articulated that although her worldview was present before her awakening to Jackson, her “fascination” with the artist has made her worldview more focused and more a part of her daily activities. Erica voiced this very articulately:

Before Michael, I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with God. Now I do. I find it easier to understand other points of view and accept people as they are, because I am confident and secure in my beliefs. Michael has everything to do with all of it. He is my example, my inspiration, my guide, and my greatest love.

Although the fans drew parallels between their own worldview and that of Jackson, no one stated to take inspiration from the Jehovah’s Witnesses – the faith Jackson grew up in – or suggested that Jackson might still have been a member when he died. This confirms again the fans’ cherry-picking; they relate their interpretation of Jackson to their own experiences – choosing to follow the Michael who best fits their take on life. Take, for example, Elena who explained: “he believed in God, but then he also, *I think*, from what I heard him say, he started also to question things, and I think he was also not religious but spiritual.”

As I showed earlier in this chapter, most fans in my study have a Christian background, but stated to have disengaged from this religion. Nevertheless, the comments of a significant number of my interlocutors demonstrated that their approach to Jackson is informed by the Christian tradition – which was also exemplified by the previous chapters. Twenty-two of my interlocutors, for instance, referenced to Jesus when discussing Jackson.⁴¹⁹ Many, for example, spoke about the popstar as if he were a martyr: even though he did so many good deeds, they argued, he was still persecuted by the media and suffered heavily. Jacky remarked: “I doubt the Catholics would consider him a saint but the burn scar on his head could be interpreted as a crown of thorns and he was crucified in the press.” The way the women talked about Jackson’s “suffering” and “unjust death” reflects the conclusions of Campbell and Haughey who noticed how MJ-fans online viewed Jackson’s death as preordained and motivated by undeserved persecution. Their analysis also shows that, in their posts, the MJ-fans ignored any negative depictions of Jackson’s character, instead celebrating his life, charitable work, and messages.⁴²⁰

I did not meet fans who proclaimed Jackson as the second coming of Christ. Generally, the women in my study referenced Jesus metaphorically. They usually employed the example to explain the depth of their feelings towards Jackson. Miranda wrote:

⁴¹⁹ Fans also often compared Jackson to other enlightened beings and gurus, such as Krishna.

⁴²⁰ Heidi A. Campbell and Rebecca Haughey, ‘Modern-day Martyrs: Fans’ Online Reconstruction of Celebrities as Divine’, in: Marie Gillespie, Anita Greenhill and David Eric John Herbert eds., *Social media and religious change* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2013) 103-120, 103, 115. Similarly, in the beforementioned study of Fraser and Brown, Elvis-fans selectively identified with Elvis’s prosocial values and downplayed Elvis’s antisocial characteristics and behaviors: Fraser and Brown, ‘Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence’, 189-190, 200.

My point is not to demand that you think of Michael as the second coming of Christ, but rather that you see Him as important as Christ. I use Christ as a reference, as Michael did, having both grown up in a Christian culture.

In a similar way, Donna explained that she uses the image of Jesus symbolically to express the love that she feels for Jackson: “I don’t mean it literally”, she said, “it’s just a symbolic expression of love on this whole other level.” Although Brooke and Grace both compared Jackson to Jesus, they stressed that they did not conflate the two, but saw Jackson as a good follower of Jesus, and not *alike* to Jesus.

In response to my pondering on what made following Jackson so different from following Jesus, especially since Jackson took Christ as his example⁴²¹, Ava responded that she sees no real difference. What makes Jackson different is that he is the one who came to her and not Jesus: “it wasn’t that I chose Michael. If you could choose it, I would have chosen Jesus a long time ago”, she said. This is an important remark as it shows that Jackson is a new medium, but not necessarily a new message. The women’s fandom, in combination with their particular consumption of Jackson’s music, creates a palpable spiritual experience. However, this does not change the original wish to connect with God. Indeed, nobody in the group interpreted their relationship with Jackson in terms of a new religion – not even those who self-professed as Jackson’s disciples. Indeed, the women often used Jackson to critique and revise religion. The SBNR-fans use their interpretation of Jackson as a Christ-like, tender being to contrast with religion, the church and authority. Instead of preaching the truth, these fans argue that Jackson guides people in making their own choices.

The fan reports illustrate that the women derive a sense of self-love and empowerment from their interpretation of- and identification with Jackson – whether this be in the previously mentioned better understanding of faith and a closer connection with God, or in terms of courage to “be themselves” and develop new hobbies. It struck me how often the women expressed feeling safe and supported thanks to Jackson’s presence in their lives. This emancipating interpretation of Jackson was prominent in quite a few stories, including in the vignettes with which I opened the previous chapters. The women’s accounts thus demonstrate that identifying with a popstar and reading his art in an emancipatory way can favorably transform one’s self-perception and enhance one’s self-esteem.

The confidence and (self)love that the women state to draw from Jackson, gives them the freedom and bravery to become “the greatest version of themselves” by centralizing their own needs. This application of Jackson to foster self-empowerment and agency fits the theory of

⁴²¹ Jackson has also expressed in interviews that he tried to live his life like Christ. Cf. Robert E. Johnson, “The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows”, *Ebony* 40:2 (December 1984) 155-162, 157.

Woodhead and Sointu that women are prone to use spirituality to create space for themselves. Especially those who identified as “disciples” of Jackson often expressed that their fan attachment gives them an incentive to centralize their own needs and evolve. Page stated how, since her awakening, she allows herself to be “authentic, rather than try to hide myself from others.” Several women shared with me that they used to be shy. Since their awakening, they have gone “out of their comfort zone” and “found their own voice”. Through their fandom, my interviewees discovered new interests, such as writing or drawing. Dakota described the effect of her connection with Jackson as a “miracle” that gave her compassion, confidence and selflove. Dakota called Jackson an “enabler” and “motivator” who helps her stop belittling herself and start unpacking her potential.

Media scholar John Fiske was one of the first to examine how fans’ attitudes to celebrities can bring about empowerment. He took Madonna-fandom as an example.⁴²² Jenkins reflects on Fiske’s study:

The teenage girl fan of Madonna who fantasizes her own empowerment can translate this fantasy into behavior, and can act in a more empowered way socially, thus winning more social territory for herself. When she meets others who share her fantasies and freedom there is the beginning of a sense of solidarity, of a shared resistance, that can support and encourage progressive action on the microsocial level.⁴²³

Fiske pointed out that some Madonna fans are inspired by their fandom to demand better treatment by their boyfriends or to refuse to give up the street to men as their territory.⁴²⁴ Other studies have confirmed the thesis that popular culture texts are potentially empowering. Scholar Laura Vroomen showed that Kate Bush fans’ admiration for the singer’s autonomy and power translated into their own strengthening of their position within their families or at work.⁴²⁵ The studies of Julie D’Acci and Janice Radway have demonstrated in separate studies how watching tv series and romance reading can potentially increase agency when such texts are read as feminist.⁴²⁶

In this section I discussed how the fans follow Jackson’s self-portrayal as a spiritual messenger and co-opt the popstar into their existing belief-system. Jackson, they argued, brings them closer to God – whoever or whatever s/he might be. Moreover, the women described their investments

⁴²² See: John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis Group 2010).

⁴²³ Henry Jenkins, ‘Why Fiske still matters’, in: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London; New York: Taylor & Francis 2010 ProQuest Ebook Central) xii-xxxviii, xxxv.

⁴²⁴ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 150.

⁴²⁵ Vroomen, *This woman’s work*, 203.

⁴²⁶ Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press EBSCO Academic Collection 1994) 170, 181; Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press ProQuest Ebook Central 1991) 12, 52, 54, 93, 102.

in Jackson as empowering. One of the places that best exemplifies the way fandom and faith meet is in the fans' use of Jackson's music. In the next section, I will unravel what Jackson's music does to his fans and what they do with his music.

4.7 The message is in the music

During Michael Week 2019, Erica gave me her latest book in which she had gathered fan stories about "The Living Legacy of Michael". One of her contributors wrote:

I began hearing Michael's messages in his music, about love, peace, compassion and unity. (...) I had been a Christian all my life, so the message wasn't new, but somehow, Michael brought it to a new level, and made it come alive for this Age.

This quote nicely illustrates what I want to demonstrate in this chapter, namely the interplay between fandom and faith. In this section, I examine how the fans use Jackson's music as a dynamic medium to manage their mood, morality and worldview. As was already demonstrated by the case study of the MLP, the fans in this study regard Jackson's music as a tangible legacy of his vision. For the interviewees who are central in this chapter, Jackson's music is likewise an important source of inspiration. I argue that their consumption of his art is influenced by their interpretation of the popstar. The fans are exceptional in that many approach Jackson's music also as a ritual to experience a closeness to the divine.

Theologian Clive Marsh and vicar Vaughan Roberts have shown that when listeners commit themselves in a disciplined way to listening to music, it can be seen to function in a similar way as liturgies do for religious people in the sense that music can be used in a life-affirming, life-shaping way.⁴²⁷ The scholars tread carefully, not stating that such a "spirituality like" consumption of music is comparable to any structured belief system or theology. Nevertheless, they ask attention for the way music consumption can be "a locus where religion-like meaning-making configurations are in the process of being constructed."⁴²⁸

For long, musicologists have searched for evidence for the effects of music in the music itself or in the intention of the artist. As I discussed in my introductory chapter, the debate has shifted to a focus on the person who listens to the music and the ways she links songs to experiences.⁴²⁹ Although I agree with current trends within sociomusicology that for a good understanding of the experience of music, one should move away from an essentialist analysis

⁴²⁷ Clive Marsh and Vaughan Roberts, 'Listening as Religious Practice (Part Two): Exploring Qualitative Data from an Empirical Study of the Cultural Habits of Music Fans', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30:2 (2015) 291-306, 304-305.

⁴²⁸ Idem, 305.

⁴²⁹ See for example: Cavicchi, *Triamps Like Us*, 110; Marsh and Roberts, 'Listening as Religious Practice (Part Two)', 294-295; Marsh, 'Pop and Rock', *Religion and Popular Music*, 232.

of lyrics, in my view the power of song texts should not be dismissed altogether. I found that fans connected Jackson’s music to important life events, but my case study simultaneously shows that it is precisely Jackson’s lyrics that form an important part of how the women experience his music.

Jackson himself stated that he deliberately tried to influence the listeners of his songs with his lyrics to “make a better world of minds”.⁴³⁰ Based on the fans’ remarks about his music, he seems to have succeeded in his efforts: ““Heal the World”, “We are the World” or “Man in the Mirror” were not just songs: they are really messages to us, to act accordingly and to change the world”, Bea said during one of our conversations. Bea’s comment is illustrative of how the women approach Jackson’s songs. Jackson has left behind a vast musical catalog. In his extensive analysis of Jackson’s discography, Vogel classifies the artist’s songs into six categories: 1. Songs about seduction and deception; 2. Songs rooted in Gothic/horror; 3. Songs about media and social injustice; 4. Classic love songs; 5. Songs about loneliness; and 6. The anthems. Vogel sees as the overarching theme to Jackson’s work its “persistent dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and its attempt to provide some kind of escape, liberation, or transformation as antidote.”⁴³¹

My interlocutors stated to enjoy Jackson through all his music. Depending on context, they consume his songs for activities like dancing, exercising, and meditating. Nevertheless, when they came to speak about the lessons in Jackson’s music, most pointed to songs from Vogel’s category “the anthems” as most impactful and inspirational. These included songs like “We Are the World,” “Man in the Mirror,” “Heal the World,” and “Earth Song”. Brooke described Jackson’s music as a “huge part” of her daily life:

I have most songs memorized and can always call on certain songs for strength in difficult times. And there are others that are great dance songs, others that inspire to think of others. Many that remind me that it’s not “all about me”. That there are people in the world that really have problems and I should be helping to improve things for those people.

Brooke’s remark confirms Marsh and Roberts’ thesis that music can be used in a life-affirming, life-shaping way when it is listened to in a disciplined manner. Brooke’s discipline comes to the fore in her effort to memorize lyrics and in her reflection on the effect of Jackson’s songs. I find the way she can call on certain songs for “strength” reminiscent of how people refer to the Scripture, like Betty who compared reading the Bible to listening to Jackson’s music. Brooke’s comment also shows that Jackson’s music can function as a kind of rosary: it reminds her of the

⁴³⁰ Johnson, “The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows”, 160-162.

⁴³¹ Vogel, *The Man in the Music*, 16-17.

right thing to do, which in her case is to “think of others”. Brooke’s example is representative of how many of my informants approach Jackson’s music: they voiced that they consciously tap into his music to evoke and steer emotions and that Jackson’s lyrics hold great inspiration.

The fan comments demonstrate that Jackson’s music can open up a ‘moral space’: “a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.”⁴³² Several women explained that listening to Jackson’s music can prompt ethical (re)orientation because it helps them hold on to their ideals. In chapter one, I elaborated on Hirschkind’s argument that the body can be ethically disciplined by means of listening.⁴³³ The reports of my interviewees also demonstrate such an ‘ethics of listening’. Reese, for instance, said: “Michael’s spiritual energy is alive, because he brings out the best in other human beings who don’t just hear, but *listen* to his music.” Barbara similarly stated that the consumption of Jackson’s music goes beyond enjoyment, instead she approaches it as “a form of communication, repetition. It’s like a mantra”.

Above, I already discussed the trend among fans to speak about Jackson’s talent as “God-given”. In his study of Elvis-fans, Mark Duffett describes a similar situation. Nevertheless, Duffett posits that it is not likely that the fans come to a greater knowledge of God through their interest in Elvis nor that his music triggers a spiritual experience. Instead, he interprets the fans’ vocabulary as a token of respect of Elvis’ religious devotion and Christian values.⁴³⁴ In contrast, I found that a significant number of fans in my study do turn to music-listening to get closer to Jackson and to mediate a spiritual experience. Here it is helpful to pick up on Andrew Crome’s study. Crome researched how My Little Pony fans use their fandom to reinforce their (orthodox) Christian identities. Crome does not conflate fandom and faith but instead proposes a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the way in which religion and popular culture can operate together.⁴³⁵

As I showed earlier in this chapter, all of my informants self-identify as spiritual, religious, or both and use their fandom within their belief-system. Consequently, many approach Jackson’s music as a conduit for a spiritual experience. Elena provided extensive insight into how Jackson’s music functions for her in this way:

His tone and his resonance reach deep into the inner core of my being and transport me to a blissful state of complete relaxation, spreading a powerful influence on all my energy centers. Michael’s music in me is a kind of therapeutic intervention; it invites me to play,

⁴³² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989) 28.

⁴³³ Cf. Hirschkind, ‘The Ethics of Listening’, 623-649.

⁴³⁴ Mark Duffett, ‘Elvis’ Gospel Music: Between the Secular and the Spiritual?’, *Religions* 6:1 (2015) 182-203, 195-196, 199.

⁴³⁵ Crome, ‘Reconsidering religion and fandom’, 414.

to romance, to the expansion of consciousness, to the sacred, to the cosmic and divine in a sense of transcendence and oneness with him, with God and all His creation.

For fans like Elena, Jackson’s music functions as a medium to meet and experience the artist, but also to encounter God. Sandra explained how, for the attentive listener, Jackson’s songs can evoke a certain state of mind that she described as “bliss”: “a sensation that comes when we surrender control of things and let the magic happen”. Likewise, Reese remarked that “sensitive” listeners can reach “Michael’s spiritual energy”. Although few women similarly reflected on such a meta-level on their listening-behavior, I would definitely classify the fans in this study as ‘sensitive listeners’.

The fan reports reveal that Jackson’s death symbolizes personal change and transformation in the women’s lives. It marks a turning point after which my interlocutors came to a new understanding of both Jackson and of themselves. Consequently, most of them consciously decided to continue Jackson’s message of making the world a better place. The fans in this study exhibit that their personal relationship with Jackson makes them particularly recipient to his lyrics, which they approach as a gateway to the popstar’s intellectual legacy. In the next section I concentrate on the women’s desires and efforts to translate Jackson’s messages into their everyday lives. For most of them this means first and foremost acting from a disposition of love, but also to be socially engaged – through committing oneself to charities and creating fan works. Moreover, the next and last section of this chapter displays the effects of a dominant negative public opinion about Jackson on the women’s openness about their identity.

4.8 Be Like Mike: becoming love and taking action

The women in this study tend to wear something that refers to Jackson, for example an MJ-t-shirt, accessories or tattoos. Media scholar John Fiske notes that through adorning oneself with paraphernalia related to their star, fans construct a “social identity” asserting their membership of a particular fan community whilst also minimizing the differences between themselves and the artist of focus.⁴³⁶ Indeed, I found that wearing and carrying Michael-items allows the fans to emotionally connect to Jackson and to each other. Especially during Michael Week, wearing MJ-related clothes is an important expression of group belonging. Rather than trying to physically resemble Jackson, however, I argue that the fans in my study try to mimic Jackson’s behavior.⁴³⁷ Similar to the fans I discussed in chapter two, ‘identification’ and ‘projection’ are important

⁴³⁶ John Fiske, ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’, chapter in: Lisa A. Lewis ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London; New York: Routledge 1992) 30-49, 38.

⁴³⁷ Peter Jan Margry also observed that a significant part of the Jim Morrison-fans in his study tries to resemble the singer in behavior, for example through drinking, drugs and a libertine attitude towards love and sex. Margry, ‘The Performance of a Cult of the Senses: A Feast of Fans at Jim Morrison’s Grave in Paris’, *Traditiones* 63:1 (2007) 141-152, 144-145.

concepts to understand the fans' approach to Jackson.⁴³⁸ I often heard fans say that they try to be 'Mike-Like'. Generally, this translated in a twofold mission: first of all, fans try to cultivate a compassionate and charitable disposition and secondly, they try to have a bigger impact on the world by using their fandom as the basis for civic engagement.⁴³⁹ The fans' stances are, again, a clear example of "civic imagination in practice". In chapter two, I applied this term, that was introduced by media scholar Henry Jenkins, to the German fans.

Ask any MJ-fan what the core message of Michael Jackson is, and she will reply "love". Donna noted that although the message is hardly new, "it seems we must hear it from the right person before we'll listen." The fans in this study connect the principle of love to other values they attribute to Jackson, such as peace, compassion, forgiveness and taking action to bring about change. Many expressed feeling that this ideology is a continuation of their own beliefs and convictions – thus showing 'identification'. Some fans – like Bea, Iris and Nicole – stated that Jackson's fans themselves have a certain sensitivity and openness through which they "appetize" with Jackson in a deep way and subsequently act upon this inspiration. Miranda furthermore stressed the spiritual dimension underlying MJ-fandom: "Elvis has a loyal fan base also, but Michael has a huge fan base motivated by spiritual love. Michael called His fans Soldiers of Love, and I truly believe we take this to heart."

In line with Rumbaugh's previously mentioned understanding of 'projection', the MJ-fans try to emulate Jackson's humanitarian outreach.⁴⁴⁰ Analogous to the question "What Would Jesus Do?", the fans focus on what Michael would do. Some explicitly used the phrase WWMD, but most touched upon it more implicitly by describing an ideal to follow Jackson. Indeed, there are resemblances in the way the women approach Jackson and the imitation of Christ. In her reflection on the spirituality of Salome Sticken, a member of the Modern Devotion, historian Mathilde van Dijk explains the imitation of Christ by women. Van Dijk touches upon a form of ethical self-formation in the teachings of Sticken, who emphasized the importance of tuning the heart and desire to God, synchronizing one's will with that of God. Van Dijk notes that the imitation of Christ is never finished. It is a lifelong project that determined one's thoughts, feelings and actions.⁴⁴¹ This rings close to the way the fans in this study approach Jackson; following Jackson a lifestyle. It is a particular mindset that takes constant effort.

⁴³⁸ Fraser and Brown, 'Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence', 189; Gina Rumbaugh quote in: Jones, 'Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement'.

⁴³⁹ Vivian was the only one who noticed some physical similarities between herself and Jackson. Like Jackson, she frequently wears black loafers and black pants with something red on top.

⁴⁴⁰ Rumbaugh defines 'projection' as a condition "whereby fans take into account how stars would behave in certain situations, and then attempt to imitate that supposed behaviour in their own lives": Jones, 'Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement'.

⁴⁴¹ Mathilde van Dijk, 'Navolging van Christus voor vrouwen verklaard: Salome Sticken (ca.1369-1449) in: Jaap van Amersfoort, Pieta van Beek en Gerrit Schutte eds., *Ora et Labora: Twaalf opstellen over christelijke spiritualiteit in de praktijk* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren 2014) 29-44, 36, 40.

One of the fans who takes the mission to be ‘Mike-like’ very seriously is Page. As a result of “Michael’s inspiration and guidance” she aims to always be kind and generous. Page also tries to save the environment through a vegan-lifestyle, volunteering with animal rescue- and shelter organizations and making people aware of the destruction of the animal agriculture and fishing of the oceans. The approach to Jackson as a tool for self-development comes to the fore in more fan accounts, and also surfaced in the vignette of Ava – with which I opened this chapter. Here I find Crome’s recap of Sandvoss especially relevant:

The appeal of fan texts to individuals often resides in the way in which they act as a mirror of the self. Fans find meaning in the text that is constitutive not only of who they are, but also reflects back an idealised version of the self that encourages development and improvement.⁴⁴²

Indeed, following the song “Man in the Mirror”, in which Jackson sings that change starts with yourself, the fans voiced feeling motivated to proactively heal the world. Sophie described it as an “ecological and charitable responsibility”. The women translate this in myriad ways, including recycling, eco-friendly and organic living, volunteer work and raising money and awareness for charities. But also by participating in protests – like the female march in response to Trump. About half the women is, or tries to be, vegetarian or vegan. Reese regularly promotes charities that Jackson supported in his lifetime such as UNICEF, Make A Wish, ETAF, and LupusLA. She furthermore sews dresses for a charity organization that collects and delivers dresses to underprivileged girls all over the world. While she sews, she listens to Jackson’s music and focuses on her intention “to honor him”. The fans also try to mobilize others online to become more civically engaged. Quite a few used Facebook as a platform to raise awareness (and money) for issues like refugees, animal rights and climate change. This use of social media among fans to evoke change again confirms the studies of Jones and Cohen and Hoffner that I touched upon in chapter two.⁴⁴³

The way the fans collaborate in order to continue Jackson’s activist efforts does not match Mercadante’s conclusion that the anti-organizational bent of the SBNR-movement stands in the way of concerted attempts to effect change.⁴⁴⁴ Here, I argue that it is fandom that unites the women and stimulates them to take concerted action. As I already touched upon in chapter two, it is more common for fans to support the preferred social and political activities of their object of fandom. However, as Jenkins and Shresthova have shown, not all fans are successful in translating

⁴⁴² Crome, ‘Reconsidering religion and fandom’, 406.

⁴⁴³ Cohen and Hoffner, ‘Finding meaning in a celebrity’s death’, 648; Jones, ‘Being of Service: X-Files Fans and Social Engagement’.

⁴⁴⁴ Mercadante, *Belief without borders*, 120.

their vision into collective action – most fans stopping at creative expression.⁴⁴⁵

The level of creativity among the fans is impressively high. Seventeen women create ‘Fan Works’ in honor of Jackson: they write books and poetry, create YouTube videos, paint, and scrapbook, all to express their admiration for Jackson and to spread awareness of his importance. Often fans would donate the proceeds from their artistic endeavors to various (fan-based) charities as a token of their activist mission. Creating art can also be a way to come closer to Jackson. Several fans expressed feeling “very close” to Jackson while creating fan works. It is a common feature of fandom that, inspired by their object of fandom, fans actively create and circulate new forms of cultural production. It is an expression of, what Jenkins has labeled, “participatory culture”. Especially the internet enables fans to easily distribute their creative expressions.⁴⁴⁶ Jenkins notes that fandom can offer an outlet for creative impulses that may be constrained in people’s workday lives.⁴⁴⁷ This is certainly the case for many of the fans I met who discovered skills through their fandom, like Aubree who felt inspired by Jackson’s energy to write a book, even though she never liked to write. Similarly, Vivian commented:

Michael inspired me to be creative and do something outside my comfort zone, so I started on mixed media and art journaling. That is what I hear from many, many others: Michael pushes you to use the creativity that is already there, but you didn’t pursue it because you were afraid to fail and make a fool of yourself.

Dakota is still looking for her purpose. Observing her fellow fans’ creativity and productivity sometimes leaves her feeling uncertain about what her contribution could be. Dakota’s struggle lays bare an ambivalence that I observed more widely within the fan community. On the one hand, fans are looking for a personal connection with Jackson that fits their individual needs and unique purpose. On the other hand, the fans expressed the need to unite in communities. On the basis of personality traits and ideology regarding Jackson, the fans decide who belongs and who is excluded. These communities validate the women’s identity but are also used for the greater good: to get their idol recognized and “heal the world” in emulation of Jackson.

⁴⁴⁵ Jenkins and Shresthova, ‘Up, Up, and Away’.

⁴⁴⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, xxii-xxiii; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press 2006) 131.

⁴⁴⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 42, 280.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the interplay between faith and fandom against the background of the life stories of 26 female MJ-pilgrims. Most of my interlocutors state to have gone through a moment or period of “awakening” that was catalyzed by Jackson’s death. This event interrupted the fans’ day-to-day routine and set in motion introspection that led the women to reevaluate their position and purpose in the world – thus altering their fan identity into that of activist follower. The women in this chapter set Jackson apart from other entertainers on account of his perceived extraordinary talent and altruistic mission. Many ascribed a magnifying “energy” to the popstar – which half of my interlocutors interprets as divine. This chapter sought to shed light on what made the women follow Jackson as a charismatic leader and on how they understand the effect of their awakening on their worldview and self-understanding.

Charismatic leaders tend to stand up in a time of need. There has to be a certain climate that allows this person to attract and mobilize a group of people who feel unheard by society. To understand why people choose to follow a charismatic person, we need to look at this group of receivers and investigate the context-specific process of active appropriation and meaning-making. Indeed, there is a particular context that contributed to the powerful impact of Jackson’s unexpected passing. First of all, the extensive media-coverage dramatized the tragedy of Jackson’s untimely death and drew the public’s attention to his accomplishments. The fans’ life stories reveal that in their twenties and thirties most were occupied with the business of living life. The women were generally in their late forties or fifties when they “awoke” to Jackson, a time when their lives had taken shape and when there was time and reason to look back and reflect. Being contemporaries of Jackson, his death inevitably confronted the women with their own transience and the time that had gone by – which led many to grieve a loss of childhood.

Furthermore, I argue that the women in this study have been affected by more deep-seated societal trends, most noteworthy the “massive subjective turn”. Modern western culture has been characterized as focused on an ‘ethics of authenticity’ that limits the power of traditional authority and the significance of the ideal of a common good. Reflecting the individualization that characterizes the subjective turn, the fan accounts highlighted individual values like autonomy, authenticity and self-actualization. The majority of the fans identifies as ‘Spiritual but not Religious’. They distanced themselves from organized religion, which they associated with patriarchy, hierarchy, obligation, sin and punishment. Nevertheless, their stories demonstrate the influence of embodied religious heritage. The fans often used the specific Christian framework that they are familiar with to understand and describe their relationship with the artist. In opposition to an authoritarian interpretation of God, the women portrayed Jackson as a gentle, anti-authoritarian spiritual teacher who urges them to centralize their own needs and self-exploration. The fans’

emancipatory interpretation of Jackson ties in well with research that connects women's spirituality to self-empowerment. By creating a worldview in which they can feel safe, the fans fostered self-confidence.

In keeping with an ideal of freedom that is central to the subjective turn, the fan accounts demonstrate that the women strive to live from their inner convictions. This influences their approach to Jackson; each fan created her own tailor-made relationship with the singer. It struck me that the women tended to create a version of Michael that most resembles them, for example regarding faith, values and often also appearance. It is this subjectivism that probably also contributed to the fans' color-blindness and their minimization of Jackson's sexuality. Although I interpret the downplaying of Jackson's sexuality also as a weapon against the lingering allegations of child abuse that stick to Jackson's image.

Paradoxically, I would argue that it is precisely the limitless freedom and boundless choices characterizing the subjective turn in western society that fosters a need for a charismatic figure to take the lead. This explains the appeal of icons such as Michael Jackson in modern culture. Indeed, my findings exhibit the powerful influence of popular culture as a source of belonging and direction. Furthermore, this chapter confirms the argument of Jenkins that popular culture can inspire "civic imagination in practice": the women's fan-attachment to Jackson inspires ethical self-formation and change. As a charismatic spokesperson, Jackson embodies the women's collective discontent with the spirit of their time, while he also offers a message of hope. The fans' emphasis on the communal values of love, unity and collective activism can be interpreted as a counter response to the subjective turn as it captures a critique on individualism, passivity and polarization. The fans' spiritual experience of Jackson stimulates their motivation to follow his example.

Following Crome, I have suggested to study the interplay between fandom and faith. My analysis exemplifies that the women's fandom does not pose a threat to, nor replaces their former beliefs. The women's fan-attachment to Jackson should not be conceived of as a new religion. Instead, the fans use their pre-existing worldviews to interpret Jackson – presenting him as an extraordinary messenger of God. All the while, their fandom offers the women concrete guidelines to live their spirituality. The popstar offers a palpable way for the women to express their worldview and encounter the transcendental in an immediate manner. By mixing fandom and faith the fans have created their own worldview. Many expressed that through Jackson they feel closer to God. Few had trouble bringing these worlds together; many rather explained that it made sense to them that, after 2000 years, God had sent a new messenger to show mankind how to live. In a way, these fans explained, following Jackson is not very different from following Jesus or other enlightened beings; the message of love is the same, the difference is who strikes you.

Against common views on modern-day SBNRs as individualistic, centered on personal fulfillment and not willing to commit, my findings align with the conclusions of Knoblauch

and Kaell that spirituality should not be equated with individualism and that individualism is misunderstood if it is viewed in opposition to collectivity. Although my interviewees emphasized their personal unique relationship with Jackson, they also showed a need for and loyalty to a community. Moreover, the fans' efforts towards a common good transcends individualism. Through their focus on Jackson, my interviewees tried to nurture a compassionate attitude and aimed to use their unique talents towards a higher good. This also came to the fore in the fans' approach to Jackson's music as a 'moral space' and their efforts to spread awareness through fan-art and social activism. Although it happens more often that fans organize around social causes, the MJ-fans' ardent and successful dedication to continue Jackson's humanitarian legacy collectively is rare. The influence of the subjective turn and the SBNR-movement, in combination with the fans' discontent with their zeitgeist and Jackson's charismatic answer explain the activism of this group of fans.

In spite of the women's different cultural and geographical backgrounds, I see many parallels in the ways they described Jackson and their relationship with him. I was struck by the resemblance between their 'Michael stories', which followed a remarkably similar pattern. Through being in online contact on a daily basis, these women have together created a broad-based conversion narrative on account of their 'disenfranchised grief'. This not only demonstrates the social dimension of worldview, but also the power of the internet. However, being an MJ-follower is not always easy, certainly not since the release of *Leaving Neverland*. The women in this study validate and support each other's convictions.

Conclusions:
Why and how fandom matters

Being one of the most iconic entertainers of the twentieth century, Michael Jackson has left his mark on contemporary popular culture. This research has explored the impact of this popstar on his followers, mapping and analyzing their worldviews, ethics and (group)identity through a focus on the case study of ‘Michaeling’. Against the context of the decline of traditional religious institutions and the rise of the SBNR-movement that characterizes what Taylor has coined ‘the subjective turn’ I highlighted popular culture as an important source for establishing and reinforcing a moral self and a meaningful existence. I specifically emphasized the significance of the influence of music-listening as a reflexive practice that has the power to affect our selves and daily habits, as it draws us into emotive alliances with performers and the performers’ other followers.

The main question addressed in this thesis is what the case study of ‘Michaeling’ can tell us about the ways in which contemporary people employ fandom, religious cultural heritage, and new media as sources to negotiate a worldview, sacred forms and an ethical self. In the introduction I presented the conceptual tools I use to approach Michael Jackson fandom as synthesizing popular culture and religion. As a first point of entry I ended the chapter by depicting how the popstar used his background as a Jehovah’s Witness as a source of inspiration and presented his art as a medium between heaven and earth, encouraging his fans as “soldiers of love” to be part of his global mission to “Heal the World”.

Chapter one centered on the online faith-based Major Love Prayer (MLP). This case study showed that the fans deploy symbols and practices that are rooted in Christianity and eastern religions to enforce the sacred significance of humanitarianism, environmentalism and moral self-actualization. This chapter also demonstrated the importance of the internet as a digital environment for modern people to develop and perform their fan practices and beliefs on their own terms. At the same time, the MLP illustrated a need for instruction, which is exemplified by the authority of administrator Donna and the prayer-guidelines on the MLP-website. This case study also gave a first sketch of the contours of the social and activist dimension of fandom. I have demonstrated that by performing the ritual together, the fans feel connected to something greater and feel motivated to make a change in the world.

Chapter two further developed the argument that fandom can become the basis for civic engagement. My analysis of the grassroots MJ-memorial in Munich showed the importance of ritualization for coping with loss, and pointed out the influence of televised public mourning on people’s behavior after the tragic deaths of public figures. Moreover, MJ’s LEGACY’s appropriation of the Di Lasso statue in the city center of Munich as an MJ-shrine reveals the kind of power-conflicts that tend to occur in fan communities. In this chapter I focused on what the MJ-memorial means for the fans who visit and take care of it. Since my last visit in 2017 the public debate in both North America and Europe around contested statues has intensified, in

some cases resulting in the pulling down of controversial monuments, like those of slave traders. It would be an interesting discussion to analyze the MJ-memorial against the background of this discussion around contested statues, certainly after the recent documentary.

Chapter three zoomed in on the act of traveling to Michael-places. My findings show that, fitting the modern 'subjective turn', the women appropriate the format of pilgrimage as a tool for their individual growing processes in the here and now. However, the fans also use 'Michaeling' to draw closer to Jackson's humanitarian legacy and to each other as a fan community. This final case study thus again underscored the greater good and the bonding and sociality that underlies the women's worldview and fandom. Chapter four introduced the fandom and worldviews of the 26 female MJ-pilgrims whose stories also informed chapter three. This chapter identified the influence of the subjective turn and the SBNR-movement for making the fans receptive to follow Jackson as an ethical leader. I demonstrated how popular music can become a 'moral space', since the fans consciously try to cultivate an ethical habitus by listening to Jackson's songs. I argued that while the women set Jackson apart as a sacred authority, they use his authority as a tool for their own self-actualization and autonomy.

My research has brought to the fore that the fans follow Jackson's self-portrayal as a divine messenger and that they have fostered a particular moral physiology based on their fan attachment. I have argued that the women are sensitive and open to receive the impact of the sacred rituals that they have created by merging fandom, their religious heritage and the use of new media. This same sensorium that they activate allows them to open up to and be inspired by the messages in Jackson's music. The women's testimonies illustrate that they are aware of the bodily and mental techniques they have to use to create a special atmosphere and mindset that allows them to perform their rituals so as to benefit most from these techniques. Paradoxically, the fan accounts stress both individualism and collectivism. On the one hand, all women interviewed emphasized their personal unique relationship with Jackson through which they develop themselves and strengthen their relationship with the divine. At the same time, both the fan statements and my observations during Michael Week, testify to a broad-based conversion narrative that the fans have created together by being in online contact on a daily basis to cope with and account for their 'disenfranchised grief'. What comes to the fore based on the case studies and the life stories of the women is that the fans present Jackson as an ethical leader and voice a shared global mission to continue his legacy together.

The analysis of 'Michaeling' contributes to both academic and societal debates about the sacred in the modern world and how people mediate a closeness to sacred forms. This study demonstrates that contemporary people draw on multiple sources to find inspiration for a meaningful life and that they use both cultural traditions, such as religion, as well as new cultural phenomena, such as new media to express this worldview. I therefore argue that fandom can play

a central role in (re)directing one's mindset towards sacred principles. In line with the subjective turn, the fans highlight individual values like autonomy, authenticity and self-actualization. However, they simultaneously underscore the communal values of love, unity, and collective activism, which can be interpreted as a counter response to the subjective turn, as it captures the fans' criticism of individualism, passivity and polarization. The fan accounts reveal a search for belonging and guidance. Against the backdrop of the subjective turn, their fandom is an important source for structure, purpose and (group)identity. Their stories show that developing and living in accordance with a worldview and performing ritual are intrinsically social processes. Fans frequently stated that the presence of others intensified the experience of their rituals – including 'Michaeling', the MLP and taking care of the MJ-memorial. Together, the fans build on a new narrative that works for them. Through self-chosen sacred rituals they confirm and validate their identity and take on life.

Against common interpretations and expectations of modern-day SBNRs as exclusively focused on personal fulfillment and not willing to commit, this study has demonstrated the importance of the social and communal dimensions of contemporary meaning-making to experience and bring in the sacred. Modern western culture has been characterized as focused on an 'ethics of authenticity' that limits the power of traditional authority and the significance of the ideal of a common good. Theologian Linda Mercadante, for example, has shown that the anti-institutional bend of SBNRs usually prevents them from uniting, let alone effect social active change as a group. My findings disclose a different interpretation of contemporary spirituality, in consistence with the conclusions of the sociologist Hubert Knoblauch and the anthropologist Hillary Kaell, that individualism is misunderstood if it is viewed in opposition to collectivity. The fans in this study do unite and as a group they effect change. I think the key here concerns the power of fandom to foster critical awareness. Following Jackson brings the women together and stimulates them to take action.

The fans I studied are not unique. Indeed, scholars within the field of fan studies like Henry Jenkins and Bethan Jones have shown that fans more commonly organize around social causes. However, the MJ-fans' long-term activist dedication to raise money or awareness for specific causes without a direct impetus from a celebrity is rare in fandom. I argue that the fans' motivation and commitment rests in a large part on the personal spiritual connection they feel with Jackson. What the fans interpret as Jackson's profanation by public opinion and martyrdom fuel their civic engagement. Although it is not uncommon within celebrity fandom that fans develop strong feelings for their celebrity of focus, the MJ-fans in this study are exceptional in the spiritual connection that many report having with Jackson and their dedication to continue his humanitarian legacy, especially because Jackson is dead.

In line with Weber's argument that charismatic leaders arise in time of need, the fans'

belief in and devotion to Michael Jackson can be explained in terms of the women's desire for change in their personal lives and in the world, thus showing the powerful influence of popular culture as a source that can inspire change. The flip side of that is obviously Jackson's 'branding'. Besides being a talented entertainer Jackson was also a successful businessman who understood the power of branding. He set himself apart in his art, in his physical appearance and in his personal life. Jackson's personal brand was reinforced by the media event of his death and the posthumous release of *This is It*. The fans in this study respond to the 'social body' of Jackson: the mediatized icon which they have appropriated to fit their personal lives. The women are unhappy with the zeitgeist of their time and many bemoaned a societal lack of morality. They approach Jackson as voicing their discontent and their vision of an ideal world, using his art to critically address the world around them, for instance to protest against the exploitation of animals and natural resources. Jackson thus presents a focal point of collective agitation in that this particular group of fans use their fandom to unite and mobilize. It fits the subjective turn that the women understand themselves as being capable to make a unique contribution to the world and that they are not dependent on the approval of an outside authority to take action. However, the fans transcend individualism because they gather and cultivate their unique talents for a common good. This does not devalue their individualism. Neither do the ideals of self-sufficiency, independence and personal prosperity entail a loss of a sense of community or an absence of solidarity.

The sacred rituals that the fans have created show us how fandom can bring forward new sensational forms. The fans consciously mediate an experience of sacred forms and sometimes an experience of the transcendental. It is not the values that underlie the fans' worldviews that are so special in and of themselves. The sacred forms that the women's stories highlight, reflect cultural shifts in modern society: they show the influence of the subjective turn with its dimensions of individualism, self-actualization and free expression. The sacralization of nature, child-care and humanitarianism fit the sacred forms in modern society identified by Lynch. What these fans show us, is that popular culture is an important field to which people turn to develop, experience and express their worldview. It is their *ways* of connecting, the particular media that the fans choose to connect with and experience these principles that stand out and provide us with new insights concerning the relation between fandom, religion and sacred forms. Through their fan attachment to Michael Jackson the women come into contact with these sacred forms. The fans' engagement with Jackson on the internet furthermore gives insight into how modern media, especially the internet, are used to express, validate and develop a worldview.

Jackson's spiritual agency might come across as a paradox: as a figure bound to 'secular' popular culture, the popstar brings the fans closer to an experience of God. I have argued that this does not mean that he represents the sacred in a new religion. In fact, my point is rather

the opposite: the women's fandom does not pose a threat to, nor replaces their original beliefs. Instead, the fans' stories and behavior show a synthesis of faith and fandom. This goes both ways: the fans affirm Jackson's importance by means of faith by presenting him as a messenger of God, and they subsequently use him to grow and to develop their beliefs. By borrowing from both cultural domains the fans have constructed their own worldview. Although the women distance themselves verbally from institutionalized religion, their stories and behavior show that it continues to inform them. They take inspiration from Christianity for many of the rituals they perform – albeit with their own twist – and also frequently use religious language, such as talking about Jesus and God. More in general I would argue that Christianity is a (symbolic) frame of reference in the women's views on the specialness of Jackson and their expressions of the depth of their feelings for him.

Most of my interlocutors come from America. Others are from Western Europe, Australia and South-America. Although they more or less belong to the same age group, are predominantly white and have Christian backgrounds, when I began my research I expected to find significant differences between their stories based on differences in their specific cultural and religious backgrounds. This assumption proved to be wrong. I argue that, besides fandom, the internet is the uniting factor here. This also explains why the women told similar awakening-stories. From the time of its emergence, the internet has developed into a parallel field of existence, which has become intertwined with everyday life. To gain a fuller understanding of the workings of identification and appropriation, it would be very interesting to see how fans whose gender, age, culture, faith and ethnicity intersect in different ways approach Jackson and what sacred forms these groups attach to him. I invite other scholars to further develop these.

Looking at the women's personal stories what comes to the fore is the intimate relationship they have with Jackson. They call upon him as a dear friend to help in their lives. By attributing character traits to Jackson that in Western societies are considered as traditionally feminine, the women characterized him as safe and approachable. In their interpretation of Jackson, the fans set him against the commands of an authoritative church, husband or family. Even though they portray Jackson as wise, they shape him not as a leader but as a compassionate coach who is always by their side to support them and help them grow. The fans used terms like "freedom", "self-healing", "inner peace", and "confidence" to describe the effect of their awakening. My findings correspond with research that explains the appeal of spirituality for women as connected to self-empowerment as a response to the male authority of churches and a struggle for selfhood relating to wanting to please others. The fans' comments show that they appropriate Jackson to acquire more agency and centralize their own needs, for instance by traveling to Michael Week on their own or finding the courage to try new things creatively. The women's identification with Jackson and reading him as encouraging self-growth, enhances their confidence and self-esteem.

The women's (spiritual) awakening to Jackson urged them to reconsider their position and purpose in the world which resulted in a change of identity and dedication to civic engagement.

To sum up, this study highlighted the significance of celebrity fandom and popular music as research topics for the study of contemporary religion in the West. I have argued that the popular negative constructions of celebrity-focused fans needs to be reexamined. I have demonstrated in particular that the (neglected) study of mature adults and seniors demonstrates the impact of fandom: how it is a major constituent of their identity formation and how the relationship between the fans and their object evolves in later life. The women's fan-art, activism and reflexive consumption of music provide important evidence for thinking of celebrity audiences as active agents instead of passive consumers and exemplifies how fandom can form the basis for ethical self-fashioning and collective action. Fandom matters. It is more than mere entertainment. It is a source for belonging, consolation, and hope and can be used to make a change, not only in people's personal lives but also in society at large.

Dutch Summary

Als een van de meest iconische entertainers van de twintigste eeuw heeft Michael Jackson zijn stempel gedrukt op de hedendaagse pop cultuur. Jackson stierf onverwacht op 25 juni 2009 aan de vooravond van zijn comeback tour *This Is It*. In de nasleep van zijn dood organiseerden fans herdenkingspraktijken ter nagedachtenis van The King of Pop om hun toewijding te uiten en hun verlies een plek te geven. De fans noemen dit ‘Michaeling’. Een van de belangrijkste rituelen is de jaarlijkse pelgrimage tijdens ‘Michael Week’, in de week rond Jacksons sterfdatum. In dit onderzoek richt ik mij op een groep fans die regelmatig ‘Michael-plekken’ bezoekt. Ik noem hen ‘MJ-pelgrims’ en analyseer welke rol Michael Jackson speelt in hun leven. Hierbij onderzoek ik de impact van de popster op de levensovertuiging en (groeps)identiteit van zijn volgers.

De MJ-pelgrims die centraal staan in deze dissertatie zijn volwassen vrouwen van boven de 45 die zichzelf hebben gecommitteerd aan Jackson als morele gids voor hun dagelijks leven. Geïnspireerd door Jacksons leven en muziek pogen deze fans zichzelf en de wereld om hen heen te verbeteren. De fans gebruiken Jacksons muziek om hun emoties en moreel kompas te sturen en om hun spiritualiteit te ervaren. Zodoende haakt deze studie aan bij hedendaags onderzoek binnen de etnomusicologie waarin muziek wordt benaderd als reflexief medium voor identiteitsvorming in het alledaagse leven. Dit proefschrift toont de complexiteit van fandom. Met behulp van een narratieve, biografische aanpak laat ik zien dat MJ-pelgrims doelbewust putten uit hun fandom voor het vormgeven van hun wereldbeeld en ter cultivatie van een activistische inborst.

Dit proefschrift bevindt zich in een opkomend veld binnen de godsdienstwetenschap, namelijk het onderzoek van nieuwe vormen van zingeving in een gesecculariseerde cultuur. De hoofdvraag die ten grondslag ligt aan mijn studie is wat de casus van ‘Michaeling’ ons kan vertellen over de manieren waarop hedendaagse mensen fandom, religieus cultureel erfgoed, en nieuwe media gebruiken als bronnen om tot een ‘worldview’, ‘sacred forms’ en een moreel zelf te komen. Ik deze studie gebruik ik de term ‘worldview’ zoals beschreven door antropoloog André Droogers. Droogers benadert ‘worldview’ als dat wat gecreëerd wordt in het proces van het stellen en beantwoorden van vijf ultieme vragen over wat mooi, goed, belangrijk, waar en authentiek is. Ik heb voor de term ‘worldview’ gekozen omdat de meerderheid van de fans in deze studie zich niet identificeert als religieus, maar de voorkeur geeft aan de term spiritueel. Wanneer ik de term religie gebruik, ga ik uit van het christendom als model, omdat dit het meest overeenkomt met het dominante wereldbeeld waarin de meeste vrouwen in deze studie zijn gesocialiseerd – doorgegeven door familie of onder invloed van christelijk cultureel erfgoed in het Westen. Mijn gebruik van ‘the sacred’ volgt socioloog Gordon Lynch. Lynch ziet ‘sacred forms’ als die dingen die mensen beschouwen als ultieme waarheid en essentieel voor het leven zelf. Mijn

interpretatie van het ‘morele zelf’ is geïnspireerd op de benadering van ‘ethical self-formation’ van de antropoloog Saba Mahmood. Zodoende benader ik een morele habitus als gevormd en gesterkt in het dagelijks leven door middel van rituelen en alledaagse praktijken die worden uitgevoerd met een bepaalde ‘ethische focus’.

Ik beantwoord mijn centrale onderzoeksvraag op basis van een analyse van drie uitingen van ‘Michaeling’: 1. het virtuele, maandelijks gebed ‘the Major Love Prayer’, 2. de *grassroots* MJ-herdenkplek in München en 3. de bovengenoemde pelgrimage naar Michael-plekken tijdens het jaarlijkse evenement ‘Michael Week’ in Los Angeles. In de inleiding van de dissertatie presenteer ik het conceptuele raamwerk van waaruit ik ‘Michaeling’ analyseer. Tegen de achtergrond van de afnemende invloed van traditionele religieuze instituten en de groei van de zogenaamde ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’-beweging (SBNR), benadruk ik de invloed van ‘the subjective turn’: een culturele shift die volgens filosoof Charles Taylor de moderne westerse cultuur karakteriseert en wordt gekenmerkt door een zoektocht naar iemands unieke stem waarbij zelfactualisatie en authenticiteit idealen zijn. Binnen dit ideaal is beperkt ruimte voor de macht van traditionele autoriteit zoals dat van religieuze instituten.

Ik beargumenteer dat een belangrijke inspiratiebron voor hedendaagse zingeving zgn. *popular culture* is – met fandom als concrete case study. Door middel van fandom communiceren mensen over wie ze zijn, wat ze geloven en doen, en waarom. Tegelijkertijd putten mensen nog regelmatig uit (christelijk) religieus erfgoed, bewust of onbewust. Dit leidt ertoe dat er in westerse samenlevingen bij nieuwe vormen van spiritualiteit vaak een combinatie te vinden is tussen alledaagse- en religieuze ideeën en handelingen, traditioneel en nieuw. Michael Jackson is bij uitstek een popster die de gebieden van pop cultuur en religie verbindt. Door in te zoomen op Jacksons carrière en biografie laat ik zien hoe de zanger zijn achtergrond als Jehova’s Getuige, en later zijn spirituele exploratie, gebruikte als bron van inspiratie voor zijn kunst. Jackson presenteerde zijn muziek expliciet als medium tussen hemel en aarde en moedigde zijn fans aan om deel te nemen aan zijn mondiale missie om de wereld te helen (“to Heal the World”).

Na de inleiding bespreek ik in drie hoofdstukken steeds een uiting van ‘Michaeling’. Hoofdstuk een richt zich op de Major Love Prayer (MLP): een maandelijks online gebed dat deelnemers aanspoort om de boodschap van Jackson te internaliseren en te verspreiden door middel van meditatie op Jacksons muziek. Deze casus wijst uit dat de fans symbolen en gebruiken aanwenden die geworteld zijn in het christendom en oosterse religies, zo populair in veel SBNR-milieus, om zo de ‘sacred forms’ te versterken van filantropie, milieuactivisme, en zelfactualisatie. Dit hoofdstuk toont ook het belang van het internet als digitale omgeving voor hedendaagse mensen om hun fan-gebruiken en geloofsovertuiging te ontwikkelen en te praktiseren op hun eigen manier. Tegelijkertijd illustreert de MLP een behoefte aan instructie. Dit blijkt uit de autoriteit die de MLP-participanten toekennen aan MLP-leider Donna en de

gebedsregels op de MLP-website. Deze casus geeft een eerste inzage in de contouren van de sociale en activistische dimensie van het type fandom dat centraal staat in dit onderzoek. Door tegelijkertijd het ritueel uit te voeren, voelen de fans zich verbonden met iets buiten henzelf – door sommigen geïnterpreteerd als een godservaring. Dit motiveert velen om zich in te zetten voor een betere wereld.

Hoofdstuk twee bouwt voort op het argument dat fandom de basis kan zijn voor maatschappelijke betrokkenheid en burgerparticipatie. In dit hoofdstuk staat de casus van de MJ-gedenkplek in München centraal. In het stadshart van München hebben fans na Jacksons dood een standbeeld van Orlando Di Lasso getransformeerd in een MJ-heiligdom. Ik ga in op wat deze plek betekent voor de fans die het bezoeken en onderhouden. Mijn analyse van deze ‘grassroots memorial’ toont het belang van publieke ritualisering voor rouwverwerking en kan dusdanig worden geïnterpreteerd vanuit het fenomeen dat socioloog Tony Walter het ‘new public mourning’ heeft genoemd. Ook illustreert deze casus de invloed van de media op het gedrag van mensen na de tragische dood van publieke figuren en geeft inzicht in het dagelijks functioneren van een pelgrimsplaats. De MJ-site in München blijkt net zo ‘contested’ als veel andere pelgrimsplaatsen.

Hoofdstuk drie is een analytische beschrijving van het evenement ‘Michael Week’: de week voorafgaand aan de sterfdag van Jackson waarin speciale activiteiten worden georganiseerd om zijn nalatenschap te herdenken en eren. Dit hoofdstuk is gestoeld op mijn veldwerk tijdens dit evenement, tezamen met de pelgrimage ervaringen van 26 MJ-pelgrims. Mijn bevindingen tonen dat, in overeenstemming met de eerdergenoemde ‘subjective turn’, de vrouwen in mijn studie het format van pelgrimage gebruiken als ritueel voor hun individuele groei in het hier en nu. Echter, de fans gebruiken ‘Michaeling’ ook om Jacksons filantropische werk voort te zetten en om dichterbij elkaar te komen als fangemeenschap. Deze laatste casus onderstreept daarmee een conclusie die ook al in de voorgaande hoofdstukken aan het licht kwam, namelijk dat een diepewortelde wens tot verbinding en politiek engagement ten grondslag liggen aan de fans hun wereldbeeld en fandom.

Het vierde en laatste hoofdstuk geeft een verdieping op de drie casus. In dit slothoofdstuk reflecteer ik op de fandom en zingeving van de 26 MJ-pelgrims om zo inzicht te geven in welke factoren hebben bijgedragen aan het ontstaan van ‘Michaeling’. Hoofdstuk vier grijpt terug op de invloed van de ‘subjective turn’ en de SBNR-beweging als trends die de fans ontvankelijk hebben gemaakt om Jackson te volgen als ethisch leider. Ik betoog dat, hoewel de vrouwen Jackson apart zetten als ‘sacred’ autoriteit, ze tegelijkertijd zijn autoriteit gebruiken als instrument voor hun individuele zoektocht naar zelfactualisatie en autonomie.

De vier hoofdstukken laten zien hoe de vrouwen die ik bestudeerde zich kunst en religieus erfgoed toe-eigenen om hun levensovertuiging te ontwikkelen en uiten. De ‘Michaeling’-

herdenkingsrituelen tonen dat juist in onze huidige, cultureel heterogene maatschappij het belangrijk is om aandacht te houden voor zowel traditie als verandering, die, zoals dit proefschrift aantoon, vaak samenkomen in iemands wereldbeeld. Hoewel het merendeel van de fans in deze studie zichzelf verbaal distantieert van geïnstitutionaliseerde religie, wijzen hun verhalen en gedrag uit dat het hun ook voedt. De vrouwen halen inspiratie uit het christendom voor veel van hun rituelen – al is het met hun eigen twist. Ook gebruikt menig fan religieuze taal, bijvoorbeeld door te spreken over Jezus en God of door vergelijkingen te trekken tussen bepaalde ‘Michael-plekken’ en religieuze plekken zoals Bethlehem. In algemene zin betoog ik dat het christendom een (symbolisch) kader is dat de beeldvorming van de vrouwen voedt en hun interpretatie van Jackson beïnvloedt tezamen met hun uitingen van de diepte van hun gevoelens voor hem.

In navolging van antropologen als Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind en Birgit Meyer, benadrukt deze studie het belang van het lichaam voor identiteitsvorming en het ervaren van zingeving. Door middel van zelfgekozen rituelen valideren de fans hun identiteit en kijk op de wereld. Deze studie betuigt bovendien dat de fans een bepaalde morele fysiologie hebben gecultiveerd gebaseerd op hun interpretatie van Jackson als goddelijke boodschapper. De getuigenissen van de vrouwen laten zien dat ze zich bewust zijn van de lichamelijke en mentale technieken die ze moeten gebruiken om een speciale atmosfeer en *mindset* te scheppen die hun in staat stellen om hun rituelen uit te voeren op een manier waarop ze er het meeste voordeel aan hebben. Ditzelfde sensorium maakt het mogelijk om geïnspireerd te raken door de boodschap in Jacksons muziek. Wat deze fans ons laten zien, is dat het de *manieren* van verbinden zijn, de specifieke media die de fans kiezen voor verbinding, die ons nieuwe inzichten verschaffen met betrekking tot de relatie tussen fandom, religie en the sacred.

In tegenstelling tot gebruikelijke interpretaties en verwachtingen van moderne SBNR-mensen als exclusief gericht op persoonlijke vervulling, benadrukt deze studie het belang van het sociale en gemeenschappelijke voor zingeving. Hoewel de fans zoeken naar een directe, persoonlijke ervaring van Jackson en God, laten mijn bevindingen zien dat individualisme collectiviteit niet uitsluit. De sleutel ligt deels in de kracht van fandom: het volgen van Jackson brengt de vrouwen samen en stimuleert hen om actie te ondernemen. In lijn met ‘the subjective turn’ achten de vrouwen zichzelf in staat om een unieke bijdrage te leveren aan de wereld onafhankelijk van de goedkeuring van een externe autoriteit. De fans, echter, overstijgen individualisme omdat ze hun unieke talenten cultiveren voor algemeen welzijn (‘a common good’). Dit devalueert hun individualisme niet. Noch betekenen de idealen van zelfredzaamheid, onafhankelijkheid en persoonlijke welvaart een verlies van een groepsgevoel of het ontbreken van solidariteit.

De langdurige activistische toewijding van MJ-fans om geld in te zamelen en bewustwording te creëren voor specifieke doeleinden zonder de directe prikkel van een beroemdheid is zeldzaam binnen fandom. In overeenkomst met Webers argument dat charismatisch leiderschap ontstaat

in tijden van nood, kan de fans' geloof in en toewijding tot Michael Jackson verklaard worden door hun verlangen naar verandering in hun persoonlijke leven en in de wereld. Ze reageren op de gemediatiseerde icoon 'Michael Jackson' en benaderen hem als iemand die hun persoonlijke onvrede verwoordt en hun visie van een ideale wereld. Bovendien rust de commitment van de fans op de spirituele verbondenheid die ze voelen met Jackson. Jacksons spirituele 'agency' lijkt een paradox: als een figuur die gebonden is aan het 'seculiere' popular culture, brengt de popster de fans dichterbij een godservaring. Ik beargumenteer dat dit niet betekent dat Jackson 'the sacred' representeert in een nieuwe religie. Mijn punt is eerder het omgekeerde: de fandom van de vrouwen vervangt niet hun oorspronkelijke geloof, maar wordt ermee geïntegreerd. De fans presenteren Jackson als een boodschapper van God, waarna ze hem gebruiken als medium om hun oorspronkelijke geloof te ontwikkelen.

Deze studie onderstreept het belang van popular culture – meer specifiek celebrity-fandom en populaire muziek – als onderzoeksonderwerpen voor de studie van hedendaagse zingeving in het Westen. De casus van 'Michaeling' bewijst hoe fandom de basis kan vormen voor morele zelfontwikkeling en collectieve actie. Fandom doet ertoe. Het is een bron voor verbondenheid, troost, en hoop, en het kan gebruikt worden om de status quo te veranderen, niet alleen in iemands persoonlijke leven, maar ook in de samenleving als geheel.

Appendix I

“I know I can do it, because Michael wants me to do it”

Erica's body displays her love for Jackson. She wears “Michael clothing and jewelry” and several tattoos subtly refer to the artist. Before Jackson's death, the only thing she knew about him was his year of birth because they were the same age. It was Jackson's death that “awoke” her and initiated the “biggest turning point” in her life, changing both her inner- and outer self. Until that point, Erica characterized her life as “great”, but also “boring”. She looks back on a happy childhood with her sister, raised by her single mom. Her mother believed in God but they did not go to church and Erica claimed that already as child she “didn't like any religions”. Nonetheless, she simultaneously described a lifelong search towards a close connection with God to whom she always prayed at night. This seeming contradiction can be explained by her interpretation of God, whom she disconnects from any specific denomination and equates with “love”. Throughout her narrative, Erica kept returning to her lifelong quest to find “something” that would agree with her “inner knowing”.

When she was 19, Erica got married and moved out of her parental house. She remembers feeling confident to start a new life and this event marks the first big change in her biography. Today, she looks back on the marriage with mixed feelings. Although she “loved getting married”, she now interprets her decision as fitting in a life phase that she characterized as “doing the right thing”: “being a good person, having a job, buying a car...”. Over the course of 13 years, Erica started to feel “suffocated”. Although her marriage was “fine” and her husband “a great guy”, she wanted a divorce. She was scared, having two small children, but left all the same. This decision has come to symbolize for her the moment she “stopped making all the right choices”. In hindsight, she called her divorce her “first awakening” and the second turning point in her life. The time from her divorce until her awakening to Jackson presents one long existential search for meaning and purpose during which she read many self-help- and New Age books, including *A Course in Miracles* by Helen Schucman. It made her realize that she had the power to take control of her own life. During this “seeking” life phase, Erica met her current-husband with whom she had another daughter and together with whom she started a business. Despite her hectic “great life”, Erica kept “seeking something else”, but she never found a church that “felt right”. Nor did she feel a personal connection with God.

It was the instant she watched Jackson's memorial that Erica was "struck" by love: "I physically felt this huge opening of my heart (...) I suddenly felt a connection to everyone and everything. I cared, as he had cared." Erica explained that she felt being called by Jackson to join him in healing the world. But she also felt like the artist was her best friend that she had lost. She cried for two years, not understanding why, only knowing "it was him" and "it was good". Every night, Erica read about Jackson on her computer to find out what had happened. "My whole intellect had to catch up", she said. Her research of Jackson's humanitarian effort inspired Erica to evaluate her own civic engagement: "I felt I had not done enough for the world", she reflected.

She realized her "whole life had to change. I was woken up." Erica decided from then onwards to "always say yes" and never look back. She classified the moment from her "awakening" onwards as "bliss" and "heaven", because she found her "answer". "I used to be afraid of dying", she said, "(But) if I die right now, I would be so happy, because I feel like I am satisfied with who I am and what I leave behind. I just feel so free and safe." Erica's family was at first surprised by her "apparent obsession with Michael" not understanding the reason for the depth of her devotion to him. Although Erica thinks they hoped it would go away with time, she believes they have benefitted from her change because she has become a more loving person.

Erica calls herself "spiritual but not religious". She described her worldview as follows:

Before Michael, I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with God. Now I do. I find it easier to understand other points of view and accept people as they are, because I am confident and secure in my beliefs. Michael has everything to do with all of it. He is my example, my inspiration, my guide, and my greatest love.

Erica was outspoken and straightforward about her view on religion – mostly implying Catholicism. "It's just pleasing, so that you don't go to hell", she said. Religion, she argued, is inauthentic because it centers on obligation, discourages critical investigation and asks for a leap of faith. Erica thinks this is precisely its appeal: "people like to be told what to think, (so) they choose to follow somebody. It is scary to make up your own mind." Erica explained that there is nothing wrong with religion per se. It is the truth claims made by religious organizations that she deems wrong.

Jackson, who Erica attaches to spirituality, is the opposite in her view; he has no secrets and there is no obligation. Her spirituality is focused on the here and now: Jackson made

her see that “heaven is here”. Her worldview is furthermore about free will; giving without wanting anything back. She also connects her spirituality to courage, confidence and taking the responsibility to “think for yourself”. Jackson, she said, invites critical reflection, because he wants people to find their own right path. According to Erica, his message is: “that we have unlimited potential and have a responsibility to take action”. With Jackson, there is no Satan or evil, and there are no wrong choices, punishments or going to hell. Life is about endless opportunities to “learn and grow” all to “become love”. Jackson has given Erica the reassurance that whatever she chooses to do “it is all safe” and the confidence to believe in herself. She sees Jackson as a spiritual leader who saved the world like Jesus did:

He’s purely good, he’s purely loving, he’s purely behind us, he loves us completely and that’s the God that I was looking for. That I knew in my childhood. (...) that’s my answer, my one thing that I was looking in all the self-help books. It was Michael. Which is the last thing that you would expect.

Why Jackson chose her, she does not know, but Erica is immensely grateful he “saved” her. Because she has found her purpose, as well as out of gratitude “for all he did for the world”, she feels “a deep desire” to give back to Jackson in any way she can: “his love for children, animals and the planet is now ours.” For Erica, “living Michael” means participating in charitable projects, but mostly to “*be* love in all situations”, which she sees as the way to Jackson, God and enlightenment. She has one other point on her agenda, namely to inspire others to see Jackson’s true importance: “I think he is asking us to bring them there. But not in the form of a religion”. Being shy by nature, Jackson’s presence in Erica’s life has made her more confident and brave. Because of him she has done things that are “completely out of character”, like publishing her own book and speaking in public. Looking at the future, Erica said: “I feel like the sky is the limit. It’s up to me. This is only the beginning.”. Whatever happens, Erica feels secure and confident: “I know I can do it, because Michael wants me to do it.”

Appendix II

“Every year when I leave I think ‘I hope I will see you again’”

The living room of 67-year old Dutch Iris is heavily decorated with MJ-posters and other Jackson memorabilia including pillows, statuettes and sunflowers – Jackson’s favorite flower. Iris is one of the nine women in this study who became a fan after Jackson’s death. This event catalyzed an unprecedented mourning process in Iris, which she described as “very confusing” and “horrible”. Having worked for the police for 16 years, she thought she had seen her fair share of drama, but nothing could have prepared her for the enormous grief and pain she experienced after the popstar’s death. Today, Iris tries to live like Jackson did. She believes Jackson was sent by God to teach and that he channeled God through his music. *Man in the mirror* is one of her favorite songs because it captures her agentic take on life: that people need to realize their influence on the world. “I think that is what I recognize in Michael”, she explained, “being good to other people, and not judge, but give everyone a chance.”

Nobody in her environment understood her feelings for Jackson and Iris started to long for people who were as captivated by the artist as she was. It is no wonder that the social aspect of ‘Michaeling’ is the main reason why she flies yearly to the other side of the ocean. Since her first trip in 2014 Iris has not missed one Michael Week. She describes her journeys as “following Michael’s footsteps” but emphatically does not identify as pilgrim. Pilgrimage, in her opinion, is too much connected with the Catholic Church, which evokes negative connotations in her. Iris regrets that she only found out about Jackson after his death, but she had her hands full with raising a family and work. Now, being divorced and retired, she can spend her money and time as she pleases. “I have an amazing life because of *him*”, she said, “I meet people who I would have never met, and I would never have gone to America, without him.” Through ‘Michaeling’, she found friends with whom she could share her feelings for Jackson. “The great thing about fans”, she explained, “is that you don’t have to say anything, if you cry they know why, and we all feel the same when his music is playing in the car.”

Iris’ ‘Michaeling’-journeys usually last two weeks. Reflecting on her trips, she remarked: “the days fly by, while at the same time it feels like you are away for months because the days are so long. Normally, I am back home around six, but *there* it easily continues till ten, eleven, sometimes even later. I drive along and I do everything.”

Every Michael Week she visits Neverland, the walk of Fame, Jackson's former house in LA, the house where he died and his grave at Forest Lawn cemetery. Neverland and Forest Lawn mean the most to her. Iris usually looks for a hotel near Forest Lawn, so she can visit Jackson's resting place every day. The specialness of being at these Michael sites is that Jackson was there; Iris can sense their special atmosphere. She jokingly called fans "gatekeepers": "we hang out there. We linger everywhere. That's pretty much all we do (laughs). We are together and we talk about Michael." Furthermore, Iris enjoys the philanthropy that is part of Michael Week: "we hand out giftbags to the homeless and tell them it is in honor of Michael. I find that the most fun part of my whole holiday."

Iris' reason for visiting Michael Week has shifted over time. Initially, she wanted to walk in Jackson's footsteps to be where he was and see and feel "what he experienced". Nowadays, she travels primarily to meet her friends. "I look forward to it all year", Iris said smiling. "So much so", she continued, "that I sometimes think I need to live more in the here and now". When she left Forest Lawn after visiting for the first time, Iris remembers she felt guilty, "as if I abandoned him. We are going back and he stays there." Today, although she still dreads having to say goodbye, the notion that she will return comforts her. After arriving home from Michael Week, she usually feels "a little depressed", but in February the anticipation starts; plans are made and contact with fellow fans is intensified. She realizes a time will come when she will not be able to travel anymore. It is her biggest fear. "So every year when I leave I think 'I hope I will see you again'", Iris said earnestly.

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