

## IASPM-CA 2016 Book Prize

Susan Fast's contribution to the 33 1/3 series on Michael Jackson's 1991 album, *Dangerous*

The book prize committee were unanimous in their acclaim for Susan's new book, and I'd like to summarize our observations about some of the book's many significant strengths.

In a year in which we have witnessed the passing of two great icons of popular music – David Bowie and Prince – it is interesting to compare the passing of Michael Jackson some years earlier. While Jackson was younger than either of these artists at the time of his death, he was actually a contemporary in many ways: he was born in the same year as Prince and, as a child star, he had a career that spanned as many decades as Bowie's. Yet, as Susan Fast persuasively argues in her book, *Dangerous*, there is a sense in which Jackson was never understood as a "mature artist" in the sense that both Prince and Bowie were – he remained, for many critics and fans, the "boy-man" of pop.

Susan's starting point is that *Dangerous* is Michael Jackson's "coming of age" record, that the album—and its cover artwork and set of accompanying short films, which Susan shows to be inseparable from the songs—demonstrates in a hundred different ways Jackson's stark and fearless maturity. In developing this theme across the album, its cover, and its accompanying films, Susan draws on a truly broad range of scholarly and popular critical perspectives. And remarkably (we all remarked on this!) she does so through fluid, generous, reflective prose that conveys analytical rigor and ambitious multidisciplinary in inviting, sometimes colloquial, sometimes humorous, but always solidly grounded language.

With this book, Susan has given us a model for how we can reach a broader audience with scholarly writing. Attempting this kind of academic outreach can be very difficult, even "dangerous," but we believe Susan pulls it off. Her willingness to take such a risk seems likely motivated by her admiration for Jackson's risk taking—and it's inspiring. Susan's book, we hope and expect, will open possibilities for younger scholars, who haven't yet achieved her professional level of recognition and seniority, to write a book in this hybrid genre.

I'd like to add that as a scholar who focuses mainly on issues of labor, intellectual property, law, and political economy, Susan's book deepened my interest and appreciation not only for Michael Jackson, but for a range of analytical perspectives that are new and exciting to me. I'll finish my comments with one example from her chapter "Utopia," where Susan discusses Jackson's body, what she calls his theology, and their intermixing in his expressions of "kinship." Jackson's "queer ways of building kinship," Susan writes, "are extensions of the fluidity of his body." "Jackson's vision of the body and kinship was...forward looking, some might even say utopic. He modeled a way of being in the world that was predicated on the idea of what Haraway calls 'affinity', not identity, on the creation of coalitions of the like-minded" (104-105). As the Michael Jackson of Susan's *Dangerous* shows, the activities and properties of such challenging artists can burst the limits of any disciplinary approach.