

Michael Jackson, *Life Within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011)

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The subject of Michael Jackson's *Life Within Limits* is the concept of "well-being," which Jackson represents as a dynamic struggle for hope amid the "fundamentally unstable and ambiguous" (xiii) limitations of existence, impermanence, and loss, "a sense that one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be" (xi). Challenging himself with what appears to be a Dantean descent to a realm where hope itself would be a miracle, Jackson chooses to locate the research for his philosophical reflection in contemporary Sierra Leone, apparently traumatized by its notoriously vicious war and judged by a UN report to be the poorest and "least liveable" country in the world (ix). The ethnography is grounded in a thoughtful narrative of Jackson's return to Sierra Leone accompanied by his teenage son. Jackson regards the ethnographic text itself as a kind of mission, as testimony to his hope in the reflexivity of his problem (14). The comparative contexts are provided by encounters with people from Jackson's early fieldwork in Sierra Leone, by memories, by the characters in folk stories, and by Jackson himself, conscious of his own age and reflecting on the burden of his philosophical problem. There are more than enough countervailing experiences available to frame his quest. His erudition affords him an even broader canvas: he moves with ease from Mauss to Merleau-Ponty, from Rousseau to Ricoeur, from Spinoza to Sartre, applying their thoughts to his examples.

This is the work of an elder, literary and philosophical, yet the style is personal, anecdotal, and impressionistic. The work reminded me of Edwin Wilmsen's *Journeys with Flies* (Chicago: 1999), though it is not quite as experimental in its literary format and use of details. The argument is cumulative rather than linear, a gradual assemblage that aims toward conjunctions and affinities whose recognition feeds an optimistic openness to commonality as a means of transcending alienation. The goal of this openness is to perceive the "other" not as an alien but "as oneself under other circumstances" (196). Jackson claims his method was "minimally planned and . . . improvisatory" (190), but it is not without internalized discipline. He explains, "Juxtaposed in a text that preserved the sequencing, interruptions, and distortions of lived time, these episodes did not amount to an essay in understanding. . . . Any one element echoes others, even though there is no discernible causal link between them and

the only hub seems to be the consciousness of the observer. What binds them together, then — whether we are speaking of cultural traits from very different regions of the world, or events occurring in the space of a single day — is the active imagination of the person whose consciousness encompasses these things” (132-33).

Ethnographic practice becomes a way of recovering humanity through engagement with “others,” but this recognition of the other is to be based on fundamental commonalities of human experience. The literary challenge involves avoiding a sense of strangeness, bringing the marginal into commonplace familiarity, and finding new meanings in everyday details (191-94). In the book’s fifteen chapters, Jackson takes us into his associates’ lives as they work out their solutions to different life problems, and he connects these stories to both the circumstances of their elicitation and the broader questions he has posed. Their stories are less related to the traumas of the war than to more mundane situations. There is a woman he knew as a young girl, given in an arranged marriage and now mature, reflecting on her life. There is a theological discussion with a learned Muslim. There are accounts of a funeral, of a circumcision initiation, of a gifted young storyteller in difficulty, of a philanderer’s wife. His traveling companions provide ample testimony of the frustrations and anxieties of people returned from abroad trying to reconnect. Jackson is confronted over and over with unanswerable questions that raise uncomfortable issues implicit in the multiple asymmetries of his own situation. His counterplayers are as curious about him as he is about them. They question him about what sustains him in life. He tries to see the assumptions behind the familiar appeals of the young — educate me, take me with you. In contrast, he adds a poignant chapter about an amputee mother and daughter whose bonds were broken when the child was taken by a non-profit organization for medical treatment in the United States, where she was placed and remained in foster care. What do they all think they need to feel good about their lives? The characters are all looking at how their lives have been affected by their experience, and they are thoughtful — almost too thoughtful. Their thoughtfulness is both a manifestation of their difficulties and a link to Jackson’s own compassionate quest.

Echoing Jackson’s method, the extreme aspects of the recent war establish their significance by their apparent irrelevance to Jackson’s conclusion: the most significant factor underlying a sense of well-being is the need for involvement with others. One cannot be alone. Responding to Jackson’s question about the worst thing imaginable, his informants affirmed that, “Social death and the radical

disruption of social bonds seemed more awful to contemplate than one's own physical annihilation" (160). Separation is the unifying theme of their stories, the fundamental frustration they must reconcile. Their issues go deeper than their recent history and reiterate the cultural wisdom of the many folk stories that Jackson incorporates into the texts to complement or counterpoint the stories of his subjects. He suggests that, "A story becomes a stage on which we recast and replay the real-life dramas that defeated our best attempts to bring them under control" (144). The war and its aftermath are there to an extent, but I expected a more challenging and pervasive theodicy. In my own work among the young post-colonial generation in Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso (*Hustling Is Not Stealing* and *Exchange Is Not Robbery* [Chicago: 2003, 2005]), I saw a similar strength in storytelling as a means of objectifying one's experience. In those works, the satirical anecdotes of domestic conflict issued from less violent times, when portraying life as war was an acceptable metaphor, and the heroine laughed at suffering and embraced struggle as a means of self-fulfillment. The thoughtfulness of Jackson's informants elevates their affirmation of sociability, but it also reflects sadness, powerlessness, acquiescence, and a degree of passivity. Still, their acceptance of life within limits is a strength, and they are resilient, and they have endured. Jackson includes several heroes within the folktales he relates: they are there in the traditions. However, in *Life Within Limits*, people are not arguing for the importance of fighting for things. There seem to be very few warriors in Sierra Leone, these days. Maybe there never were many. One former renegade Jackson encounters (189-90), lamenting that he cannot return to his home, serves as a briefly glimpsed symbol of separation from others and from the deeper cultural sensibility that Jackson explores so gracefully in this book.

— John M. Chernoff