



## Me and Ms. Jones: The Androgyny of Black Women

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### *Abstract*

Despite the progression of contemporary discourses around gender, the Black woman's body remains in a categorical conundrum shaped by post-colonial legacies. Therefore, this paper explores how prevailing notions of femininity and its intrinsic relationship to delicateness exclude Black women from the female category. Given the significance gender plays in participation in the Occident, Black women's preclusion from the female category can result in, what may appear on the surface, as a posturing of whiteness; but, which, on further interrogation, reflects a performance of fragility. On the other extreme is the embracement of androgyny as both an internalization and a way to subvert the *white gaze* - which does little to differentiate the Black woman from the Black man, or Black people as a whole, from being imagined primarily as additional labor. Thus, I aim to dissect the essential roles androgyny performs for Black women in predominantly white spaces. Namely, how androgyny acts as an internalization of gender ambiguity, as well as a subversive response to imposition. But, most observably as a means of participation. The internalization of liminality as an embodied experience relies upon a more introspective narrative form to decode. As such, through self-examination, and a critical view of the

discography of Grace Jones, I will be employing a participation epistemological approach which hybridizes the creative form with academic inquiry to bridge the space between creative and academic forms. Given that my subject emphasizes the colonial gaze and the role it plays in shaping the Black body, I intend to redirect the gaze - to invert the process of discovery by positioning myself as an essential and credible source in conversation with the imaging of Grace Jones.

*Keywords*

Grace Jones, gender, sexuality, Blackness, femininity, fragility

“What is it to lament this? I am not really lamenting.  
I am hating this. I am loving this.  
I am turning into the something, necessary to live this ...”

– Dionne Brand, “Nomenclature for the Time Being”

While discourse around gender relations today seem to do away with the gender binary, this theoretical leap, perhaps, comes at the expense of a sorely neglected issue. From a post-colonial framework, the Black woman is yet to be considered a woman. Oscillating between obscenity and obscurity, the Black female body has existed in an unlegislated space as an undue consequence of colonialism – a categorical conundrum evidently unresolved. Expounding upon the prevailing view of femininity and its intrinsic relationship to delicateness, this paper aims to relate some of the ways this has placed Black women outside of its category. Given the significance gender plays in participation in the Occident,<sup>1</sup> Black women's preclusion from the female category can result in what may appear on the surface as a posturing of whiteness; but, which, on further interrogation, reflects a performance of fragility. On the other extreme is the embracement of androgyny as both an internalization and a way to subvert the *white gaze* - which does little to differentiate the Black woman from the Black man, or Black people as a whole, from being conceived merely as extensions of labor. I aim to dissect the essential roles androgyny performs for Black women in predominantly white spaces. Namely, how androgyny acts as an *internalization* of gender ambiguity, as

well as a *subversive* response to imposition; but, most observably as a means of *participation*.

The hierarchical structure of gender performativity, and the extent to which fragility acts as a cultural signifier for “women,” tenably informs the phenotypical ladder in a gendered white society. To this extent, it may not necessarily be women’s proximity to whiteness, but their proximity to delicateness, that dictates who is desired and who can perform as a cultural sign. Judith Butler’s ideas around *Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* assert the concept of “gender as an identity tenuously constituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts.” It foregrounds the possibility that the body can be compelled to conform to a historical idea of “woman,” and that one could induce the body to become a cultural sign. This places the Black transnational body in a contentious struggle to conform to two separate and distinct cultural/historical ideals. Scholar, Janel Hobson, unveils, in her analysis of “The Hottentot Venus,” that “from a Black cultural viewpoint, to not be endowed from behind is to be ‘lacking’ in some ways” (Hobson 2). This marks a stark contrast to Western perceptions of Sarah Baartman as a malformed spectacle of a body to that of the imagination of her body within the context of its origin. 80’s supermodel and musician, Grace Jones, speaks to a similar dichotomy regarding the perception of her body. In her memoir, Jones recalls how in Jamaica, men preferred more curvaceous women - a standard which inversely precluded her from the female category in her country. However, in the United States, her gender ambiguity saw her body interpellated as a celebrated artifact - a physical embodiment of a third category. Both Jones and Baartman personify what Hobson labels the “Black diasporic identity” which, from a phenomenological framework, is an identity that is in a constant state of negotiation. As such, the Occident can also be understood as a place of performance for the Black transnational subject.

I can attest to a similar negotiation of identity having grown up between multiple borders and institutions that have placed me under isolating circumstances that re-inscribed my body as a thing that spills over, contaminates, and must be put into baggy clothes. To be a Black woman, in a postcolonial migrational context, is to be tasked with the project of self-making. No sooner was this made clear to me than in my adolescent years in Copenhagen, Denmark, where I began to costume myself in my brother’s clothes to disguise the overtures of my body, and to perform the strength assumed of my complexion. These were precisely the experiences that shaped my understanding, on a personal and theoretical level, of the gender ambiguity often assumed of Black women, and the

precariousness of living without category. It is for this reason I will be drawing upon personal experience as a standpoint epistemological approach to my argument along with the discography of Grace Jones as a physical embodiment of liminality.

The Black woman's body, in its overtures, is often viewed as an unregulated body where its size connotes indulgence and its shapeliness prematurely draws assumptions of its maternity. It is a body that does not so easily slide into form-fitting clothes, nor can it be held accountable for its provocation. It is a disobedient body; a punishable body. Although, at times, it is precisely the opposite: with its muscular outlines, its darkness, and its bestialized resistance to the sun. Despite the limitations of being presented with options that paint the Black women's body as obscene, or obscure it, or limit it to its utility while systematically delegitimizing it in the colonial public sphere; Black women have devised ingenious ways of negotiating agency within these parameters. Jones was famously photographed naked in a cage, posed like a wild cat, roaring for the cover of Parisian photographer, Jean Paul Goude's *Jungle Fever*.<sup>2</sup> Grace Jones recalls her complicity in Goude's photographs, fashioning herself a "partner in design." However, in her memoir, cheekily titled after her infamous lyric "I will never write my memoirs," Jones manages to glaze over the racial undertones implicit in Goude's work and some of the ways she may have been photographed to epitomize the white gaze on the Black female subject. She is, to a degree, purposefully evasive. She admits, "I decided that the only way I would be known [...] was through my music, through pictures, and through art as an art groupie [...] All you would need to know could be found in how I look in a photograph or captured in a song. The rest is a mystery" (Jones 2–3). Consistent with this mystery, Jones writes her memoir under the same veil, never veering too far from what she has been prepared to openly admit over the years in interviews or in songs. Her prose is similarly punctuated as if captured in a frame, leaving the reader with a punchline or a bold image to take away; but, never the person. Never does one get the sense that she is remotely aware that she has become the pictorial embodiment of a post-colonial fantasy. Yet, it is also from this admission that we are able to identify a certain disembodiment and a reliance on image, as a form of definition, which seems to have spawned a generation of Black Aesthetic ideals.

Goude writes, in the Introduction to his photographic series of Grace Jones, that "she was exactly what [he] had been looking for all these years – not just a pretty model, but a fresh image, a demi-goddess, Black, shiny, her face something

more than just pretty. It was more like an African Mask” (Goude 104). In a photograph, entitled *A One Man Show*, Goude displays Jones’s face duplicated into a series of masks laid haphazardly on a workshop table.<sup>3</sup> The following page reveals a large photograph, spread over two pages, of a group of androgynous Black women posed in military formation. Like avantgarde mannequins, they are adorned with the iconic buzz cut hair, accentuated cheekbones, bold lip colors, and the sunglasses famously worn by Grace Jones. It is as if the masks have been distributed, and Jones’s image has been successfully reproduced into the prototype of a new woman: “a creature whose beauty transcends both the gender of her sex and the ethnicity usually associated with the colour of her skin” (Goude 106). By Goude’s description, “She looks barely human. She is more like a strange menacing alien, blue-Black on Black, in Black” (106). In *The Body as Evidence*, scholar, Janel Hobson, draws on pop culture and the celebrity - as a shared cultural sign, to illuminate some of the ways Black public figures have deliberately constructed ambiguity to “prevent their bodies from becoming ‘fixed’ into raced and gendered categories and narratives” (53). Hobson alludes to the use of androgyny in this context as a means of evading a category to avoid dehumanization. She offers, as an example, ‘the public construction of Michael Jackson’s’ “freakery.” She writes, “while partly of his own making, [it] formed distortions that were designed to contain the subversive Black body that dared to transcend its raced, classed, and gendered status” (Hobson 54). Similarly, “by playfully donning ‘masculine’ formal attire, singer Janell Monae challenges her audience to “unfix” her Black female subjectivity and to recognize her own musical prowess [...]” (Hobson 53). From this lens, we begin to see how androgyny can be used to reframe the Black body within the Occidental performative space.

In 1977, Grace Jones, who had made a name for herself as a model and musician, infamous for her shocking performances, was at the tail end of her career. Jones commissions Jean Paul Goude to curate her album artwork. Goude describes his first encounter with Jones performing at a night club by the following: “That night she was singing her hit song *I Need A Man*, to a room full of shrieking gay bobbysoxers. The ambiguity of her act was that she herself looked like a man, a man singing *I Need A Man* to a bunch of men. No wonder the fruit bars loved her!” (102). Goude is immediately drawn to Jones as a masculine figure, describing her as a powerful presence, and his attraction to her as owing to his “heterosexual sissy-ness” (Goude 102). Goude’s language, in his description of Grace Jones, is consistent in its objectification. It is clear from the moment he

meets her that she will be the focus of his artistic fascination in the years to follow. From Jones' memoir and interviews, it is hard to verify the extent of her complicity in Goude's colonial image making. She calls herself a partner in design; but, struggles to describe the images he has created of her beyond the words "shocking," "crazy," or "rebellious." What is clear is that Jones has, through Goude, managed to resuscitate her career, and recreate her image as a cultural touch stone. It would seem that Jones' disassociation from the image she is co-creating is directly tied to her fear of insignificance and of falling out of the frame of magnified attention. Through becoming Goude's muse and embodying his vision, she remains a point of reference -participating in the space she is on the verge of being excluded from.

We see a similar fear of being peripherality exposed in a talk show interview with Russel Harty and Grace Jones in 1980.<sup>4</sup> In it, Grace Jones attacks the television host for turning his back to her throughout the interview. This gesture is provoked by the fact that Russel Harty asks Jones, "Are you wearing any perfume?" He then turns to his other guest and asks, "Can you smell her at all?" ("Grace Jones Slapping Russell" 00:00:02–00:00:30). Jones responds by saying, "No I have my own body odour perfume" in jest. Harty then turns his back to her again muttering, "let's try keeping it on a slightly higher level shall we..." At this point, Jones snaps. He had, in that instant, not very subtly called her a malodorous primitive on national television. In her memoir, Grace Jones explains:

I was meant to sit next to Russell Harty and keep still and quiet. I was all dressed up like an Amazonian seductress, and treated like the hired help. This is no way to treat a guest. Being stuck there while he ignored me made me feel very uncomfortable. I wasn't attacking him because I was drunk or stoned. I was lashing out because I felt he was not being proper. Harty was rude. I wasn't going to put up with it. I lashed out on live television. It takes balls to do that, which could be seen as a little crazy. (314)

The camera angle; the seating of Jones; and the talk show host give literal form to the frames Judith Butler draws out in their book on *Frames of War*. In it, Butler observes that "If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain [...] frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (1). They suggest there are frames through which we apprehend life or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured,

which is an ontological problem. Although Butler sets up these ideas to probe the question of war – on why and how it becomes easier, or more difficult, to wage war, the problem of framing can be critically applied to the depiction of Black bodies, which continue to exist to an extent in *an undeclared state of war*. In their view, to begin to apprehend life, “we have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or a set of lives as precarious” (Butler 3). Butler makes an important distinction between precariousness (all bodies that are menaced by suffering, injury, and death) and precarity (as something which distinguishes some bodies as more protected and others as more exposed). This construction of the frame lends itself to the uses of the physical frame - the borders in which photographs are displayed. This frame gives material significance to the pictures they display. They color the negative space between the photograph and the wall surrounding it. In this interview, we see Jones resist being decentered as a metaphorical border framing Russel Harty and his guest. By applying Butler’s conception of the frame, it becomes clear how Jones uses her image to establish her identity within the Occidental frame as a survival strategy. Her reaction to being excluded can, thereby, be understood as a literal flight or fight response.

Similarly, in the documentary film released in 1990, *Paris is Burning*, the director, Jennie Livingston, provides insight into the ball culture of New York City during the 80s by exploring the lives of African American and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities, with a particular focus on drag culture and ballrooms. These balls served as safe spaces for these marginalized groups to express their identities, often mirroring societal norms. The ballroom also existed as a performative space under the mechanisms by which a life is framed, which was precisely what was being reenacted. In a memorable scene where an African American ballroom performer, dressed in a flamboyant military uniform (an image strikingly similar to Grace Jones), holds up an American flag, sauntering down the ballroom while narrated in the background are the words: “when it comes to the minorities, especially Black, we as a people for the past 400 years are the greatest examples of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive” (“Paris is Burning: on Race in America” 00:01:20–00:01:40).<sup>5</sup>

Through this mirrored image of the ballroom performer and the iconic militant regality of Grace Jones, it becomes increasingly discernable that drag culture and Black femininity appear to be constructing a similar performance – an abstract presentation of fragility. Though I use the word fragility interchangeably with what Butler describes as precarity – bodies that are more

protected by contrast to those that are more exposed. Both Jones and the ballroom performer have become the living embodiments of liminality such as to make their lives apprehend-able. In the documentary, ballroom performer, Willy Ninja, explains: “Everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority is to live and look as a white person is pictured as being in early media” (*Paris Is Burning*, 00:41:40).

This film draws our attention to television shows like *Dynasty*, *The Colby’s*, *All My Children*, and *The Days of Our Lives*; and onto magazine spreads like *Home and Garden*, *Forbes*, *Vogue*, etc. These reoccurring media productions display a casual leisure; a life of access and freedom; or lives that seem absolved from strenuous labor. Their images are distilled into an essentialized image of whiteness for the marginalized viewer. But, what is being projected is, in fact, a capitalist display of subjects imbued with a humanity shrouded by an Eden-ness lifestyle. Where “everybody got a million-dollar bracket. [...] everybody’s in their own home. The little kids are fisher kings’ toys – they’re not in no concrete playground. They are riding around the lawn; the pool is in the back (*Paris Is Burning*, 00:47:10–00:47:25). These are the lives for whom death is a distant and avoidable end. They exist on television screens and magazines as distilled images of the possibilities of self-making, and the reward of perfected white femininity. Delicateness, from this understanding, does not simply infer the quality of being brittle or vulnerable; but, that which imbues enough value in a person, such that their precariousness, should warrant the careful and sensitive consideration of their being (i.e. precarity) rather than the exploitation of it. Humanity, in this instance, is achieved by an abstraction of essence through a performance of fragility.

In an essay entitled “The Black Women Thinks About Black Lib,” late Nobel Prize Laureate, Toni Morrison, alludes to a kind of self-making for Black women as a response to a fundamental categorical exclusion. She describes the Black woman, having carried the weight of both domestic labor and child-rearing, often on her own, while also holding jobs that Black men either could not access or refused due to pride. “And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (Morrison 24–25).

This particular segment of the essay reveals a noticeable relationship between the act of self-making and an active distancing from labor. As Saidiya Hartman puts forth in her critical fabulations, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, “It is not surprising that a Negress would be guilty of conflating idleness with resistance” (205). Freedom from forced labor may very well have been interpreted

as freedom from labor. As such, the marginalized subject dreams him or herself into the body of the white women, “as pictured in early media,” because while she may not be free from her patriarchal constraints, she, unlike her white male counterpart, appears to be free from labor. The representations we see in the ballroom are not merely performances, but an extravagant exhibition of survival strategies. Judith Butler observes, in her phenomenological argument, that stages in general provide a platform where we, as an audience, are accepting of all contrivances presented to us. But, these same spectacted bodies become an abhorrence to us, seated beside us, on the bus or in the subway. We appreciate on stage what we are repelled by in real life. As such, for the queer body and the Black body, reality becomes the test of the validity of their performance.

In keeping with this view, in Jones’ music video for the song *Private Life*,<sup>6</sup> she can be seen wearing a mask of her own face, removing it only to reveal the same sternness, as if the woman underneath the mask is the woman on the surface. It leans into the exteriority assumed of the Black body, one that marks its plasticity, its instrumentalization, in the colonial imagination. But, according to Goude, this is precisely what frames Jones’ image as a recognizable signifier of femininity and, by extension, precarity. He writes, “When Grace is dressed in a miniskirt, wearing conventional female attire, she looks, as I’ve said, somewhat masculine. But if she wears male attire, the femininity of her features is immediately revealed, enhanced, the same goes for the haircut. The flattop she wears now is a traditional Marine hairdo. For some reason, Grace’s beauty is enhanced by that hairdo” (Goude 107). Goude reveals how the androgyny of Black women, while commonly assumed to be a gesturing towards the animus, more often than is realized, is used as a costume to accentuate one’s femininity by contrast. Goude admits that he photographed Jones naked with a male look alike (whom he labelled her twin), “to confront the creeps who swear that Grace is a man and to show them what she really would look like if such were the case” (106). This is to say that the similitude of the mask Jones wears of her face, to the sterility of her real face underneath it, may, in fact, indicate that for the Black female subject to remain in the frame, she must remain in character. Her humanity does not extend beyond the parameters of the stage.

Morrison inadvertently explores a new dimension of the frame in her collection of essays, *Playing in The Dark*, where she observes, “the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in white [peoples] battle for coherence” (20). She alludes to the shadowy Black figures that backdrop white American fiction as somewhat essential to the construction of whiteness, and reasons that

“the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 17). Morrison points to the idea that the dehumanization that takes place at the periphery of the frame is essential for establishing the precarity of the lives in it. “What became transparent,” she writes, “were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of the Africanist presence” (Morrison, *Playing in The Dark* 17).

I became aware of a similar reflective construction in the Africanist persona’s framing the walls of the Parisian cafés, the museums, and the photographic displays as a student in France. For example, in the skeletal remains of Sarah Bartmaan in Musée de l’Homme; the African Masks in the Musée du quai Branly; the posters of Josephine Baker topless in a banana skirt, repackaged and sold on rue de Rivoli; and Goude rebranding Jones as a modernized carnivalesque example of the “Great African Beauty.” Images of Blackness in the Occident seemed to exist to give spatial significance to whiteness. In the case of Grace Jones, her image appears created to soothe the colonial anxieties of Goude, and by extension, the French audience. It modernizes the image to make it pertinent to the current imagination of Blackness. However, Goude exempts himself from the racial implications that shape American evaluations of Black artistry. He insists that, as “a European,” he has “the advantage of being able to describe [his] romantic conception of Blackness from a white point of view,” a conception he claims is “free of all social connotations” (107).

He is clearly mistaken in this assumption. In a photograph, entitled *Coal Black and The Seven Dwarfs*, Goude has Jones pose atop a pedestal pointing as if commanding a staircase of Japanese men in Black face and white gloves with their arms stretched out towards her. He describes his fascination with the idea of trying to influence Jones to learn Japanese dancing. Saying, “I thought that it would be such a nice fresh thing for a Black entertainer with such a domineering image to do- to tippy-toe around the stage like a samurai sissy, instead of boogying down or whooping and hollering like all the others” (Goude 105). Goude puts crudely the construction of the Africanist persona; the fantasy it produces in the white imagination; and the impossibility of it truly being contorted into anything delicate. The picture Goude aims to construct with Jones’s image is an essentializing parody: one that others both the Japanese “samurai sissy” and “the boogying down, whooping and hollering negress.” Goude is, moreover, beguiled

by Jones willingness and ability to so wholly embody the other. When her body is unable to contort to his imagination, he paints over and digitally reconfigures her image into the Africanist other. Goude says of his painted collage of Grace Jones, entitled *Nigger Arabesque*:

Painting, joining up all those pieces to give the illusion that Grace Jones actually posed for the photograph and that only she was capable of assuming such a position. (I know a ballerina with the Joffrey Company who is still trying to imitate it!) If you really look at it, the pose is anatomically impossible. I always thought the natural flatness of the feet of most Black dancers should be used systematically in ballet as they are, not desperately pointed like the feet of whites who for the most part have a natural instep. In my picture, I try to show how a primitive movement of flexed feet can make the controlled traditional arabesque look more interesting. (103)<sup>7</sup>

I once tried to reconstruct this image myself. I stood over a log with one hand stretched out, and the other holding my left leg. When the photographs came out, I saw that my stomach protruded a little from the skin-colored body suit I was wearing, and my skin tone appeared uneven. The flesh from my behind dimpled and did not arch as Jones's does in that manner Goude once described of model and actress, Toukie Smith, photographed leaning against a white wall with her derriere on full display as "the ones who look like racehorses." Then, finally, there was my posture - clumsy and fractal. I was relieved to discover the impossibility of this photograph. It had been digitally enhanced to produce the fantasy of the Black body and not its reality. The image he constructs of Jones is designed to console him, as well as modernize the colonial imagination of the primitive other. He reiterates that he finds this composition of her "both beautiful and grotesque." Jones admits in her memoirs to feeling as though she had to pose at every moment while with Goude. She would find herself posing on the toilet in the fear that he would walk in. Within weeks of giving birth to their son, she began doing sit ups, adamant on proving to Goude that she could retain her previous shape. She is, in a sense, afraid of what she becomes to him outside of the angular composition of his frame.

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I gravitate toward the images of Grace Jones. I can tell she, like myself, was shaped by someone else. She, too, found herself tall, lean, too dark, and with a beauty, they said, as difficult to sell as a used car. Then, came a man who said if she is too dark, let us make her darker. If she is not quite a woman, if “you are constantly looking at her wondering if she is beautiful or grotesque, or both; or how she could be one if she is The Other?” Let us shave the sides of her hair; let us paint the gorge of her cheek bones Black; and paint the corners of her forehead Black. Let us plaster her body in oil - accentuate her muscular outline, and give her the eyes of a wild cat waking.

There you sit in a room full of eyes that unknowingly shape things, probing you to search for the interiority of Grace Jones. Who was she beyond this image? Did she take issue with being photographed this way? There I want to say: have you ever been a ghost? Do you know what it is like to hover about the world having no place in it? Do you know what it is like to watch? To know, for instance, there is a way into this world; but, the way will not let you in. Suppose, by chance, you were offered a body; be that as it may, swinging “from the organ grinders monkey – to the great African beauty.” Would you not take it? Or, would you question whether or not it was good? I have been a ghost. I have wandered down Filles du Caviar and looked into the frame at a woman with jet Black hair, seated beside the man who would have taken the striped cardigan off my back, and gave me a body. One he was willing to touch, and one which he became willing.

I am unsure whether Grace Jones was born in 1948 or 1953. She says she barely thinks about her age; but, I know what really frightens her: it is not a mystery. You can only keep a small portion of yourself when you are being made. That is what makes the photographs authentic. There is a subtle quality, a fragment of your being is magnified into your whole identity. They do not tell you this when you walk into their studios, convinced they are the makers of your beauty, or, at the very least, the only ones who can see it. They do not tell you that the parts of you they capture, they keep. Until you are no longer sure who you are outside the frame. You might think you can write your way back into it; but, that art is of recollection, even when what you are yearning for is pure presence.

Grace said she took her iconic militant stare from her Pentecostal upbringing. She would mimic the strict and foreboding portrait of her grandfather and her father, who had been ministers in the church. From them, she learned discipline, as well as the stage. How a look could command, and how rebelliousness relied upon a special kind of devotion.

Have you ever witnessed an exorcism? Have you not marveled at how expert an average man can be at convulsing by showing only the white of his eyes?

When I am afraid, I refrain from form fitting clothes. I learned all of this from Jones. I learned: how to harness the man in me to protect the woman; how to stay in this body; and how to work my way into the frame.

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In her essay “On Becoming Human,” scholar, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, foregrounds western philosophy’s perception of the animality of “Blackened people” in the concept of abjection, as defined by the Bulgarian French philosopher, Julia Kristeva - that being an unassimilated being that is unrecognizable and more radical than strangeness. It is the ultimate other seen to be unpleasant, repulsive, or socially unacceptable. It disrupts meaning, but it is not reduced to signifying nothing. She suggests that in the process of colonialism, western anthropologists encountered the “naked African,” stripped of all Christian sensibilities, along with animals they had not yet known such as gorillas, chimpanzees, rhinoceroses, etc. Encounters with “sub-Saharan” Africans occurred adjacent to these discoveries, leading to unbridled speculations linking primates and Africans. The beastilization of Africans rendered them “abject” in the western imagination. However, Jackson suggests this abjection was a critical step in solidifying the “human” category and the colonialists’ place within it.

Goude too admits to finding Jones both grotesque and beautiful. He wrote that “The strength of her image, then and now, is that it swings constantly from the near grotesque – from the organ grinder’s monkey – to the great African beauty. [...]you are constantly looking at her [...] and wondering how she can be one if she’s the other” (Goude 102). Then, spouse to Grace Jones, Jean Paul Goude, once described his idea for his wife’s performance explaining:

Imagine in the midst of 6,000 shrieking fans, this huge animal is rolled out to the end of a runway, as in the end of King Kong. There is danger in the air-what if the tiger escaped? Grace, dressed as a tiger herself sings to the beast. They hiss and snarl at each other. She opens the door of the cage and, suddenly, all the lights go off. The music stops. It is pitch Black! Then this loud tape comes on of two tigers roaring as

though in a fight to the death. Ten scary seconds go by. Then the lights and the music come back on, the tiger has disappeared, and, in its place, Grace is singing and chewing on a big piece of meat. (105)

Here, we see Grace's image transcend the beast by becoming something more obscene; devouring, yet still caged.

In her article on “The Performance Art of Grace Jones,” scholar, Miriam Kershaw, alludes to the misrecognition of blackened people in the eyes of the colonizer (Kershaw 20). This is a misreading of African traditions and of their symbolic value for the Western audience. Jones’s image, depending on who is looking, is either empowered or dehumanizing. In the progression of her career, an observable difference can be seen in the way Jones uses her image to subvert expectations. In several moments, she digresses from the frame, leaning into her abjection, and destabilizing her viewers before instantly returning to it, like a trained circus performer.

In 1978, Grace Jones performs the cover of a French song in a large circus tent,<sup>8</sup> wearing a stylized hijab covering her from head to toe, showing only her face and hands. This performance evokes a colonial angst of the veiled women, compounded by the fact that she is singing in French, moving sensually, and pinching at a libidinal urge to glimpse the skin beneath the cloth. As the song progresses, Jones begins to lift the drapes covering her legs, tucking them into an elastic band around her waist. She is holding the remaining material above her head, revealing her long toned legs in a manner that both shocks and abates the erotic tension in the audience.

This performance draws upon several of the colonial fantasies Franz Fanon observes in his chapter on “Algeria Unveiled.” In this chapter, Fanon presents an alternative solution to the dehumanization of the colonial subject, and by extension, the land they embody and occupy. He dissects how the “veil, one of the elements of traditional; Algerian garb, was to become the bone of contention in a grandiose battle for coherence, on account of which the occupation forces were to mobilize their most powerful and most varied resources, and in the course of which the colonized were to display a surprising force of inertia” (Fanon 36). He describes the settler’s new attitude toward the colonized man in relation to his women. One who sees the “veiled woman” as both mystified and perverted in the French occupiers’ fantasies – that constantly sexualize the unveiling and seeks to save the Algerian woman from the restraints of the Algerian man. Fanon gives symbolic value to the veil as a decolonial instrument – one which obstructs the

colonial gaze. The veil presents a solution for Fanon; but, one which makes the female body the site of colonial resistance, and reduces her to an object to be bartered amongst men.

In Jones' performance, the contentious struggle between occupation and resistance is resolved by the half of her body (her legs), which are revealed, contrasted by the top half of her body, which remains covered – and, perhaps, doubly layered by the drapes she holds above her head. Jones, once again, embodies liminality; but, in a manner that is representative of the land. For Fanon, the veil quite literally withholds the identity of the colonized from the scrutiny of the colonial gaze and, by extension, the country itself. Jones beckons to this reading in her performance as she falls to the ground at the end of the song as if she had been shot, only to be carried off the stage by two statuesque white men. By satisfying the psycho-sexual fantasies of the audience, and, by the same vein, the colonial imagination; she performs her symbolic defeat, one that sees her carried into the Black of the stage, returning to it again in a skin-tight cat suit.

From this analysis, Grace Jones's liminality not only transcends her raced and gendered category, but becomes symbolic of the ambiguity of the colonial space. Although the distinction between categories in colonial discourses differentiate Algerians and Africans (understood to be Black), the colony takes on a unifying characteristic from the colonial lens; one which scholar, Achille Mbembe, expounds upon in his essay on necro-politics. Mbembe's concept examines how power operates through the control and manipulation of death. It emphasizes how certain political regimes exert sovereignty by deciding who lives and who dies, often through the creation of zones of exception where life is disposable. According to Mbembe, this terrain of disposable bodies, where the rules which govern civil conduct are suspended, are places such as refugee camps, borders, the colony, etc. He points out how violence and death are instrumental to maintaining power structures, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where certain populations are rendered "bare life" and subjected to extreme forms of control and exploitation. In conversation with Butler's views, Mbembe's ideas explore how the violence enacted upon the colony seeks to reinforce the power and civility within the states who perform it. From this reading, Goude's construction of Grace Jones's liminality performs something far more sinister; it transforms her into the embodiment of both the colony and the "bare life" which populates it. It recreates, for the French audience, a colonial nostalgia – one which reinforces their sovereignty through the symbolic reenactment of their conquering of the wild as represented by the colony. The

photograph of Jones posed naked in a cage labeled “do not feed the animal” consolidates this notion.

But, an important distinction should be made between the image Goude constructs of Jones and the ones which mushroom from there on out. In 1985, fashion photographer, Helmut Newton, did an infamous photographic series of Grace Jones and her partner at the time, Dulf Lundgren; one which depicts Grace Jones stark naked in a freight truck, and her partner, Lundgren, dressed as a day laborer standing outside the truck, posed as if contemplating how to unload her.<sup>9</sup> This image feeds into a dangerous assumption about the durability of the Black woman’s body; its commodification; and its availability. However, the composition also places Jones above Lundgren in the truck, creating the illusion of dominance, and a spatial distance from herself and the laborer, while maintaining the colonial gaze which sees Black bodies as property. The same series depicts Jones naked, standing in front of Lundgren with a target sheet behind him. Here, Grace Jones is positioned as a human shield.<sup>10</sup> Both her and Lundgren are toned, angular, and with the same marine hairdo. But, Jones’ expression in these photographs feels guided and cooperative. She does not feign co-creation in these compositions. While Goude’s images paint Jones as the idealized “French” colonial fantasy (i.e. a taming of the wild, a primitive liminality, a vision of the unformed); Newton’s images draw inspiration from the Black body as a post-colonial subject - one marked by the un-gendering of the middle passages and the forced labor imposed upon it. Yet, still gesturing towards Mbembe’s observations of the “bare life” that constitutes the colony. This is evidenced by Jones’s naked body, quite literally, positioned to absorb the bullets directed towards her white mate. Prior to this, in 1978, Newton would photograph Jones naked, on her knees with chains around her ankles, holding a whip.<sup>11</sup>

Newton and Goude’s images bear a similar contradiction: they depict Jones as both dominant and subdued. But, it is as if her domination justifies her subjugation. When she is photographed as a wild animal, she is caged; when she is depicted as a dominatrix, she is chained at the ankles. The liminality she imbues here is in the incongruity of these roles. The fantasy it produces for the white man is a kind of prehistoric re-enactment of male initiation – a hunting ritual of sorts. A reminder of humanity as the merit for having overcome the wild. Newton would proceed to photograph Jones with Lundgren, naked on a large sofa, barely covered by a white sheet. Lundgren is made to lie underneath Jones, signifying her dominance.

## Conclusion

In fact, this depiction of Grace Jones assuming the dominant role in a sex scene would become a prominent characteristic associated with her. In Reginald Hudlin's directorial film, *Boomerang*, Jones would play the character Strange, a French African seductress with an untamed and frightening sexuality. Similarly, the 1985 James Bond film, *A View to a Kill*, involves a scene where Jones, who plays May Day, is shown to resist Bonds's attempts to lay on top of her, mounting him instead in bed. These perpetuated depictions of Jones assuming the domineering role in bed draw an unambiguous parallel to the *Book of Lilith*. They overtly prompt reflection on the enduring power of feminine rebellion, and the scriptural implications of women challenging traditional gender roles.

Grace Jones's sexual association with Lilith imprints upon Black women the image of the primordial woman – an unrefined prototype. Her desire to dominate seems only to give evidence to her murky composition – one which is suggested to give her a deluded sense of equality to her male companion, Adam. Lilith is banished and replaced by Eve, a woman, like Adam, made of dust or earth, and who will bear the human children of Adam – a stark contrast to the hundreds of “demonic babies” Lilith will birth daily. This, once again, draws assumptions of the durability of the Black body. But, perhaps, more specifically the captive Black body, which Hortense Spillers insightfully explains as the body that becomes a source of irresistible and dangerous eroticism. At the same time, and in stark contradiction, it is stripped of subjectivity and reduced to an object in the eyes of the captor. This erasure of agency turns the captive's sexuality into a biological marker of “otherness.” As such, the body becomes a target for pornographic representation, and symbolizes extreme physical vulnerability, a vulnerability that extends into broader forms of social and existential powerlessness (Spillers 67).

In the scene featuring Jones as May Day, she services Bond in place of the blond female lead who is the true object of his desire. Bond aptly uses the words “take care of me” to describe their intercourse. The availability of her body is apparent. The portrayal of her sexuality is never without a hint of strength or bestiality. She is the archetype of a woman without the dressing of femininity. She provokes the untamed desires of men without their chivalric protection. This leaves her in a particularly precarious position where her desirability dehumanizes rather than uplifts her.

When faced with the critical choice of being either obscenely objectified or defeminized, adopting an androgynous public image could be applauded as an act of self-preservation. Grace Jones reflects on the difficulty of her childhood years in Jamaica. In an attempt to shield herself from the brutality of her upbringing, she writes, “I created the man in me as a way to protect the woman” (Jones 105). Jones also reflects on her relationship with her younger brother who was inversely considered a rather feminine boy. She explains how the two of them were similarly seductive to straight white men after moving to America - hinting at a latent homoeroticism implied by Western standards of beauty. Jones and her brother, Chris, would both come to understand their sexuality from the perspective of the white male gaze. In a way, Jones employed her androgyny as a tool to seduce rather than subvert the male gaze. By her own description, Jones says of herself, and her life’s work, at the close of her memoir, “I will stand in front of them, a formlessness that engulfs all form. I will put on another hat, crack my whip, scatter fireflies, fix them with a five-thousand-year-old stare, fit to fight to the bitter end, becoming a ghost with the passing of time” (498).

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup>Occident is a term meaning “the West.” Edward Said also used the term in his book *Orientalism* (1978). He used it to mean Western countries that had colonized the Orient. This, in particular, includes France, Great Britain and, later, the United States.
- <sup>2</sup> “Célébrités.” *Invaluable Auctions*,  
<https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/celebrities-111-c-817457088c>.
- <sup>3</sup> “Grace Jones Masks Created by Jean-Paul Goude (1983).” *Fox Gallery NYC*,  
<https://www.foxgallerynyc.com/artwork/grace-jones-masks-created-by-jean-paul-goude-1983/>.
- <sup>4</sup> “Grace Jones Slapping Russell Harty Live on Air.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Grace Jones Brasil, 16 January 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz\\_UHLfZKAA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz_UHLfZKAA).
- <sup>5</sup> “Paris is Burning: On Race in America.” *YouTube*, uploaded by krfty1, 29 June 2007,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guh29l2\\_Tu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guh29l2_Tu8).
- <sup>6</sup> “Grace Jones – Private Life.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Chrissy Darling, 1 March 2010,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvLn\\_qC7QAs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvLn_qC7QAs).
- <sup>7</sup> “Story of One Photo: Story of One Photo: Nigger Arabesque.” *First Channel News*, 17 June 2015, <https://www.1lurer.am/en/2015/06/17/Story-of-One-Photo/18056>.
- <sup>8</sup> “Grace Jones in Concert – 1978.” *YouTube*, uploaded by kuliscioff, 5 May 2021,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQhA0rQ\\_vLQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQhA0rQ_vLQ).
- <sup>9</sup> “Helmut Newton, Grace Jones and Dolph Lundgren, 1985.” *Liveauctioneers*,  
<https://www.liveauctioneers.com/price-result/helmut-newton-grace-jones-and-dolph-lundgren-1985/>.
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<sup>10</sup> “Helmut Newton: The Bad and the Beautiful.” *Another Magazine*,

<https://www.anothermag.com/design-living/gallery/11407/helmut-newton-the-bad-and-the-beautiful/3>.

<sup>11</sup> “Helmut Newton, Grace Jones, Paris, 1978.” *Liveauctioneers*,

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