Sounding Like a No-No
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Every generation needs a model for how to be strange. For me, that model was Grace Jones. In my teen years, Grace Jones was the soundtrack to my first trips to Chicago’s North Side by myself: to Second Hand Tunes, Wax Trax, the Silver Moon Vintage Store, and the Value Village on Kimball Avenue. In Chicago, that period between Nightclubbing (1981) and Slave to the Rhythm (1985) was simultaneous with the opening of some neighborhood boundaries—particularly those of gay and punk subcultures—and the tighter policing of others, around class and race. Which neighborhood store or club or El stop would be welcoming sometimes depended on the color of your skin, the cut of your jeans, the expense of your haircut. It might depend on whether you’re perceived as cruising or just window shopping, hanging out with your friends, or congregating. But catalyzed by the election of Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor, in 1983, my friends and I began venturing outside of our predominantly black and brown South Side home neighborhoods, taking the Red and Brown Line to neighborhoods to the north for our fun: to the snooty stores at the Gold Coast, where we were chased out for playing in the water fountains; to the Korean barbecue shops and Middle Eastern bakeries and thrift stores in Albany Park; to the artists’ spaces in Wicker Park; and to Boystown, the increasingly punk and queer spaces dotting Belmont Avenue, from Broadway to Halsted, where we’d stop in at the Dunkin’ Donuts and then the Alley to shop for Doc Martins and look for old tux jackets and lace and where I found warped LPs of Eartha Kitt and Shirley Bassey. In Boystown, the early 1980s was a time of cultural and political upheaval in the face of AIDS and the continued threat of violence from the police and outsiders, but it was also a time of identity so-
lidification, increasingly seen as Chicago’s “gay village” from the outside, as well as from within. Eventually the Boystown area would become more expensive and gentrified—but at this point, it was still possible to find old diners and shoe repair shops among the newer gay clubs and bookstores, mom-and-pop video stores, and, for my family, a space where we could “move on up” from renting on the South Side. Eventually, my mother bought a condo there, not far from Augie’s and C.K.’s, the lesbian bar in front of which I was once scandalized to watch two women, squatting on the sidewalk, giggling and taking a pee, right there in the open.

Boystown’s thrift stores, which I r ummaged with my friends Jorge and Robin, were a chance to invent and redefine a new self, to connect to other folks’ pasts. (Trying on black cat’s-eye frames, I suddenly became my mother caught in a snapshot, taken in her early married life.) ἀ ere is in the bricolage of thrift store fashions the idea of “making do” but also a claim to the freedom of movement and access, also at the heart of the cosmopolitanism that is at the heart of Grace Jones’s aesthetic. Along with this exhilaration was that joy of watching gay men—still mostly white—cruising each other on Broadway Avenue and Belmont. I loved and shared the aesthetic of camp and appreciated the open secret of yearning. But I was curious, too, about the place of black women in this world. ἀ ere were the icons of style and boldness, like Donna Summer and Grace. ἀ ere were the girlfriends, linked arm in arm with their boys on Saturday night. ἀ ere were the kitschy greeting cards with large-breasted black women circulated for laughs in the gay-run card and gift store. And sometimes, too, there were lesbians and queer women, who seemed to take up a less visible space.

On those streets I saw shimmering in the distance the possibility to be something else, even if that shimmer was my own desire mirrored back at me. And if, perhaps, this gay male culture did not always return my interest, Grace Jones seemed to, even while she injected herself into the geometry of the desire of those men. ἀ ough reinvention and sheer demand, she kept their gaze while still remaining a mystery. ἀ ere was elegance in her traditionally African beauty, and also laughter. Grace was a lesson in how to travel in multiple spaces while being resolutely herself. And this was my dream at age fifteen. ἀ is was a form of excess, made over from castaways, debris, and rejects to make new power, unaccounted-for power. It’s the power of a silk blouse for only $1.25, ignoring the underarm sweat stains. Like the youthful ingenuity that in-
vented hip-hop, hers was an art made from the unpredictable largess of her various patrons (Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Jean-Paul Goude) but which runs away with the show.

Is Grace Jones a Hologram?

The darling of Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, Grace Jones is often associated with gay and primarily white male subculture. In Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Æmes—Perestroika*, white gay male AIDS patient Prior phones his friend Belize, drag queen and nurse, about a recent dream of a woman and his unexpectedly orgasmic response.

Prior: I am drenched in spooj.
Belize: S pooj?
Belize: Well about time. Miss ãin g has been abstemious.
She has stored up beaucoup de spooj.
Prior: It was a woman.
Belize: You turning straight on me?
Prior: Not a conventional woman.
Belize: Grace Jones?¹

If, for Kushner’s Belize, Grace Jones is a figure of desire, she is also a figure of sexual disorientation and wonder. Sociologist and Sylvester biographer Joshua Gamson describes Grace Jones’s appeal as “sexy gender-fuck,” a heady cocktail of glitter, camp, androgyny, and fear.² For white gay male subculture, I’d argue, Jones serves as an androgynous object of desire, a fitting muse for the space of the polymorphously perverse disco, and a conduit, or screen, that enables fantasies of black (and white) sexuality and subjectivity, from the dominatrix to primitive, to animal, to vampire.

In contrast to the ways that Jones circulates in mostly white gay male culture as a site of wonder and sexual disorientation, for many of her black fans, she serves as a site at which to refuse and/or dismantle essentialized notions of black subjectivity. For many of her fans of color, she might serve as what Kevin E. Quashie identifies as the “girlfriend”—a site of identity making “where the self becomes and is undone, the site
where the politics of self, nation and difference are evaluated through cultural landscapes and ethical sensibilities relevant to Black women [and men], where the necessary anti-identity politics coalesce.”

In the context of black freedom struggles, her link to other black “fugitives,” from the maroons to Zora Neal Hurston, gives Jones’s unconventionality a context that might otherwise be missed. Gay African American artist Lyle Ashton Harris describes Grace Jones’s impact on his own sense of celebrity and the feminine in the 1980’s:

I was having dinner with an artist the other day, and . . . I mentioned Grace Jones and he said that she was frightening. And I didn’t say anything to him, but I just find it quite interesting. At was his nightmare. It wasn’t mine. . . . To be someone who was so stunning, so androgynous, so beautiful, and just completely so self-possessed, but also just smart and sharp—it was something that was deeply inspirational. And also she was obviously a gay icon. But also I just appreciated her rudeness, her criticality. Her drama.

As Harris points out, Jones’s power to shake up, alienate, and speak truth to power—in admirably theatrical ways—has important implications for the ways that we think about the performance of black womanhood, and queer color sensibility, in the 1980s cultural moment. In the Paradise Garage, a disco space shaped by a primarily black and Latino gay aesthetic in the late 1970s through 1980, Jones’s “Pull Up to the Bumper” and “Slave to the Rhythm” were on the Top 100 DJ list. Jones’s “Pull Up to the Bumper” became a bold articulation of sexual pleasure in the face of growing panic about AIDS and gay visibility. The song at once captures the exhilarating, sometimes utopic, and sometimes anonymous spirit of connection, as well as the risk that accompanies public sex in the club scenes of the 1980s and 1990s. And we can watch Jones perform these pleasures in her performance of “Pull Up to the Bumper” in her Grammy-nominated 1981 performance One Man Show, at one point surfing a crowd of black and white and brown dancing men, their faces kept in shadow. I read Jones’s embodiment of anonymous intimacy here as an aspect of her own complicated take on the Post-Soul imperative of integration, as well as her savvy negotiation of gay male subcultures, taking up space both among and outside of the crowd.

Grace Jones, born Grace Mendoza in Spanish Town, Jamaica, in 1948,
was raised along with five brothers and sisters by her grandparents, while her parents, Marjorie and Robert Jones, a clergyman and politician, lived in the United States. Contrary to her outrageous persona, church was a strong part of Jones's upbringing, and she describes herself as a child who was shy and very athletic and loved the outdoors. She and her brother Christian moved to the United States in 1965, joining her parents to live in the considerable Jamaican community in Syracuse, New York, where her father was a bishop. Both Jones and her brother clashed with her conservative family, and Jones says that she found escape in community theater and at one point a motorcycle gang. Jones studied theater at Onondaga Community College and Syracuse University. She converted her skills in performance to the high-fashion world of modeling in New York and Paris, where she captured the attention of art world icon Andy Warhol, as well as photographer Jean-Paul Goude, who became her patron, collaborator, and lover. In 1977, Jones signed a contract with Island Records, with which she recorded her first dance club hits *Portfolio* (1977), *Fame* (1978), and *Muse* (1979). Jones would continue to grow as an icon of the art, dance, and music scenes, her music and live performances growing to be particularly popular in gay subcultures and in Europe in the early 1980s, and crossing over into the R&B and pop charts with *Warm Leatherette* (1980), *Nightclubbing* (1981), and *Slave to the Rhythm* (1985), said by many of her critics to be her strongest albums. With the growth in popularity of music videos, as well as her appearances in popular films like *Conan the Destroyer*, *A View to a Kill*, *Vamp*, and *Boomerang*, Jones's notoriety as beautiful, gender-bending trickster became more widespread. While the 1980s would seem to have been the pinnacle of her visibility as a performer (so far at least), she continues to perform and record in to the twenty-first century, collaborating with Luciano Pavarotti, Sly & Robbie, Lil' Kim, Brian Eno, Tricky, Wendy & Lisa, Massive Attack, and French avant-garde poet Brigitte Fontaine.

We can see the sign of Grace in the vocal stylings of Neneh Cherry in the mid- to late 1980s, in the stagecraft of Tina Turner’s post-Ike renaissance, and in the sartorial and sexual outrageousness of RuPaul and perhaps even Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown in the 1990s and moving into the twenty-first century. Grace's influence is still visible on the streets, in drag queen culture, and in recent revivals of 1980s style, from flattops to Lady Gaga's surreal theatricality. And we can see Jones explicitly referenced in African American and Caribbean art that might be outside the realm of “entertainment”: Lyle Ashton Harris's *Memoirs of Hadrian* #17
and postmodern cubist Caribbean poet Deborah Richards's “Halle Berry One Two,” for example. Black Haitian American performance artist Dréd uses the persona of Grace Jones to open up the world of drag kings to more fluid expressions of female masculinity. In Grace Jones’s work and that of the other black artists influenced by her, we see the wedding of disco and punk, art and fashion, male and female, animal and human, and human and machine to create new notions of black sexuality.

Flattop, gleaming cheekbones, and muscled chest, Jones was—and is—confrontationally androgynous, and at the same time distant and sufficiently underground to seem unco-optable. (Yet my friend Jeff tells me of an urban legend that Grace Jones is actually a hologram, completely made up by Island Records.) Jones can switch from languorous, husky rap in “Walking in the Rain” and “Demolition Man” to a frisky femme alto in “Pull Up to the Bumper” and a glass-breaking screech in “She’s Lost Control.” Jones also uses national drag through voice, moving from Jamaican patois in “My Jamaican Guy” to middle American femme in “Man Around the House” to her mock-straight Britishisms in “I Need a Man.” Jones performs multiple racialized, national, and gendered desires. In her video for “My Jamaican Guy” in her One Man Show, Jones romances herself, singing, snuggling up to, and kissing a male version of her “self”—and so we might add “autoeroticism” to the list of ways that Jones performs desire. Often during these same performances, Jones also performs in animal “drag.” On the famous cover of his collection of works, Jungle Fever, Jean-Paul Goude figures Jones naked and in a cage, on all fours. At her knees is a carcass of meat (animal? human?), and around her mouth trickles blood. Her eyes are narrowed, and her teeth are exposed in a growl. Underneath the cage is a sign, “don’t feed the animal.” We see an apt, white audience, watching. At the beginning of One Man Show Jones opens in a gorilla suit and grass skirt playing the bongos, evoking and outsavaging Josephine Baker’s banana skirt, as well as Marlene Dietrich’s gorilla striptease in the film Blonde Venus (of 1932).

Jones’s use of drag—and particularly animal drag—is an important aspect of her theatricality—one that cites previous black performances, putting her into the larger history of the ways that performers of the African diaspora use performance in complex ways to critique the de-humanization of black people. Yet Jones’s use of drag and other techniques of performing identity also poses challenges of readability. She is, in many ways, a trickster figure, an androgynous Anansi, sliding out of
the grasp of both her fans and her critics. Jones uses an outsized public persona (one that often risks caricature) to lobby critique and to express anger and, ultimately, agency—like three other trickster performers of color who rose to prominence during the same period of the 1980s and early 1990s: visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose works and life constantly poke fun at fears of black sexual potency; performance artist Coco Fusco, whose 1992 collaborations with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the “Two Undiscovered Amerindians” series, document the “irony of having to demonstrate one's humanity” through over-the-top staged performances of the “savage” on display; and rapper Flavor Flav, “sideman” for the group Public Enemy, whose manic comic persona, complete with gold teeth, ever present huge clock-necklace, and wacky sideways baseball cap nevertheless fueled the critical fire of many of Public Enemy’s most potent political songs in 1989.

Grace Jones counters and surpasses traditional notions of gendered erotic performances—for black women in particular—by occupying and performing the image of the black female body as “strange” or “eccentric.” The eccentric performance’s ability to locate itself in freedom of movement in an otherwise constraining situation—in the case of Grace Jones, the constraints of a history of brittle racial and sexual stereotypes—is very important to the ways she pushes the boundaries of identity and recognition. Hers are excellent contemporary examples of Daphne A. Brooks’s concept of “Afro alienation acts” discussed in her study of nineteenth-century theater, Bodies in Dissent. “Afro alienation,” Brooks suggests, is an exploratory performative strategy meant to call attention to one's looked-at-ness as a black subject by making “strange” gender and racial categories through disruption, discomfort, and alienation of one’s audience.

Just as Brecht calls for actors to adapt “socially critical” techniques in their performances so as to generate “alienation effects” and to “awaken” audiences to history, so too can we consider these historic figures as critically defamiliarizing their own bodies by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies. By using performance tactics to signify on the social, cultural, and ideological machinery that circumscribes African Americans, they intervene in the spectacular and systemic representational abjection of black peoples.
chapter considers ways that Jones creates a critical reading and disruption of these oppressive representational systems. Although the delightfully disorienting pleasures of her music and iconicity, she creates a space for pleasure and knowing for her black audiences. In their consumption of Jones’s sometimes alien and alienating iconography and style, music and bodily performances, black audiences might locate a space for refashioning subjectivity. In Jones’s performance of the machine or cyborg, for example, she disrupts the notion of black female sexual availability and “naturalness.” At the same time, she also provides a space of secrecy, of not knowing, which might also be a space of creation and pleasure for her listeners. Brooks describes those

moments in which black cultural producers and black women in particular negotiated ways of manipulating the borders of the material and the epistemological in transatlantic performance culture. . . . We can think of their acts as opaque, as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and rehistoricizing of the flesh.

What are the politics of occupying a position of eccentricity in the public sphere for black women? What does it mean to strategically occupy the position of gender and sometimes racial and national ambiguity—at the risk of unintelligibility? In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler suggests that unintelligibility might have an important role in maintaining one’s humanity.

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction.
What is radical, daring and also risky about Grace Jones’s work are the venues with which she explores her split selves: first in the (still white dominated) culture of the avant-garde art world of Jean-Paul Goude, Andy Warhol, and Keith Haring; and then the venue of popular, commercial culture (from Island Records to the James Bond franchise), risking misreading, reappropriation, and alienation.

Grace Jones presents a curious and challenging project of “blaxploration.” Her performances are often overlooked by feminist and other critics for their political critique—I’d argue, because she is so good at what she does. Jones’s theatricality: her grand gestures, the sweep of her gaze, her preference for artifice in her vocalizations in places where we expect sincerity, realness, and roughness can also be distancing. She is spectacularly successful in creating a smooth and deflecting surface, and in capturing our erotic attention through spectacle. She is so fantastic at becoming an object—animal, machine, space invader, multiplying robot, hurricane—that we might not hear her also explaining what it’s like to be an object. Grace is so good at creating desire that we miss her read on where that hunger comes from, and what it costs. But it’s there, in the force of her voice, in her lyrics, in the flash of her eyes. And in the highly theatrical staging of scenes of desire that occupy her work: from cage to studio to disco floor to stage. Her work is often overlooked as a project of black critique because of the contradictions she raises and refuses to resolve. Like Eartha Kitt, she is the stranger, placing herself outside of the circle of normative blackness to look back into it, and into the realm of suppressed fantasy that lies there, the space of the “no-no”: dominatrix, slut, he-she, queer, black bitch. Anger incarnate in beautiful bared flesh. Crazy enough to say what you’re thinking, but won’t say out loud. Easier to place her somewhere else or perhaps to not place her at all.

Strange Women: Anger and the Split Self

Every generation needs a new kind of woman. For me, that woman was Grace Jones. The switching of accents. An insectlike tilt of her head. Sunglasses that block out our meeting (and reading of) her eyes. A smile that could well be a sneer. I recognized in her thrilling contrariness, her “sounding like a no-no,” a female masculine home girl. When she talk-sings “You ain't gonna get it!” in “Nipple to the Bottle,” or yells out
“Doesn’t anyone work in this town?” in “ἀ ε Apple Stretching,” I can imagine the cutting of eyes, the sucking of teeth, the toss of hips that reveal a sensibility that I can only describe as womanish.

In contemporary entertainment culture, “strange” women might be culled from the strangers that people celebrity culture, but they may also be family, or even ourselves. In Julie Dash’s groundbreaking film Daughters of the Dust, the story of a family of black women in the Georgia Sea Islands at the turn of the twentieth century, two sisters discuss the return of Yellow Mary, a member of the family who has gone off on her own, gone to Cuba, to work first as a servant, then wet nurse, and then prostitute. She returns to the island in style, still audaciously outspoken and providing no apology for her leaving.

Girl One: What that woman, Yellow Mary. She ain’t no family woman. She a scary woman.
Girl Two: She a new kind of woman.

For every generation, there is the scary woman, the woman who symbolizes the community’s anger at and fear of change. Like Eartha, and like Grace, the character of Yellow Mary represents what can happen to women outside of the comfort of a small community—what can happen when one is “ruined.” But Yellow Mary also represents what can happen when one survives the new challenges of the outside world. We find out that after she was brought to Cuba her employers held her captive. Yellow Mary tells us that she “fixed the tittie” to end the exploitation of her sex. She stopped the milk—the product that was paying for her room and board, as well as feeding the children of her captors—something like Lady Macbeth’s unsexing of herself. In this move, she takes momentary control of her own commodification. But her next option—prostitution—is a limited one that she must also live with. ἀ е film is mysterious about just what “fixing the tittie” entails and doesn’t tell us what else she has done in the process—what other changes, what other “fixing” had to occur before she made it back home. But her family and we see what she has become—beautiful, haughty, distant—a diva. She carries a big yellow parasol and brings with her a lover, a woman in yellow, another yellow woman. Over the course of the film, Yellow Mary’s “Fixing the tittie” has turned out to mean a lot of things—a symbol of unknown happenings, fears of travel, fears of the body, but also the negotiation of sexuality—at once concrete and vague, suggestive.
In Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*, Nell and Sula are fighting off the white boys who bully them on their way home from school. Sula stops and pulls out a knife, and cuts herself. She makes herself bleed. She tells the boys, “If I could do that to myself, imagine what I could do to you.”\textsuperscript{13} The impulse, the act. Anger. A new self, emerging. A break in narrative, a stopping of time.

\textit{\textbf{a e}} moments when things pop out of my mouth and I don’t know where they come from. I am followed home from school. Some boys are teasing me, calling me names, throwing rocks that barely miss my ankles. I wheel around, and I point at them. “You go straight to hell.” \textit{\textbf{a e}} ey stop—aghast—as if I have been speaking in tongues. \textit{\textbf{a e}} ey laugh and frown at the same time, backing away. Perhaps—I hope—they have taken me quite literally, that I have cursed them. Maybe they assume (wrongly) that I believe in hell. But perhaps for that moment I do, because I want them to go away, and my anger is real. I want them to suffer someplace far away from me.

A different afternoon, a little later that spring, one of the same boys follows me into the lobby of my apartment building. \textit{\textbf{a e}} ere are three doors to get through, one locked outer and two locked inner. \textit{\textbf{a e}} boy pushes his way in after me. I make it to the second door, but he is right behind me before I can open it. I stare straight ahead, my hand in my pocket feeling for my keys. I feel him behind me, touching me, breathing Doritos breath down my neck, laughing. I jab my elbows into him, but he is pushing, and I can’t get him away from me. My voice is... hard to find. “Stop,” I say, breathless with panic. “Leave me alone.” I sound too polite to my own ears, apologetic, and I wish that I didn’t. My voice is betraying me. From the other side of the door, a neighbor comes down the stairs. She says, in a no-nonsense voice, “When will you kids stop?” She does not seem to see that I am pushing the boy away from me, that I am not playing. No one seems to notice that I am not playing. She opens the second door and I run in. Luckily, at the sound of the older woman’s voice, the boy has disappeared. I scramble for my keys and skitter into my apartment. For the rest of that spring, I will keep seeing him around the neighborhood and at school, a beige peacoat, and when I do, my heart will leap and I will duck my head, hoping I will not be seen.

Grace Jones provides the soundtrack for my revenge. She is the voice for the things that I hold in, and that threaten to break me. She is Sula’s split finger, and she is the knife. On Jones’s *Slave to the Rhythm* album, her face is splintered into half a dozen refractions. Laceration. \textit{\textbf{a e}} cut-
ting, splitting image of her face, screaming. Mouth open. Anger split and multiplied. Anger also a mirror, reflecting mine. She is acting on us, on me. She is splitting me, us. She is mirroring. Now she is opening.

In her iconography, in her music and performances, Grace Jones performs a caricature of black femininity, and then the splitting of that caricature. She is like the tall, graceful plaster Nubian statues that my great-grandmother kept in her front parlor, but it is as if they have been cracked, revealing the brittleness of their construction.

I see Jones’s splitting of self in her performances as a direct response to a history of presenting the black female body as both sexually voracious and unrapeable, unable to feel pain. This split is a dominant theme in black women’s feminist art of the Post-Soul era, including Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sapphire’s *Push*, Kara Walker’s heart-wrenching cutouts, Lydia Johnson’s and Suzan-Lori Parks’s plays about Sarah Baartman, and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*. In *Yellow* Mary’s not quite fully revealed story of “fixing the tittle,” we might think of the “culture of dissemblance” that Darlene Clark Hine discusses in her work—the culture of masking sexual experience, pain, and loss by black women, masked by an image of bravado or exposure.14 Julie Dash discusses her own struggle with the culture of dissemblance as a central motivation in making the film.

The stories from my own family sparked the idea of *Daughters* and formed the basis for some of the characters. But when I probed my relatives for information about the family history in South Carolina, or about our migration north to New York, they were often reluctant to discuss it. When things got too personal, too close to memories they didn’t want to reveal, they would close up, push me away, tell me to go ask someone else. I knew then that the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories.15

If, as Jacqueline Bobo has documented, black female audiences had been courted and addressed through the *Daughters of the Dust*’s marketing and production, Grace Jones’s black audiences, and especially her female audiences, might be seen as participating in an accidental or even eccentric form of reception. We find in Jones’s songs and films less easily
available narratives of black family, community, and self-actualization than what we might find in *Daughters* or *The Color Purple*—two works that critics often evoke when they theorize about black female interpretive communities and responses to popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet Grace Jones’s adoption of hypersexualized, animalistic, machinelike, and apparently degrading positions acts as “disidentification” with the toxic aspects of dominant ideology of black womanhood. In Maria J. Guzman’s insightful analysis of Jones’s performances in her *One Man Show*, she points out that Jones “has been most often criticized for not addressing her audiences during the *One Man Show* period, and has been called ‘Alien Grace. Detached Grace. Frozen Grace.’ She is often seen as an emblem of cold steel androgyny.” Yet Jones’s coldness might be read less as a problem than as a solution—a way to mark her refusal and spirit of critique through sound and embodiment. We might then look to Jones as a way of theorizing the black female spectator’s use of difficult and/or controversial figures as a means of negotiating the contradictions and complexities of race, sexuality, and pleasure, and the forging of identity within the very curtailed space of commercial entertainment culture against the grain of original intentions. In addition, as a subcultural icon, Jones forces us to think about the ways that black cultural traffic travels out from, as well as returns to, unpredictable, and unforeseen, directions.

What is additionally radical, daring, and risky about Grace Jones’s work is that she explores black female anger and the split self in a popular, commercial, and often gay white male culture. In this way, we might see Grace Jones as conveying a kind of triple consciousness through the medium of celebrity; Jones gives black voice (and style) to the predominantly white-controlled text of the celebrity. But she adds to this double-voicedness a third level of critique about the space for art and critique.

Behind her “strange” mask, Jones presents a commentary on the condition of negotiating exploitation.

As we discuss Jones’s work, and especially the extent to which we might think of her work as critique, the problem of her agency in shaping her persona emerges. Both Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Janell Hobson link Jones to the representation of the Black Venus and sexual savage. Pieterse, in *White on Black: Images of the Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, comments that Jones’s image of “the construction of the exotically and erotically dangerous black woman is also an important
thread running through the stage personae of a whole range of popular singers, for example, Eartha Kitt, Shirley Bassey, and Tina Turner.”

“Jones fits into a history of commercial images of black women’s bodies as animal and human sexual objects is undeniable. But what is missing here is room for the agency and complexity of a performer, or for the multiple ways that her audience might understand her.

Jones has been spokeswoman for corporate culture in the United States and elsewhere: on billboards, album covers, and advertisements. For example, her body and voice have been used to sell Honda scooters—the perfect embodiment of her sleek futurism and the mobility of identity in the 1980s. But she has also figured herself as part of the artistic avant-garde, and her carefully studied allusions reveal her understanding of an international history of the performance of “strange,” from Picasso’s primitives to Josephine Baker to Marlene Dietrich to the constructionists to Japanese Noh theater. In her essay “Grace Jones, Post-coloniality, and Androgyny: the Performance Art of Grace Jones,” art historian Miriam Kershaw writes of Jones as a performance artist, not just as a commercial performer or representation created by others, and one who strategically intercedes in the discourse of the primitive dominant in twentieth-century modernism. Kershaw offers one of the few critical studies of Jones that credits her work as a politicized engagement with art and history, describing her work as self-referential, a “dance of sign ricochets.”

Jones’ fierce stage presence destabilizes historical relations of power enacted through male/female, black/white interactions, while her commanding voice leads the viewer through a symbolic negation.”

Kershaw notes the importance of her experiences as a runway model, a training ground through which to think critically about body, look, and movement, as well as “rapide, multiple reinvention.” Other forces of influence include gay subculture and the “liminal space of the disco”—where Kershaw says Jones worked out a sense of sexual play. Like Kershaw, I see Jones as consciously inhabiting and then disrupting a series of black female stereotypes, from the primitive mask to Parisian Black Venus. Indeed, Jones herself articulated her identification with Baker in her interview with Andy Warhol. In her performances, Jones highlights
the spectacle around gender and the theater of black identity. Her use of boxing motifs in the *One Man Show* and her other works is just one of the ways that she places herself in a tradition of the spectacle, eroticism, and violence of black bodies. To borrow Homi K. Bhabha's phrase, Jones occupies a position of “sly civility,” and her artistry, in some ways, comes in her play with ambiguity.26

Jones's performed critique is part of its own historicizeable tradition, an engagement with cultural memory that might be accessed via her assemblage of costumes, persona, and movements (sometimes animal, sometimes machine, sometimes masculine and feminine); her gaze (aggressive, flirtatious, and sometimes shielded, a mask); her sound (use of lower, as well as high, registers, the sometimes flat boredom expressed in her voice and phrasing, her gruffness or blueing of notes, her shouts); the citationality of her performances to past performances (Eartha Kitt, Josephine Baker, minstrel shows, circuses, freak shows, and other black “displays”); and her lively engagement with countercultural audiences, especially now that her celebrity has taken on cult status. The tools of performance studies are vital in opening up Grace Jones as icon or representation to a figure of critique. By viewing Jones as a performer rather than a produced media spectacle, we are allowed to think of her as an agent always in collaboration with an audience.

In her performances, Grace Jones is something like a piece of kitschy racist memorabilia, but one that has somehow come to life, possessed and angry.27 As she switches from automaton during “Demolition Man,” to heartbroken lover in “La Vie En Rose,” there is always a glimmer, a wink, and sometimes a glare, a sneer of anger, lurking just below the surface, that might well have its roots in the commercial trade of black bodies from the slave moment to the present. Jones's performances constantly call attention to her own framing, and to the expectations of her audience. She asks us to think about the “situation” of her performance, and the limits of its boundaries and the lens. This not only gets us to think further about the artificiality of her performance of identity: black, woman, and Jamaican. It also invites the audience to consider their participation as audience/consumer.

Grace Jones's attention to the framing and sale of her sexuality, as well as her disruption of easy categorization and harnessing of sexual power and control, is informed, I'd argue, by a history of resistance of Caribbean slave women, and in particular, the voice of disdain and anger that can be located in Caribbean oral culture. Jones may transmogrify this
Caribbean tradition into a patois informed by bodily, as well as vocal, manipulations of punk and performance art, but the spirit is still shared. For example, in Carolyn Cooper’s landmark *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, she traces the image of the transgressive black female woman in Jamaican culture who uses both her body and her speech as a means of resistance. Cooper begins with the figure of Nanny, the maroon leader who, according to legend, raised her skirts and mooned British soldiers, and in the process deflected their bullets. Cooper traces the centrality of the bottom in dance hall culture as going back to this first “potent female bottom.”

From Nanny on, sexual transgression, as well as theatrical self-presentation, becomes a means of critical commentary in Jamaican folk culture. Cooper points to the song “Me Know No Law, Me Know No Sin” as an example of where the transgressive black woman declares her strategic use of her master’s economic interest in her sexuality, her ownership of her own sexuality, and her refusal of moral responsibility.

Altho’ a slave me is born and bred,
My skin is black, not yellow;
I often sold my maiden head
To many a handsom fellow. . . .

Me know no law, me know no sin,
Me is just what ebba them make me;
āi s is the way dem bring me in;
So God nor devil take me.

Cooper suggests that this song gives us a female character who declares her freedom as she flaunts her cunning ability to capitalize on her body—selling her “maiden head” several times over “[t]o many a handsome fellow.” The qualifying “[al]tho’ a slave me is born and bred” declares her refusal to be commodified by anybody but herself. She may be a legal “slave” but she is free nevertheless to exploit her status as a commodity in the sexual marketplace. She is able to seduce gullible men into purchasing a non-existent product, not her body, but the illusion of virginity and first conquest of undiscovered territory; the imperial myth (dis)embodied.
At the same time, by claiming ignorance of the transaction at hand (through the play of “no/know”) the speaker claims the right to innocence, placing herself outside the boundaries of the social. In this way, Cooper suggests, she claims her right to humanity.  

I see in Grace Jones’s covers of Bill Withers’s “Use Me” and Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire,” a similar presentation of self as sexual trickster, at once offering herself as an accessible source of and product of consuming sexual desire, and, at the same time, in her aggressive and sometimes surreal performance style, mocking the idea that she might not have the upper hand.

In Jones’s collaborations with her former husband, Jean-Paul Goude, we see a similar tug-of-war of representational and, in the end, sexual control, and ultimately, the emergence of Jones as trickster. Goude says that he first met Jones, artist, model, and then an emerging disco singer, after seeing some of her “outrageous” performance art in Paris and New York. Jones becomes the subject of a series of photographic art, collage, and drawings. The content, as well as the strategy, of Jean-Paul Goude’s work reveals a fascination with the black female body, as well as with technology. He combines both to denaturalize and sometimes at the same time exploit stereotypes about black female bodies as primitive, excessive, and accessible. His photographic technique includes supplementation of fetishized body parts like the buttocks (as in his photographs of black model and former Robert De Niro inamorata Toukie Smith, in “Carolina” [1978]), and the elongation of neck, legs, and torso, as in the 1978 photo collage created of Grace Jones, which Jones jokingly called his “Nigger Arabesque.” Goude, in fact, appropriates this title as a caption in his book Jungle Fever without scare quotes, undercutting Jones’s critical response. Goude describes his pre-Photoshop process of altering the figure in Jungle Fever.

First I photographed her in different positions—to get all my references—, which I combined, as you can see, in the cut-up version of the picture. I cut her legs apart, lengthened them, turned her body completely to face the audience like an Egyptian painting, and of course, once I was all done, I had a print made which I used as my preliminary drawing. Then I started painting, joining 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.
Here, as well as in other work, Goude would seem to demonstrate an obsessive desire to control and reshape both Jones's image and her history.\textsuperscript{33} In a photo entitled “Grace at seven, imagined. Spanishtown, Jamaica. 1979,” he reimagines Jones’s childhood, and perhaps her sexual coming of age, figuring her as a girl in pigtails and without panties, raising her dress to the camera. In “Grace and twin, imagined. Paris, 1979,” Goude reconceives Jones’s relationship with her real-life twin brother, creating an incestuous family drama by replicating Jones’s face and putting it on a nude male body, the two spooning on a yellow satin loveseat. By including the word \textit{imagined}, Goude both marks his shaping hand as the artist and erases Jones’s participation in either her life or this new conception. \textit{He}, it is assumed, is the imaginer. \textit{His} passion for orchestration comes out even stronger in his description of his work with Grace in their performance piece \textit{One Man Show}. He writes, “Grace let me make her over completely, use any effect I could find to turn her into what I want her to be.”\textsuperscript{34}

Yet it is in the moments of performance during \textit{One Man Show} that Goude’s control slips, which he himself acknowledges. He describes here one of the sequences where Grace confronts a tiger.

Grace, dressed as a tiger herself, sings to the beast. \textit{They} hiss and snarl at each other. She opens the door of the cage and, suddenly, all the lights go off. \textit{The} music stops. It is pitch black! \textit{Then} this loud tape comes on of two tigers roaring as though in a fight to the death. Ten scary seconds go by. \textit{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.

To tell you the truth, I couldn’t see where all this stuff was leading. It was certainly fun, but also very tiring and very difficult to control. So I decided to go back to my still pictures where I was the undisputed boss.\textsuperscript{35}

As it turned out, the tour of the show became a place where the professional and personal collaboration between Goude and Jones broke down. He ends his chapter on Grace bitterly.

My masterpiece was a vision entirely my own of what was essentially a simple, naïve person, holding back to what she had always been. Trouble. By the time “One Man Show” reached the U.S., I
knew I had lost her. The “party nigger” had gone back to what she knew best, and I would have to find a new vehicle.36

Goude’s version of the production of the performance reveals a sinister implication of the title One Man Show—with Goude’s vision as the true subject and Grace as the vehicle of that vision. But the subversive spirit suggested by Goude’s phrase “party nigger” is impossible for me to ignore. Jones’s performances create a production that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The video production of One Man Show (1982), culled from performances in New York and London, provides a rich locus of analysis because it combines a filmed live performance of one of Jones’s concerts with video art that is “canned.” We are forced to think about the ways that Jones’s performances are mediated by the hand of Goude, underlined by the video’s use of stop action, speed, color, and other forms of distortion. Indeed, one might say that the show as a whole is about mediation—about the experience of being shaped and altered by an outside, a “slave to the rhythm,” as the opening song suggests. Yet the performance also forces us to interrogate our assumptions about live performance as the most authentic. As Philip Auslander has discussed, some studies of performance participate in a bifurcated and reductive binary opposition between the live and the mediated, where “the common assumption is that the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real.”37 There are many ways, indeed, that the nonlive aspects of One Man Show convey important problems and issues of Jones’s identity and agency in her performances. Jones’s lyrics, facial expressions, voice, and other embodied performances add commentary to Goude’s editing and other artistic choices.

The sequence for “Living My Life,” for example, calls on the visual vocabularies of minstrel shows, Dada, and punk. Jones wears several cone-shaped appendages over her head, nose, and eyes, which are pulled by a white hand from her chin, breast, and forehead, extended from her chin and her breast, announcing the artificiality of that body under the constraint of fame and “art,” and less explicitly, the dynamics of race and power in these worlds of performance, art, and music. A pulsing heartbeat of a synthesizer creates suspense as Jones brings a gun to her head. The gun goes off with a comic shot, while the cone hat goes flying into space, and Jones is left standing. The action then speeds up to match the speed of the synthesizer, which is beginning to sound like an
aerobics lesson. Jones swims in her stiff cone of a skirt. Multiple white ballet dancers dressed like Jones but wearing gorilla masks race across the screen. Jones’s movements capture the hopped up, surreal, and often comic aesthetic of punk—one that, according to Dick Hebdige, feeds on discomfort about and even alienation from the body, a mechanized and therefore dehumanized relationship to natural processes, and an interest in the debris of society, sometimes putting such debris on the same level as “highbrow” culture. Cast-away sources of past racial shame—the gorilla mask, the blackface of the minstrel show—are put into collaboration with the highbrow movements of ballet, ballet’s classic graceful beauty also made more grotesque by Jones’s pained expressions and movements, as well as by being sped up. “Living My Life,” penned by Jones herself, might be the most explicitly angry song: “You choke me for living my life . . . you brainwash me for living my life . . . You can’t stand me for living my life.” Yet the imagery is surreal, and her gestures of anger are comically melodramatic, flinging her arms in frustration or clutching her head, filmed in off-center close-up. In One Man Show, then, we see Jones negotiating the flotsam and jetsam of racist traditions of representation, working within and standing outside of them, always still asking us to notice their frame.

Conclusion: Grace Jones as Corporate Cannibal

By 1998, with several hits, as well as film roles, behind her (including in A View to a Kill and Boomerang), Grace Jones was a known quantity of strangeness, packaged, in some ways, to create an experience of risk, particularly for her straight and white gay audiences. This is reflected in Brian Chin’s comments in his liner notes to Jones’s Private Life: à e Compass Point Sessions (1998) that “In a recent poll by Men’s Health Magazine, the male readership named Grace Jones (along with Hilary Clinton, RuPaul and, of course, ‘my mother’) among the women who scared them the most.”

To what extent can this strangeness be domesticated? With each public appearance, Jones changes the nuance of her performance. Her audience never quite knows which Grace they’ll see, and if in fact they will become a part of the act. Perhaps this wily reinvention is part of the “scariness” that the men surveyed in Men’s Health zero in on. (Or it could be her muscles.) But this unpredictability risks being packaged as
exoticism or shtick, as Jay Hedblade suggests in a review of a Jones performance at Chicago’s House of Blues.

Roughly halfway through her set Sunday night, Grace Jones was chanting the word “strange” while staring down the front row with steely eyes and baring her chest for all to see. It was perfectly fitting, and anyone at the House of Blues who wasn’t expecting Ms. Jones to challenge the limits of decorum had certainly stumbled in without knowing the evening’s main attraction.40

As an artist who is also a commercial commodity, Jones’s continual regeneration is a necessary means for keeping a place in the public memory.41

That tension is perfectly captured in Jones’s role as Strangé in Reginald Hudlin’s 1992 film Boomerang. In the film, which centers on the comeuppance of Marcus, played by Eddie Murphy, a “player who gets played,” Grace Jones plays a wild diva whose outrageousness is eagerly sought after to energize a flagging cosmetics line, but who threatens to steal the show.

Boomerang is a Post-Soul time capsule from the appearances of black 1990s comic men: Murphy, David Allen Grier, Martin Lawrence, and Chris Rock. It features Robin Givens, bad girl still in the midst of her public romance and struggles with Mike Tyson, and a pre-Monster’s Ball and pre-Catwoman Halle Berry. Along with Grace Jones, it features celebrity eccentrics of a past generation: Geoffrey Holder and Eartha Kitt, figures known, like Jones, as cosmopolitan and sometimes “exotic.” The film presents an idealized version of black life in the early 1990s. The characters inhabit incredibly swanky New York corporate and domestic spaces. In the office, black and brown faces of many shades are everywhere, on every level—from the secretarial pool to art direction to middle management to the CEOs. Yet the film is also conversant with a multicultural world. They are served by white waiters and buy from white-run clothing stores, and Marcus and Halle Berry’s character, Angela, fall in love while bonding over Star Trek.

The interiors of the office are hip, masculine: brown gleaming marble pillars, black leather chairs, and chrome. The geometric angles of the flat-top dominate. The office is a space of New Jack freedom, the aesthetic and space clearly African American, hip, and male. (In fact, the film opens with a riff from “Atomic Dog,” George Clinton’s call of the black
masculine wild.) The life of the corporation, a beauty company, seems to provide ample food for sexual appetites—whether it’s the lineup of honeys waiting to be cast for the next commercial spot or the art director’s playfully erotic commercials. The chase of women (and men) is presented as compatible with corporate competition. Getting freaky is okay as long as it can be shaped for profit.

Strange’s explicit sexuality, sartorial splendor, and showwomanship are an updating of the sly, if more genteel, Catwoman charms of Eartha Kitt, the aging but still voracious former owner and spokeswoman of the cosmetics line in the film. In other words, Jones plays herself—and the film places her as a generational bridge in a cultural history of outrageous and “strange” black women of the twentieth century. We see the corporation continually scheming to track and sell Strange’s outrageousness. In one fantastic sequence, Strange bursts from a helicopter-delivered crate on a carriage drawn by leather-harnessed, bare-chested, beefy white men. This display is used to open a swanky corporate dinner and inaugurate a new perfume line. The admen and adwomen struggle to accommodate Strange’s eccentricity. All are shocked when she removes her panties in the boardroom to demonstrate what the “essence of sex” smells like. As she calls out possible names for the fragrance (“Afterbirth,” “Love Puss,” “Steel Vagina”), pacing the floor in fishnets, blond fall, and whip, she threatens to steal the scene. An alarmed Jacqueline (Givens) warns Marcus (Murphy), “You do realize that you’re never going to be able to control her.” But Marcus answers with confidence, “I don’t want to control Strange. Just let her do what she does and we’ll get more coverage that way. Strange is buck wild.” In other words, Strange’s wildness will help them get the publicity they need to make the perfume a success. Marcus calls out to her, “You go, girl!”

Strange disciplines Marcus, however, in the next scene. At a chichi restaurant meeting, Strange grabs his hand and pulls it to her crotch under the table, demanding (rather than questioning), “You don’t want some of this?” When Marcus demurely turns her down, telling her that “it’s not that kind of a dinner,” Strange chases Marcus from the crowded restaurant, shouting “Pussy, Pussy, Pussy!” to Murphy’s rising embarrassment. It is only Jacqueline’s threat to sue Strange that calms her down (an allusion to Jones’s occasional offscreen legal troubles, perhaps). While the film argues that the “essence of sex” is business, Strange’s outrageousness keeps her patrons guessing.

Jones’s 2008 song “Corporate Cannibal,” from her CD Hurricane, aptly
captures the ambiguity of her work. Jones is both the icon of the savage, sold and traded by corporations like Island Records, and the force that threatens to destabilize the economy that trades in her—ingesting it and spitting out the bones, always altering the venues in which she travels. In Michel de Montaigne’s essay “On the Cannibals” (1580), written in response to early European fascination with the peoples of Brazil and the Caribbean, he corrects the misconception that cannibals eat their enemies because they are uncivilized. Cannibalism, he argues, is a stylized act of revenge, which gives recognition to the fortitude of the enemy. As a “corporate cannibal,” Jones gives testimony to the ravaging hunger of the marketplace, as well as her own ability to stay one step ahead of it. In this way, Jones is part of the ongoing dynamic of black cultural traffic, initiated by the mid-Atlantic slave trade, which continues into the current moment—where black performers negotiate the pressure to be “authentically,” recognizably “black” and always cutting edge. As Tricia Rose writes in her foreword to the collection *Black Cultural Traffic* (2005):

Racial ideologies undergirding the historical trade of bodies on which black cultural traffics are based have ensnared interpreters of black cultures in an endless paradox: black culture has been both an enduring symbol of unchanging purity, in full and complete opposition to white, western normalcy and yet a highly celebrated example of cutting-edge change, dynamism and innovation. Forever “new,” “exotic,” and yet “always black,” black culture must always be recognized as black for its daily bread (as in familiar in its blackness) and yet must also be newly black (as in pure and untainted by “outside forces” for the same ration.

A complicating factor of Jones’s art has always been its collaboration with commercialism, even as it comments on that process. Black artists in the 1980s and 1990s enjoyed a new kind of corporate recognition and movement/trade, and we can see this in the arc of the film and television career that accompanied Jones’s musical successes, as Bond villain May Day in *A View to a Kill* or working the talk show circuit, chatting up Merv Griffin, shocking Regis and Kathy Lee, competing with Joan Rivers to see who can be the most campy and outrageous on the *Tonight Show*. Given this, one might be tempted to read Jones’s appropriation of corporate gray flannel and (military?) flattop less as a queering of corporate power than a commandeering of it.
Yet Jones’s presence refuses complete assimilation. A figure of excess, Jones moves between the known and unknowable. In Deborah Richards’s poem “Halle Berry One Two,” her Grace Jones persona says, “I am not natural. I’m not super heroine. I dabble with the organic yet I am not vegetable matter.” At times she is a Jamaican home girl, at other times a Parisian diva on a catwalk. In Boomerang, Grace is Strangé, a more fabulous and amplified Cleopatra; at other times, she seems to be a work out of science fiction. Yet there is still a way that her critical spirit is also grounded in a shared history, from Nanny to Josephine Baker. Jones brings together the strange with a historically rooted sexual subjectivity. She is the “three-line whip,” a “walking disaster,” as she sings in “Demolition Man.” But she is also the sister outsider of “Walking in the Rain”—performed in a her trademark flattened key, one note blued.

Feeling like a woman,
Looking like a man
Sounding like a no-no
Making when I can.