GRACE JONES IN ONE MAN SHOW: MUSIC AND CULTURE

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GRACE JONES IN *ONE MAN SHOW*: MUSIC AND CULTURE

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Abstract

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This thesis will examine Grace Jones in 1982’s One Man Show. Based on live concerts filmed in London and New York, the video serves as an archive of Jones’s experimental work in music. Whereas her character roles in films such as Conan the Destroyer and A View to Kill embodied common stereotypes about black sexuality, her music repudiates these traditional roles. One Man Show illustrates Jones’s increased control in the production of her image. She combined visual references to industrial society, primitivism, and fashion with music that provided an alternative narrative to our cultural history. By doing this, Jones exemplified the cooperative aspect of popular culture and its public, which is far from passively watching. I would like to explore the relationship between Grace Jones, the persona that she created in performance, and the significance of the persona in popular culture.

Approved: ____________________________

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Introduction

Grace Jones’s *One Man Show* (1982), a music video version of performances she did in London and New York City, continues to be an unusual relic of the music scene in the 1980s. *One Man Show* could be considered false advertising for promising its audience something fundamentally untrue—that its star is a man. Its star, Grace Jones, is a music and queer icon in popular culture. She is an artist who personifies a spectrum of personalities to audiences but she has never been a man, contrary to rumors that suggested otherwise.¹ In spite of her race, height, and apparent androgyny, she has become an iconic figure of the 80s. International companies have used her image to advertise everything from hair spray to axle grease, which is an estimation of her many-sided persona.²

Born Grace Mendoza in 1952, she grew up in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and later relocated to Syracuse, New York. She attended Syracuse University briefly before leaving to pursue a modeling career, which was primarily based in Paris because her features were criticized as being “too strong for American magazines.”³ Public reception plays a large role in transnational identity and therefore, Jones’s early impression upon American audiences typifies Western attitudes about how beauty should look. In fact, after several years in France, Jones returned and became a fixture in the more liberal community of the disco scene, frequenting Studio 54 and later being touted as “The

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² Ibid., 90.
Queen of Gay Discos.”

She began recording music in 1976, and released her first album, *Portfolio* (1977), with famed disco producer Tom Moulton. Her following albums, *Fame* (1978) and *Muse* (1979), were produced by Moulton as well. In 1980, she worked with reggae/dub pioneers Sly & Robbie on the single, “Warm Leatherette.” The song was a cover of an electro-punk single by The Normal, and broadened her appeal to new wave and punk fans alike. In addition, this period marked Jones’s transformation from disco diva to new wave androgyne. By 1981, Jones had released a body of work that could be formatted into a full-length feature, *One Man Show*. The video includes performances of “Warm Leatherette,” “Walking in the Rain,” “Feel Up,” “La Vie en Rose,” “Demolition Man,” “Pull Up to the Bumper,” “Private Life,” “My Jamaican Guy,” “Living My Life,” and “Libertango/I’ve Seen That Face Before.” It was directed by her creative and romantic partner, Jean-Paul Goude; the New York City footage was shot by Michael Shamberg. The video was produced by Eddie Babbage and released in 1982, and was nominated for a Grammy the following year.

Having lived in three countries by the time she began recording music had influenced her creative portrayal of herself. By incorporating elements of performance, dance, and traditional and synthesized music, she appealed to a wide audience whose members had various cultural backgrounds, interests, and beliefs.

Carolyn Anderson has suggested that Jones developed her signature style partly as a reaction against her strict religious upbringing and her exposure to permissive American

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4 Internet Movie Database, “Biography for Grace Jones.”

5 And We Danced, “Grace Jones,”
cultural styles. Anderson identified the crafting of this bold persona to a period early in Jones’s life, shortly after her move to the United States at the age of 12.7

Jones had few friends in high school. Raised in a household that required that she wear only dresses or skirts in public, she wore extravagant, hand-made Givenchy designs to school.8 One of Jones’s early interviews in Ebony magazine cited her Pentecostal upbringing as a priority throughout her life; this detail about Jones’s upbringing is only briefly mentioned in discussions about her performances yet explains much about her adaptation to American culture.

Jones’s early fashion play raises an important question: how can the oppressed interact with popular culture? In a market that hopes to make everything consumable, it seems like a no-win situation. Some choose to stay completely out of it, and yet others, like Grace Jones, do not. The first option has been cited as a strategy of “the politics of silence” by Evelyn Hammonds.9 So, what are the benefits of the second option? And how have they been integrated into academic domains of knowledge? Based on her performances in One Man Show, which were co-written by Jones, there is much to be learned about her own ideas about the image she was creating. This video loosely chronicled French, British, and American cultural historical trends while displaying her more personal experimentation with modern approaches to art and cultural performance.

6 Ibid.
8 Norment, The Outrageous Grace Jones, 92.
My analysis will begin with a discussion about the “surface” of fashion and current theoretical interpretations of identity. I am concerned with the issue of how the black female body relates to these analogies as well as how contemporary popular discourse has accumulated new versions of identity through music and video technologies. Grace Jones personified the complexities of black female sexuality through a technologically enhanced worldview, exploring multiple roles that undid popular beliefs about race, nationalism, and sexuality. Her work reminds viewers that there are many ways to appeal to the consumer market while challenging ideas about what it is to be different.

Chapter 1: Fashion and Queer Performance

Although Jones was known to be heterosexual, she has garnered much attention based on her appearance as queer or androgynous. During the early 1980s, androgyny was a popular metaphor for bodily transformations, and was adopted by artists like Jones as a specular apparatus that reflected internal or imaginary identities. While contemporary white performers such as Aimee Mann and Annie Lennox were also experimenting with cross-dressing and androgynous style, performers of non-Western descent, were not. Grace Jones’s adoption of this style provided an alternative model for visualizing black and queer women. The entertainment and fashion industries produced a uniformly white vision of style and beauty, which positioned Jones at a disadvantage. Nevertheless, Grace Jones was a well known fashion model throughout Europe and the United States before her ventures into music performance.10

In One Man Show, Jones’s awareness of her liminal identity is proposed to viewers immediately, displayed through still images of both personal and professional modeling images. Birdcalls and steel drums play while the camera slowly zooms in toward a picture that seems to be taken out of a personal photo album. The photograph shows a young, black girl lifting her skirt up on a wooden porch. This is followed by a sketch drawing of a black man, possibly a reference to her father, wearing a priest’s outfit. The man’s portrait is framed in a room that contains little else besides a naked black woman in an elaborate costume hat. The drawing appears to be realized afterwards, this time including a male who embraces her, creating a twin effect due to

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10 I will address this anomaly in Chapter 2, “Primitivism and the Black Female Body.”
their matching haircuts. They are shown holding champagne glasses, a French accordion
tune is played in the background, and they look out toward the viewer. The images then
depart from the biographical to the spectacular, beginning with the famous image that
appeared on the cover of her album, Island Life (See Figure 1).11

Queer identities have been ascribed negative associations throughout the modern
era; sexual “deviance” of any kind has been defined as a psychological affliction. This
ideation has in turn marked the queer body as unsanitized or out of control; the most
disturbing rationalization to date has been the hysteria-inducing blame placed upon male
homosexual activity for the AIDS epidemic, which gained national attention in the 1980s.

In addition, queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick have
established identity as a composite of behaviors and appearances, not natural at all.
Butler’s discussion concerning the performativity of drag is especially pertinent to the
construction of gender and the modes of expression in fashion shows. She cited the
apparent contradiction that occurs when female and male signs are superimposed and
related the concept of gender as a “corporeal style.”12 In “Demolition Man,” multiple
Graces are shown goose stepping across the stage while she sings. This is a visual
negation of a single “true” Grace that also functions to suggest the reliance on artifice,
such as make-up and clothes, in the presentation of the self.

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11 See Figure 1. The final image is the one chose by Goude as the ultimate cover for the album. I
chose to include the sketch for the image, as well as the process, in order to emphasize the illusion of Jones
as an exoticized art object, and an image that could be manipulated for effect.
12 Judith Butler, “From Interiority to Gender Performatives,” in Gender Trouble: Feminism and
Fashion depends upon theatricality and style, which shape desire in order to sell a “look.” It is the consumer friendly realization that identity can be shaped and re-shaped, in part through visual imagery. In the 80s, such mainstream bands as Duran Duran, were posing androgyny as a commodity in the highly sexed repertoire of rock discourse during the early 1980s. As white men, they could take liberties with sexuality without risking very much. The stakes were much different for Jones, a black woman whose femininity was in question.

Through her own brand of modeling, Grace Jones displayed an alternative model for contemporary black and queer identity as it was understood within 1980s culture. The word itself, modeling, suggests a manipulation of behavior and appearance. By manipulating visual codes and symbols for “different” cultural identities, she formed a parallel between the imaginary drama of contagiousness that marked queer identities with its more positive and marketable twin, fashionability.  

In “Pull up To the Bumper” for example, Jones gives us a performance that exhibits the dismissal of gendered authenticity altogether by challenging the very concept of Grace Jones as a real being in the Modernist sense of the word. “Pull Up to the Bumper” includes a male dancer dressed exactly like Jones. While she sings the title song, he dances throughout the performance on a separate podium, eventually kicking off his heels, a gesture that disavows a sense of formal entertainment or gender. This recalls Judith Butler’s assertion that an absence occurs as a result of a failure to recognize prescribed opposites (genders) occupying the same body. Jones also plays upon and

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subsequently discards both male and female traits in an empowered manner that has been long denied to women of color as bodies for entertainment and little else. This prevents the body itself from correctly signifying the law of gender as it is currently defined.\textsuperscript{14} The body of the androgyne fails to integrate its own desires with this gendered law, which regulates behavior to reproduce in servitude of the heterosexual model.

Jones’s identity then exists within/between two simultaneous genders, as defined through popular discourse, and taps into a fantasy beyond established narratives, confusing power relationships and leadership roles that tend to be masculinized. In addition, she pokes fun at the notion of style/identity as a natural or authentic experience while displaying multiple gender identities in order to unveil the imaginary character of art and its cultural “representation.”

Presenting a series of the same body, symbolized by Jones’s recognizable uniform, “Pull Up to the Bumper” and “Feel Up” are two performances that deal directly with visually re-organizing masculinity. During “Feel Up,” the audience sees three musicians, all men dressed alike in form-fitting suits, playing bass, drums, and bongo drums. She also plays percussion in this performance yet she is not shown as a member of the band-she is shown as the sole performer with a spotlight on her. At the end of the song, the band is once again shown, having increased to five members playing. Then, the screen widens to include two more musicians, totaling seven Grace Jones figures. In terms of masculinity, there are two clear features in this section of the video: the musicians are all male, and Jones is always shown apart from them. Therefore, her own

\textsuperscript{14} Judith Butler, \textit{From Interiority to Gender Performatives}, 361.
possible masculinity is always on the verge of being reinforced visually yet never does. Keeping Jones separate from her sartorial twins maintains a degree of difference, however vague it may be. She continues in this vein throughout “Warm Leatherette,” during which she played the cymbals. By the end of “Warm Leatherette,” Jones had beaten the cymbals until they fall off of the podium that she stands on. Asserting her dominance through her instruments of choice, power is thus symbolized by the ability to produce sound and subsequently destroy it. Later, during “Feel Up,” Jones’s power seemed to be shared with her musicians by clothing them to look like a “band” of Grace Jones figures. This visual relationship fails to assure viewers of Jones’s position as a masculine or feminine individual. So, she remains androgynous. The only readable elements of Jones’s body are interchangeable, like floating features that join her to supporting musicians or dancers. This is relevant to Pacteau’s definition of the androgyne as a subversive figure,

> From the instant my biological sex is determined, my identity is defined in difference-I am either a boy or a girl. I…take up my position in society on one side of the sexual divide…reaffirm the difference…the androgynous ‘position’ represents a denial, or a transgression, of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given identity and to the system of social roles which define us.\(^\text{15}\)

What exactly is considered necessary to constitute her identity onstage—makeup, clothing, skin color? Which sexual organs does this figure have? These questions are commonly expressed regarding androgyny. Francette Pacteau describes them as attempts to achieve the formation of sexual identity through imagination. Pacteau asserted that gender identification is based on ideas about biology and its visual signs, and proposed a less positivist interpretation of queer non-beings like the androgyne.16

Carolyn Anderson asserted that, despite Jones’s androgynous appearance, she ultimately read as “phallic,” through which she attains the ability to overwhelm her audiences.17 Peggy Phelan called this conceptual pairing of genders the “homosexual,” a system under which

The metaphor of gender presupposes unified bodies which are biologically ‘different’ while circumscribing them all under the order of the phallus18

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16 I am using the term non-being in an attempt to replace the word person or subject because they both connote an actual living being or natural entity. Pacteau’s discussion of the androgyne asserts that the androgyne has no place in reality because of the psychological act of speculation between one gender or the other. Pacteau’s statement that, “Androgyny cannot be circumscribed as belonging to some being; it is more of a question of a relation between a look and an appearance, in other words psyche and image,” Ibid., 62.

17 Anderson, En Route to Transnational Postmodernism, 509.

18 Phelan’s discussion of performance in relation to the “speaking bodies” that are associated with men/masculinity, and the “mute bodies” associated with women/femininity, demarcates speech and performance within a phallogocentric realm. Essentially, all bodies answer to or maintain the gravity of the phallus as the symbolic pinnacle of being. Performance, according to Phelan, enacts this otherwise unconscious nepotism through its use of the “performer’s body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body…performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement,” Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London-New York: Routledge, 1993), 151.
According to Phelan,

The genitals themselves are forever hidden within metaphor, and metaphor, as a ‘cultural worker,’ continually converts difference into the Same. The joined task of metaphor and culture is to reproduce itself; it accomplishes this by turning two (or more) into one…by valuing one gender and marking it (with the phallus) culture reproduces one sex and one gender, the hommo-sexual.19

Jones also referenced several power systems/realms that are typically recognized as the military system, Modernism, style/fashion, and nature. Agency is visually multiplied through the military-like group of neo-models of Grace Jones, determined in their unidentifiable mission. The military apparatus is associated with “male” qualities such as reason, protection, strength, competition, and control. In addition, it is a predominantly heterosexual “realm” of activity, and if there is suspicion of homosexual activities, silence is an officially sanctioned method of dealing with it.

The “truth” of one gender subverts the “truth” of the other, and therefore reveals the dependence of one on the other for maintaining its illusion/appearance. This visual “problem” is at work throughout Jones’s performances. In addition, her power suit, can be read as a symbol of upper class lifestyles. Arthur Asa Berger observed that, “Distinctions among garments imply distinctions among people,” which is the message that comes across through Jones’s wardrobe and narratives.20

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19 Ibid.
women were rarely represented as successful. In fact, black female bodies have historically been shown as art objects or curiosities, usually wearing little more than leaf skirts or less.\textsuperscript{21}

Through fashion play and first person narrative, art and its masculinized mythology are revealed as performances that require many encores in order to remain relevant.\textsuperscript{22} In this way, narratives are like fashion’s repertoire of poses. Jones’s performances embark on an imaginary tour of such fascinations—her performances are spectacular presentations of various sexual and cultural “poses.” By combining both forms of narrative, iconic and personal, Jones’s work attains its own rhetoric of power that blurs the line between sexual identities known through popular culture.

\textsuperscript{21} Berger also discussed nudity in terms of implied meaning, using the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve. He cited nudity as a visual connotation of innocence, which is an attribute that was prescribed to persons viewed as Other. He further suggests that “clothes are signifiers of guilt and sin,” which complicates the usual interpretation of the naturalized “primitive” identity. Power suits are especially pertinent to such analysis, for their embedded capitalist/material promotion, Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} I found the explanation for the possibilities of the visual semiosis that occurs on the body of the perceived androgyne to be relevant to the concept of the male artist as supremely divine and capable of creating/changing styles—as having the ability to reproduce in his own right. Both artistic style and the androgyne exist in an unconscious space, and are defined in real space through metaphor (the former through spiritual or biological/natural terms and the latter through Lacanian interpretation by Pacteau). Pacteau explained that “At an unconscious level, where the androgyne belongs, conciliation of the positive and the negative is possible…androgyny, as a fetishistic resolution of castration anxiety—providing the woman with the penis she lacks—could also evoke the possibility of the pregnant man,” Pacteau, \textit{The Impossible Referent}, 71.
The boundary-crossing in Grace Jones’s *One Man Show* is simultaneously physical and imaginary. Grace Jones’s seemingly contradictory persona appears to exist in several different categories. She is often described as “androgy nous,” and “dykey,” or “scary,” “savage,” and “primitive.” Normally, the category of the androgyne is not associated with the category of the primitive, a contradiction in terms that makes Jones’ performances interesting. Primitivism is characterized by the belief that the black body is oversexed and potentially violent. As mentioned in the previous chapter, queer identities have been marked as threatening to non-queer people, and this fear is usually expressed as an ever-present possibility of contagion. Primitivism also has the taint of contagion, whether it was a “fever” for the cultural artifacts and dances or the more threatening event of miscegenation. While engaging contemporary aesthetics, Jones plays on the trope of the display of the primitive female body in order to undermine the construct of the black woman as inherently sexualized and primitive. Jones appropriated a Minimalist fashion aesthetic in order to counteract the traditional image of the African woman on display.

Jones has been described by Barry Walters, a music critic for *The Advocate*, as “attitude-intensive, gender-twisting, gay-rific persona that mixed high style with

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23 The World of Grace Jones. [http://www.theworldofgracejones.com/fan.html](http://www.theworldofgracejones.com/fan.html) (accessed July 17,
subversive substance.” The high style referred to by Walters is arguably that of Minimalism, which was also identified by Miriam Kershaw, albeit briefly, in her essay on Jones’s work in the early 1980s. Kershaw cited it as a feature in Jones’s performances at the Roseland dance club in 1978. The Minimalist aesthetic has framed Jones’s body of work and costuming, from the early 80s to the present (see Images 3, 4, 5). The Minimalist aesthetic was created during the 1960s, largely in response to Abstract Expressionism, by a group of New York based artists that included Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Frank Stella. Distinguished by monumental and abstracted shapes, Minimalist paintings and sculptures were claimed by their creators as forms that were ultimately spatial objects, subject to perceptual and temporal changes. The participation of spectators was essential to the experience of Minimalist art, suggesting an encounter to be experienced, yet there remains a fine line between confrontation and distance in Minimalist art and rhetoric. This is partly due to its anti-symbolic reputation.

In June 2007, Jones performed in London’s annual Meltdown Festival, curated by Jarvis Cocker, wearing an outfit that resembled the Minimalist outfits she wore in One Man Show. Her headdress was fashioned to look like a Minimalist accessory that might have also been included in “Feel Up,” performed with an all-male band of Minimalist clones (See Figure 3).

26 Ibid., 20.
Although the gender-bending/haute couture antics that Jones is known for are part of what makes her subversive, her performances also comment on another dimension of cultural history—the obscured and complex history of race in Western culture. One of the cultural barometers that we have for this topic in 20th century culture is the Primitivism style and its philosophy regarding modern culture.

Primitivism was originally attributed to anything that was not Greek or Italian Renaissance art, Roman and Byzantine art, Egyptian art, Aztec art, and by the 20th century, Oceanic and African art.27 With the advent of colonialism, primitivism took on a new meaning—that of the savage, uncivilized race who were compared with civilized, Anglo-European society. The locus of primitivism was the black female body, which became the harbinger for a savage sexuality that exceeded the limits of representation. As a consequence of changing values and cultural attitudes, the black female body has undergone various transformations in Western culture, resembling deeply embedded ideas about nationalism, namely via the Primitivist model.

Primitivism in art has formed a collective picture of other cultures, based on a general non-White identity that is characterized by an overt sexuality, inferior intellectual or philosophical capacity, and abstracted art forms. Although inspired by foreign cultures, the Primitivist style has been pioneered by French and American artists, such as Paul Gauguin and Jean Debuffet. An updated version of this preference for “pure,” abstract forms characterized Minimalist sculpture, which emerged in the mid-1960s.

Grace Jones’s conflation of these two styles creates an unexpected bridge between the primitive body and Minimalist object as a “physical fact.”28 In addition, the “black” aesthetic that has been represented by Primitivist style is delegitimized through implied Minimalist narratives that convey a clean, white, heterosexual male prowess. For example, white masculinity or androgyny was symbolically transferred onto Jones’s body through the use of a power suit. However, she also dressed as an ape at the beginning of “Warm Leatherette.”

The idea of primitivism was premised upon display of Other bodies. Jones played on this notion in her performances. During the blitzkrieg montage that Goude inserted before the live footage in One Man Show, an image appears and resonates with intensity, reaching back into the past while symbolizing modern fashion. It is a photograph of Jones modeling a sheer black dress to a white audience, a soundtrack of “oohs” and “ahs” frames the dramatic scenario, making it clear that Jones is the object of desire and curiosity. Goude also manipulated Jones’s body proportions in order to achieve a more dramatic appeal (See Images 1 and 4).

This scenario is equal parts colonialist exhibition and modern extravaganza. Separated from the group of onlookers physically as well as symbolically, her body is on display as a spectacle. The commodification of the black female body has a long history in European and American history, and has been correlated to specific sexualities or lifestyles. The associations left behind in the wake of Primitivism have altered how we view the black female body, which has popularly displayed naked or in various states of

undress. When Jones invoked the spectators’ reactions, as she did in the montage at the beginning of *One Man Show*, she was reminding the video audience of the history of displaying other cultures. In particular, Jones was referencing two historical figures: The Hottentot Venus and the Black Venus, or Saartjie Baartman and Josephine Baker.

Miriam Kershaw cited the French fantasy of the Black Venus as an influence for the imagery in *One Man Show*, in which Jean-Paul Goude contemporized the French fascination with the black female body. According to Goude,

> Initially, she was flattered by all of my attention…and she's no dope - Grace is an opportunist and she knew my vision was good for her career. Initially, she let herself be taken over, but then she suspected that I had only fallen in love with her image. Of course…that's the story of my life.

*The Hottentot Venus and the Black Venus: Saartjie Baartman and Josephine Baker*

The creators and programmers of popular entertainment have long understood that difference (in the post-Colonial sense) makes for a good show. Throughout the 19th century, the exhibition of non-white bodies was practiced in both Europe and the United States. According to Krista A. Thompson,

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29 Kershaw’s essay begins with the conflation of the postcolonial and the postmodern as “interdependent,” which implies that they both exist only because of the other term, which is posed as an opposite. Although she is correct in her assertion that Jones’s performance can contribute to such a discursive approach to art historical narratives containing Western and non-Western subjects, I found that Kershaw’s analysis returned to a binarism during certain sections of her essay. For example, she cited Goude as a person whose “creative aesthetic” was discernible amid Jones’s performance, which maintains a possessiveness/origin for the two styles that she cited as conceptually tied to each other, mutually creating each other in the process of identification, Kershaw, *Postcolonialism and Androgyny*, 19.
freak shows—the exhibition of native peoples for public entertainment in circuses, zoos, and museums—became fairly common. In the USA, in particular, the spectacle of "freaks," "natives," and "savages" became a profitable industry at this time, as epitomized in popular traveling shows like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Barnum and Bailey's Circus. World Expositions were also popular for the display of native bodies. During the expositions "natives" performed various ceremonies, rites, dances, and otherwise went about their (supposed) daily routines (even though they were on the exposition grounds)...cultural "others" were employed to perform their "cultural otherness" for an Anglo-American and European audience. Up to the mid-twentieth century displays of this sort continued

The Black Venus is often associated with Saartje Baartman (1789-1815). Most recently, Baartman resurfaced as a long-forgotten reminder of colonialist exploits when her remains were returned to the South African government in 2002. The proposal was initiated by the South African Museums Association (SAMA), an organization that has its roots in the colonialist trade. Ironically, Charles Marthurin-Villet, the leader of a

theatre troupe that Baartman was a member of upon her departure to England, is believed to be the founder of the South African Museum.\textsuperscript{34}

Baartman was brought to England in 1810, and was exhibited in London as a sexualized specimen of African culture. After her death six years later, Villet sold her body to Georges Cuvier for further examination and dissection. Her remains were displayed at the Musee de L’Homme until “shame caught up with the French administrators in 1976.”\textsuperscript{35}

She was also presented as an example of the uncivilized and disease-carrying “Hottentot” tribe (See Figure 6). She was dubbed the “Hottentot Venus,” a name which implied both venereal disease and beauty.\textsuperscript{36} Her “shows” consisted of public humiliation on a constant basis, usually in crowded public venues. Her “act,” was controlled by keepers. As Lokongo points out, Bartman was made to ‘parade naked on a stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper and exhibited like a wild beast, being obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered’…an instant success, Sara became a reluctant icon of black sexuality\textsuperscript{37}

Baartman was originally from the Khoikhoi tribe. Sexual desire characterized documents produced during the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries regarding the Khoikhoi tribe. These memoirs illustrated voyeuristic, and somewhat clumsy, encounters that focused on the black female body. Under the pretense of scientific inquiry, close physical

\textsuperscript{34} Upham, \textit{From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus}, 17.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 11.
measurements and observations were believed to diminish signs that the savages were
less civilized than their observers. This belief has determined popular images and
stereotypes about the black female body, at once desirable and unsettling. One of the
most astute observations regarding the cultural history of raced imagery and its contexts
in early 20th century Europe is presented in Nicholas Hudson’s examination of early
encounters with the “Hottentots” of the Khoikhoi. He noted that although the
Hottentots were depicted as strange and uncivilized compared to Europeans,

Such strangeness, however, would not be so disruptive to European preconceptions if
the Khoikhoi did not display traits that Europeans recognized as undeniably human

Throughout *One Man Show*, Jones’s title functions as a reminder that black women in
the entertainment industry have not always had the leisure of such complex narratives,
based on self display/presentation. In addition, cultural memory is so entrenched in our
perceptions that we sometimes miss new representations or worse, disapprove of them as
“oddities.” Whereas Baartman’s biological sex was on full display as a curiosity for all
of London to observe, Grace Jones’s masks her own body to the extent that many have
questioned her biological sex as a criticism or insult, as if they are entitled to a definitive
categorization.

Obviously Jones did not wish to replicate this type of display. Instead, she reframed
it as a high-style, Minimalist fantasy distinguished by bold references to

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38 Ibid., 326.
39 Nicholas Hudson, “‘Hottentots’ and the Evolution of European Racism,” *Journal of European Studies* 34, no.4: 308-332.
American/European collective unconscious. By choosing a proposed neutral and non-representational style (Minimalism), Jones could insert any subject matter without having to challenge its visual integrity. Minimalism is one of the few styles that appears to function on a purely decorative level for viewers, devoid of any message or morality.

The other significant influence for Jones’ performances was Josephine Baker. Baker was born Josephine Freda McDonald on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri, and became a sensation in Paris with her wildly popular dance revues. When Grace Jones was asked about her creative influences in Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, she mentioned Josephine Baker as a figure with whom she identified. Baker was no stranger to controversy either, and her image has not lost its symbolic power even in 2007. A few months ago, one of her adopted children, Jean-Claude, was denied assistance by the United States Postal Service for trying to mail images of Josephine Baker dressed typically in a few feathers while topless. The image was a reproduction of a painting but nonetheless received the same reaction as an actual photograph. Baker’s local postmasters in New York had decided that the content was “pornographic” and “decadent” based on the statutes of their domestic mail manuals. Grace Jones was banned from Disneyland after a public appearance that including flashing her breasts to the audience.

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40 Ibid., 313.


Both of their careers in film have proven that, despite their judgment in domestic or family-oriented contexts, there are still popular demands for seeing primitive sexuality. Although Josephine Baker was the “highest paid black woman in the 1930s,” her opportunities in the burgeoning film industry were stereotypical and muddled representations of non-White cultures.\textsuperscript{44} Baker played the title role in three films, \textit{Le Sirene des Tropiques} (1927), and \textit{Zouzou} (1934), and \textit{Princess Tam Tam} (1935), and each storyline was an elaborate platform for her exotic performances. Robin Buss argued that Josephine Baker’s few film roles were insightful to Hollywood’s version of black women in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Buss suggested that

No one is likely to pretend that Josephine Baker had the makings of a great actress or that her three films are of great artistic merit. But no one, surely, would deny that they provide an interesting record of her performances and that their stories of simple black girls encountering European ways of life illustrate the perceptions audiences of the time brought to the screen\textsuperscript{45}

Josephine Baker’s roles echo the characters that Grace Jones made famous, most notably Zula in \textit{Conan the Destroyer} (1984) and \textit{Vamp} (1986). There has been a growing amount of interest in Baker’s image as an account of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Bennetta Jules-Rosette examined Baker’s appeal in these terms in her article, “Two Loves: Josephine Baker as Icon and Image,” citing the

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 37.
common misconception that has fixed Baker as a pretty face and not much else. Jules-Rosette stated that the main problem within these biographies is the tendency for many writers to juxtapose the ‘real Josephine’ and the icon; few of them analyze the ongoing construction of race, gender, and nationality in her life in relationship to late twentieth-century society.

This is the very same problem that Jones encountered with Jean-Paul Goude, which reveals the persistence of Black Venus mythology, which bears a double meaning for beauty, as racialized and non-Western. There are occasional references to the Black Venus aesthetic in the initial photo gallery shown in One Man Show. This duality is simulated by Jones in “Demolition Man.” Commonly viewed as purveyors of exoticized sexuality, Baker and Jones are iconic in the truest sense, discussed as personifications and not as people. While taking on a masculine and authoritative persona, Jones deems herself a “walking nightmare, an arsenal of doom…a three line whip” that nevertheless attracts others “like a moth to a flame.” With her back turned to the camera/audience, Jones turns in circles, at times stopping to cover her ears. She moves toward the bottom of a set of stairs, picks up a trombone, and blows into it to produce a jolting howl. To most anyone, the sound suggests the presence a wild animal and for some, it goes further to suggest something primitive. The sound, aligned with a different context, breaks the

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46 Upham, From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus, 17.
relative silence as an aggressive introduction to Jones’s song. Through the use of a dissimulated synthesizer, Goude was able to replace the racialized sounds of Jazz with a less often noted Primitivist symbol of black female sexuality, the wild cat. This animal has been used to symbolize black women in art and theatre since the early 20th century. In fact, Josephine Baker was known to walk around Paris with her pet Cheetah, which she adopted after posing with it for a “publicity stunt” that was arranged by the Folies-Bergère.

Carolyn Anderson’s comparative reading of Jones and Baker positioned Baker as “the personification of freshly developed musical forms” of jazz music as well as the art negre style although she, like Jones, did not seem to base her acts on originally African traditions. Grace Jones’s One Man Show is an updated version of this phenomenon, 80s style. She appears to be the embodiment of power, style, and overt sexuality, set to electronic, funk-infused music that “originated” in urban American centers like Manhattan’s Lower East Side. This section of the city already held a reputation for its artistic community, and Jones soon became one of the few black women in the art scene during the 80s. Her captivating presence and public reception have striking parallels to the French myth of the Black Venus.

47 These lyrics were translated by me.
48 Anderson, En Route to Transnational Postmodernism, 494.
50 Anderson, En Route to Transnational Postmodernism, 499-501.
Primitivism, Minimalism & Narrative

The myth of the Black Venus in French culture corresponds to Anna Chave’s argument that Minimalist artists’ insistence on the absence of narratives in their work is ultimately false. Minimalism, like Primitivism, was a disguised re-enactment or “pose” modeled after the familiar Modernist rhetoric that had perfected the process of fetishizing over a century ago.\(^{51}\) The definition found on the Guggenheim webpage explains the “problematic” circumstances of the Primitivist movement in early 20\(^{th}\) century art and society. At the same time that the “primitive” was valued for its untouched naïvete, industrialized Western culture evoked the ‘primitive’ as a sign on which to map what it had socially and psychologically repressed: desire and sexual abandon.\(^{52}\)

Minimalism is an appropriate example, especially due to Kershaw’s brief yet revealing description of the Minimalist aesthetics in One Man Show. Kershaw’s reading positioned Jones’s art “in relation to popular culture and modernist conceptions of Primitivism and Minimalism reinterpreted by modernist’s black female Other,” in which Jones’s grooming and clothing serve a second function. Modernism appropriated the striking geometry of African art. Coming full circle, the African cultural


\(^{52}\) Guggenheim Museum. “Primitivism.”

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/movement_works_Primitivism_0.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/movement_works_Primitivism_0.html) (accessed July 19, 2007).
heritage emphasized in Jones’s nearly sculptural appearance is linked to a Minimalist contemporary urban aesthetic.\(^{53}\)

In addition, it corresponds to the queer aspects of Jones’s persona as well. Kershaw’s description of Jones as “nearly sculptural” bears a resemblance to Michael Fried’s account of Minimalist artist Robert Smith’s objects, which became “a kind of statue” as a consequence of their “objecthood.”\(^{54}\)

The fear of boundary-crossing that Michael Fried mapped out in his extensive discussion of Minimalism’s failure as a modern art movement is articulated in his essay, “Art and Objecthood.”\(^{55}\) According to Fried, boundary-crossing from one medium to another was theatrical and the cause of “objecthood,” the death of art, no longer autonomous as a truly modern work. Therefore, Jones’s work reaches “objecthood,” for its theatrical, multimedia presentation.\(^{56}\) Perceived as “confrontational” by Fried, literalist (i.e. Minimalist) art objects can inspire the same disorienting presence as a person can. Fried used interpersonal metaphors throughout his essay, and suggested that being distanced by such objects is not…unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.\(^{57}\)

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\(^{53}\) Kershaw, Postcolonialism and Androgyny, 21.


\(^{55}\) Ibid., 148-175.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 155.
Equally charged with a dominating presence, Grace Jones’s appearance does not comply with the oppressive imagery of passive bodies marked as “primitive,” particularly during “Demolition Man” and “Warm Leatherette” (See Image 2).

The political undertones of Minimalist (and most avant-garde) art instilled a silenced Other, the object. In reference to the objectification of the black female body, Evelyn Hammonds described historical portrayals of black female identity and sexuality as

often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women’s bodies are always already colonized.\(^{58}\)

Minimalism is the quietest of all modern art movements, and Jones’s dramatic show activates its fetishized surface into a site of performance. Minimalist art too has been critiqued for its unilateral preference for highlighting a heterosexual, male, White narrative. This is one of the driving forces in Jones’s striking presence; in the midst of various objects and uniforms that reinforce brute masculinity, she is undeniably at its center.

Minimalist style was a trademark of the 80s, in clothing, art, and home design. A recent film based on the elite class of the 1980s, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, displays this trend as a prominent symbol of affluence and a “winning” attitude.

Throughout the film, Patrick Bateman’s pathological character aspired to define himself through his consumption of high-end products, and his home was filled with Minimalist-inspired products. Sharp edged furniture and plain decoration characterized his trendy approach to life in general. Besides the fact that Minimalism is yet another art movement which has been documented as a uniformly male phenomenon, it has also displayed a distinctly industrialized rhetoric.\(^{59}\) The promise of agency through objectification is an issue that Anna C. Chave took up in her account of Minimalism, which examines the phallocentric themes that are inscribed in the spectatorship of Minimalist art. Chave perceived the discourse of Minimalism as based upon displays of power that were fully adopted by prominent artists such as Richard Serra, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd. Her premise was most persuasively argued in her analysis about Dan Flavin’s *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)*, in which she cited the form as “explicitly phallic” and the Minimalist equivalent to a “hot rod.”\(^{60}\)

Success was achieved and displayed quite differently for black women in popular culture during this very same period in American culture. Many black women such as Whitney Houston and Diana Ross were highly successful as singers during the 80s. However, they were producing music videos that were fairly neutral in terms of sexuality and narrative. In addition, their personas were highly femininized and somewhat demure in comparison to Grace Jones. Whitney Houston is arguably the most successful black woman to have thrived as a singer during this decade. One of her earliest hits, “I Wanna

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., 267.
Dance with Somebody” showcased her as a fun-loving, yet passive woman who is simply waiting for things to happen. In addition, Houston’s body, although not too different from Jones’s, is dressed to play up a more feminine type. Wearing a tight dress and a feminine, curly bob haircut, Houston’s lighter skin signified a different stage in the projected American fantasy of black femininity.

Whitney Houston’s wide success and popularity is distinct from Jones’s fame, which expressed a “wilder” side of black women in the music industry (“Pull Up to the Bumper”)—whereas Whitney sang about how she “wanted to feel the heat with somebody,” Jones was flat out demanding satisfaction by actively voicing desire as a command to others.61 Jones’s appearance in Conan the Destroyer exemplified this common trope in American cinema. In what many have cited as her most memorable role, Jones was scantily clad in leather and loin cloth, forming a primitive bikini. Visually, she was the prototypical savage foe to the main character, Conan (played by Arnold Schwartzenegger, the current governor of California). She also said very little, mostly grunting her way through the part. This prevented the audience from identifying Jones’s character as human. Houston’s more accessible image is like that of Josephine Baker’s own playful interpretation of the “savage” beauty, although Jones did receive criticism for her revealing outfits. Jones’s version was engaged with the more sardonic history of the same bi-cultural relations in Western culture.

Jean-Paul Goude’s role as producer may have influenced how Jones represented herself to the extent that, despite an apparent partnership, his own exoticizing fantasies

61 These lyrics were translated by me.
could have seeped into the show’s production. Yet, despite this fact, I am arguing that popular art and discourse is always based on a cooperative relationship between all participants. Therefore, it does not make it less authentic to acknowledge Goude’s directorial influence on Jones. Her image is a culmination of various threads of American cultural history and black culture, perceived as separate but equally visible in Jones’s work.

Bennetta Jules-Rosette has discussed the imaginary formation of “black culture” as envisioned by Parisians in the 1920s. She suggested that various forms of entertainment, from both black and Western authors, had shaped popular ideas about black culture. Based on events such as “the Universal Expositions, the artistic forays of cubism” and the advent of “a new anthropology,” the French immediately began translating their perceived “discoveries” under the guise of art and scientific inquiry, which has defined the overlap between ethnography and art.62

By appropriating Minimalist style, Jones created a modern platform for black female artists. The association of power was an accepted part of the Minimalist experience, and her image provided viewers with a democratizing illustration of art’s legacy in American culture. Whereas Josephine Baker entertained audiences throughout Europe by climbing artificial trees on set, Jones was depicted atop a staircase several times throughout her performances in One Man Show. During both “La Vie en Rose” and “Demolition Man,” Jones occupied a capitalist environment, a wholly industrialized construction.

Grace Jones used her ability to mold her image as a response to Modernist attitudes about black culture, sexuality, and music. Instead of idealizing art’s capacity for truth, she celebrated the possibility of objecthood as an alternative to stagnant representations of black women in art and popular culture. While multimedia aesthetics may have left critics such as Fried unimpressed, Jones exemplifies the benefits of using elaborate contexts for otherwise overlooked topics in art theory. The songs included in *One Man Show* are Minimalist in spirit, connecting themes in cultural history that have been presented as mutually exclusive. In order to better grasp what we see as an audience, we *should* be destabilized, and brought out of our cultural comfort zones.
Chapter 3: Cyborg Theory

Grace Jones touches upon three themes that are consistently associated with her persona: the military, reproduction/sexuality, and the cyborg. I will discuss these themes as shown in “Pull Up to the Bumper,” “Warm Leatherette,” and “Demolition Man.” Donna J. Haraway summed up the technological link between these concepts in society, citing “modern medicine…modern production…and modern war” as realms that have become cyborgian in the late 20th century. While she envisioned the cyborg as a being that exists in a “post-gender world,” Haraway was most concerned with reproduction as a Western narrative that reinforced the myth of the woman as nature. In fact, she included primitive culture as one of the “organic wholes” that are confronted, and undone, by cyborg myth. I propose that they are not undone, and in fact, produce a discourse that the either/or positions we constantly encounter. Between the primitive and the cyborgian aspects of One Man Show, it becomes clear why audiences might say Jones is an “odd” cultural icon.

By using and referring to modern technology, Jones created anxiety about the limits of the assumptions about the black female body. Muscular and conservatively clothed compared to popular archetypes of black women, she is for the most part, 

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 152.
affectless. Therefore, she appears ultimately unavailable in a way that is not typical of
the hypersexualized depiction of black women in popular culture. Not only is gender
thrown out of balance for the audience, but race as well. By aligning herself with
machines, Jones created a problem in watching the show, one that is caught up with
popular expectations in viewing the black female body. She 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 “coldsteel androgyny.”67

According to Carolyn Anderson, Jean Paul Goude’s directorial approach
transformed Jones into “a comparative robot…through make-up, choreography,
deliberate blurring of the actual and the artificial, heightened androgyny and musical
technology, the Grace Jones of *A One Man Show* became Goude’s miraculous cyborgian
singer.”68 Anderson’s description of Jones becoming a cyborg through wholly artificial
adjustments suggests that Jones’s identity is a technological effect as opposed to a real
thing. This is a typical way of describing her otherwise extraordinary appearance.
Jones’s persona works off of this potential dead-end by superimposing a futuristic version
of trademarks of mid-to-late 20th century culture. For example, in exchange for the
authenticity or emotion that audiences might expect during a live concert, she removed
herself further from the audience by taking on the machine persona.

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66 See Chapter 2 for a more thorough examination of Jones’s portrayal and disavowal of the
“primitive.”
Anxiety about the future is familiar territory for us all, and we all wonder how our decisions will affect our futures. These apprehensions are tied to deeper concerns, such as reproduction and culture. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler’s commentary about identity politics in the late 20th century reflects fears that echo science fiction plots. The expected tragedy concerns the future of the human body. Both cautionary and semi-apocalyptic in tone, imaginations ran wild about society’s growing bond with technology. Regarding the growing acceptability of technological modifications and self-improvement procedures, Butler observed that,

In each of these struggles, we see that technology is a site of power in which the human is produced and reproduced—not just the humanness of the child but…of those who bear and those who raise children…whether technology is imposed or elected is salient for intersex activists. If some trans people argue that their very sense of personhood depends upon having access to technology to secure certain bodily changes, some feminists argue that technology threatens to take over the business of making persons, running the risk that the human will become nothing other than a technological effect.

According to the more pessimistic version of such possibilities, the worst that we could end up with is a procession of holograms, devoid of any signs of humanity. Grace Jones points up this anxiety for many viewers through the cyborgian tale of desire, “Pull

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During “Pull Up to the Bumper,” Jones is shown dancing towards the mic, and is later framed from the neck up, while she looks out to the audience. A male break dancer emulates her in the background, the camera alternates between an apparently real Grace and her double. This time her voice is softer, singing these words:

Driving down those city streets,
Waiting to get down,
Won't you take your big machine,
Somewhere in this town?

Now in the parking lot garage,
I found a proper place,
Just follow all the written rules,
You'll fit into the space.
Pull up to my bumper baby,
In your long black limousine,
Pull up to my bumper baby…

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70 These lyrics were translated by me.
The urbanscape in “Pull Up to the Bumper” is a poetic version of city life, where the object of desire is beckoning its technologically enhanced mate to take its “big machine...somewhere in this town.” Jones’s song suggests that the black body is a symbol of an urban future, not its antithesis. Throughout this song, the body is equated with an omnipresent machine, the automobile. Through this metaphor, she collapsed the perceived opposites that are condensed into the categories of uncivilized vs. industry by positioning her body as a futuristic, desirable machine.

A symbol of American-bred freedom, the automobile is transformed by Grace Jones (she co-wrote the song) as a machine that can perform sexual acts, although certain rules must be obeyed in such acts. Could this be a nod to queer or gay and lesbian politics? “Pull Up to the Bumper” is about anal sex, a sexual act that has been stigmatized as a result of the AIDS epidemic, and the American history of homophobia. Some have positioned the song in this context. In fact, Barry Walters, a writer for the queer-friendly publication, The Advocate, remarked that Jones had embraced this act “before we knew its dangers” as an outstanding detail about Jones’s biggest hit.

The lyrics suggest a yet-to-be-seen black female autobody as an updated version of Othered bodies as symbolic of geographic space. An example would be the black female body as a signifier for the wilderness or a jungle. Here, it is the fast-paced, highly supervised urbanscape, teeming with cars and people. The search for finding a “proper place” as mentioned in “Pull Up to the Bumper” takes on a deeper significance. By

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71 These lyrics were translated by me.
73 Ibid.
making it clear that there are rules to be obeyed, the song expresses the intertwined feelings of hostility, caution towards others, and desire all at once.

In addition, the opening scene for “Pull Up to the Bumper” is a shot of Jones walking across the stage, which has been transformed into a replica of the streets of Lower Manhattan. This places an emphasis on the present New York, pulling a scene out of everyday life and inserting it into Jones’s atmosphere. The reproduction of Manhattan’s Lower East Side is also presented as the site of Jones’s cyborgian fantasy, which corresponds to her first song in One Man Show, “Warm Leatherette.” Equally non-traditional in its treatment of sexuality and machines, “Warm Leatherette” delves into future fantasy and “the car crash set.”

“Warm Leatherette,” is a cover of British electro-punk pioneer Daniel Miller’s (a.k.a The Normal) song about the fetishization of automobile accidents. Despite such a distinct choice for her opening song, well meaning analyses have overwhelmingly focused on Jones’s image instead of her actual music. For example, Miriam Kershaw equated Jones’s songs throughout One Man Show with

a multicultural Afro-Latin ‘rhythm’…a resilient link with one’s ancestors…new musical forms forged by Blacks in the Americas through the African diaspora.

Kershaw’s reading of Jones’s “black” identity obscured the cyborgian implications of this song by focusing on the racialized aspects of Jones’s persona. I am interested in the

74 These lyrics were translated by me.
75 Kershaw, Postcolonialism and Androgyny, 20.
literary inspiration for this song as well as the implications of video in her adaptation of this narrative.

“Warm Leatherette” portrays desire among humanoids that cry “tears of petrol,” and are members of “the car crash set.” The song sounds the way we would imagine a technologically enhanced love song to sound like. A brief, straightforward account of primal lust and sadomasochistic thoughts, the lyrics includes a request to “make love before we die.” It remains unclear whether Grace Jones was aware of the inspiration for the song. Nevertheless, “Warm Leatherette” provided a well-matched introduction for her cyborgian persona. Written in 1978, Miller wrote the song as a musical companion to J.G. Ballard’s Crash. Miller aimed to capture the psychology of the gradual formation of an auto accident fetish. Upon releasing the track, Miller received two kinds of responses to the song, and observed that “The people who'd read the book recognized the imagery of the lyrics instantly, and the rest just thought I was some kind of sicko.”

Crash and Miller’s rendition of “Warm Leatherette” correspond to Jones’s persona onstage. Being the first to adapt the subject matter to video format, she maintained a sense of detachment paired with desire. The desire for experiencing car crashes illustrates a process of displacement for desire onto dysfunctional objects/bad objects of desire, and the interplay of humans and technology.

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76 These lyrics were translated by me.
77 These lyrics were translated by me.
Miller’s lyrics schematize a distinctly industrialized and urban experience, during which the listener/first person narration describes a place where you “see the breaking glass/in the underpass…hear the crushing steel/feel the steering wheel.”80 The usual sentimentalism that characterizes songs about romance (in whatever fetishistic form it takes via pop metaphors) is de-humanized through an utter focus on the surface of machines, not bodies. This industrialized sensuality is worded with the same obsessive detail that would normally be suited for the usual object of desire, a woman. There is a parallel to discussions about the film, Crash, and to Jones’s earlier video for “Warm Leatherette.”

Like Grace Jones’s version of the same subject matter, David Cronenberg’s film inspired two popular reactions to his visualization of auto fetishization: anxiety about the absence of “normal” sexual desire and a perceived nonsense in the depiction of female sexuality. Jones’s performance is further complicated by refusing to submit to popular representations of black female sexuality, which tend to be primitivized.81

These two reactions were examined by Shohini Chaudhuri in her article, “Witnessing Death: Ballard’s and Cronenberg’s Crash.” David Cronenberg film was released in 1996, and was plagued by criticism and even protests to its subsequent release in Britain.82 In his adaptation, Ballard’s characters appear to be in various stages of cyborgian transformation, most notably displayed by Rosanna Arquette’s eroticized body cast. The film was promptly charged with a “confused morality,” and a negative

79 Ibid.
80 These lyrics were translated by me.
81 See Chapter 2.
portrayal of women. In addition, the Hollywood adrenaline-fueled format was not incorporated into the sex scenes and car crashes. Adam Mars-Jones’s article about the public reaction to the film included a brief but enlightening observation, in which he wondered aloud:

Perhaps it is partly that Hollywood has programmed us for so many years to treat car crashes as pure narrative punctuation, no more emotionally involving than a cymbal crash in a symphony.

As “Warm Leatherette” reaches its conclusion, Jones does in fact appear to be hitting the cymbals with increasing vigor. The dramatic instrumental “attack” creates a scenario that resembles an uncontrollable crash of sound, losing all sense of etiquette by the end as they fall over from being struck. By layering her glamorous look with a violent streak, she constructed an effect that negated “normal” sexuality. As Chaudhuri argued, Hollywood filmic representation of sexuality does not allow for such contradictions. Neither does the performing body of the black woman.

The central issue regarding Jones’s performances will be the doubly meaningful concept of reproduction, as an ideological effect and a biological function. Reproduction as an ideological effect intends to reinforce phallocentric ideals, while the biological

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The process of reproduction is still used as an essentializing symbol of femininity—this duplicitous concept revolves around an implicit heterosexuality.

“Demolition Man” demonstrated Jones’s proclivity towards sexual ambiguity, which is a characteristic of the cyborg, according to Haraway’s manifesto. In addition, it refers to machines, danger, alienation and desire. Some of her lyrics place the spectator in the position of the addressee, and they include situations like being “tied to the tracks and the train’s just coming” and “being strapped to the wing with the engine running.” Instead of the readily available sex symbol, Jones becomes a potentially destructive force, and the spectator is the victim of an imaginary punishment for seeking Jones’s company. While the lyrics for “Demolition Man” do not go as far as to merge the body with machines, the possibility is still there. Jones’s lyrics read more like a castigation of the desire associated with voyeurism. She confronts her audience, as opposed to “connecting” to it, by asserting in her trademark deep monotone, “You say that this wasn't in your plan/Don't mess around with the demolition man.” She calls herself, the demolition man, “a walking nightmare, an arsenal of doom…the sort of thing they ban.”

Towards the end of the song, the frame is filled with a marching group of Grace Jones look-alikes, and seems to be a tangible version of what Butler mentioned as a fear concerning technological changes to the body. The powerful image suggests that identity is a visual construction, already heavily altered by contemporary procedures such as make-up, clothing, and attitude. Its conversion into a video image is of import to a discussion about the black female body and technology.

85 These lyrics were translated by me.
Music videos have aided entertainers in packaging their public identity, and with the capacity to present identity as a visual and temporal event. If something does not work or becomes outdated, popular identity can be adjusted by simply shooting another video. In addition, public access to video technology has created a less mystical attitude about popular cultural and its previously invisible production. In the early 80s, the entertainment industry was catching on to the cooperative potential to capitalize on home entertainment. More artists were recording concerts and performances so that audiences could purchase them afterwards, and more and more people were purchasing video cameras in order to personally document their lives. MTV, the first nation-wide music channel, was established in 1981. Following that, the music video began to attract attention from scholars as a global medium for popular cultural production. Viewed as both a brand and manufacturer for pop culture to many, it conveyed social ideals and fantasies in an archival fashion that changed how Americans thought about their music, which had never been visualized in such a manner. Through cyborgian gestures and seamless editing from one song to the next, Grace Jones’s appeared to constantly change from one frame to the next.

Music Video

Currently, black women are gaining coverage in the music industry, most notably in hip-hop and pop music contexts. Two of the most prominent artists in hip-hop are Missy Elliott and Lil’ Kim. Both Elliott and Lil’ Kim present themselves as exceptional, and

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86 Steve Jones, “MTV: The Medium was the Message,” Critical Studies in Media Communication
have reconfigured the self-aggrandizing tendency in hip-hop and rap songwriting. On the
other hand, they are two black women who have asserted themselves in a field dominated
by men using an approach that is cyborgian for its adaptability. Music videos have
especially extended this identity play into the realm of technology. Steven Shaviro’s
recent essay on contemporary imagery of black women in videos, regarding Missy Elliott
and Lil’ Kim, positions their videos as elaborate representations that indirectly and
directly denote power relations in terms of feminist, cyber, and queer modes-of-being.
Discussed as two works of “science fiction” by Shaviro, they also portray how the black
female body may be imagined in a cyber society.87 Jones’s persona corresponds to this
empowerment strategy, making ironic attempts at assimilating her look to that of
traditionally sought after American and European women in entertainment. Instead, she
assumed an authoritative role and asserted a new version of black female identity to the
audience as a point of pride and desirability.88

Shaviro understood this dialogic process, going as far as to say that society is
becoming “more and more like science fiction,” a space that makes it possible for artists
like Elliott and Lil’ Kim to transgress stereotypes through “the process of becoming
cyborg from the inside.”89 Shaviro identified video as a productive means of cyber-
critique, or cyber-consciousness, basing his categorization of their videos on the
“futuristic sets and costumes” and the “cyborg fusion” effect of sampling older music,

22, no. 1 (March 2005): 86.
87 Steven Shaviro, “Supa Dupa Fly: Black Women As Cyborgs in Hip Hop Videos,” Quarterly
88 Tony Mitchell’s analysis of pop music as performance has been very influential throughout this
thesis, including its initial inception. His remark that “rock videos…are essentially advertisements for pop
stars and their products” remains a central idea regarding Jones’s work as well, Tony Mitchell,
such as that of the “reductively rational” of the equally racialized electronic genre. He argued that black women have been consistently marginalized and/or stereotyped in the hiphop, as well as electronic, music industry.

Grace Jones utilized the video format, and it remains a video-only release. *One Man Show* has not been reformatted to DVD, which has cut off her music from newer audiences. Yet, instead of looking at *One Man Show* as an outdated archive, it remains an example of a fairly young medium that was deployed for reaching a wider population in the early 80s. Including both avant-garde and popular musical influences, including a recent trend that Jones adopted for its sleek and ambient quality, the distinctly German teutonic style that meshed disco, punk and electronica, *One Man Show* becomes cyborgian. Jones used both the electronic and R&B/funk genres in the construction of her image as an entertainer.

Tony Mitchell has cited music’s potential as a postmodern medium. His account of pop music’s influence in postmodern discourse, written 8 years after MTV became known, outlines a central theme of my analysis—the positive effects of ambiguity and the postmodern approach to cultural experience. Mitchell remarked that the growing “mediation of various forms of technology” has aided the deconstruction of popular culture as a vehicle for public consumption. Although the music video is not live it is based on live performances, which can be later manipulated to increase marketability. *One Man Show* contains edited portions that are not exactly as they appeared to the

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90 Ibid., 169-173.
91 Ibid., 172.
audience yet they still appear as real time for audiences. This is its own brand of reality for viewers, who are still likely to understand it as truthful on some level. The use of video in art and cultural documentation can affect the “look” of an event to varying degrees, which deliver wholly different messages for viewers at times. Nevertheless, there are expectations to each and every viewing.

Dan Graham considered live-video “reality” as a matter of the commodification fetish that permeates spectatorship. Graham’s essays put forth comprehensive analyses that have assisted my own understanding of Grace Jones’s work in relation to art historical and cultural contexts. His interpretation of video imagery as a simulation of real time can offer insight towards music videos for an imaginary audience.

Graham cited video as a medium that is conducive to active spectatorship. According to Graham, live-video generated an “immediate, present-time environment” and the apparent alignment of “time/space continua,” which blurred the line between being in the present and being a spectator. Being in the present is symbolized by the occasional appearance of an audience, as in “Pull Up to the Bumper.” It contrasts with the clean

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93 Ibid., 275.
94 Graham’s assertion that “Under capitalism…the ego is confused with the body image in the mirror, so that the ego is confused with the commodity” is a continuation of the Lacanian mirror phase, transforming social interactions into valuable or non-valuable experiences. The process of desiring the alienated identity is explained by Graham’s claim that “the commodity object is a substitute (fetish) for his lack-the lack his desire expresses”. In any case, any concept concerning lack remains based on a system of difference. Dan Graham, “Essay on Video, Architecture, and Television,” in *Video/Architecture/Television: Writings on Video and Video Works 1970-1978*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, New York: New York University Press, 1979), 57.
95 There are a number of films which appeal to viewers’ present reality. One of the most prominent examples that I can recall is *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. During several scenes, Ferris Bueller speaks directly to the camera, which disrupts the separation between the viewer’s reality and the film’s “distanced” reality, as Graham puts it. Many films, including silent films at the beginning of film history, exhibit this technique, Graham, *Essay on Video, Architecture, and Television*, 62.
editing, and quick jumps from one song to another, which update the authentic concert-going experience. This makes her persona become cyborgian for its increased efficiency for entertainment, and in fact, she never directly addresses her audience in the video. Mixing realities with the notion of the present, the tension between distance and access to Grace Jones’s body (as model and actress) culminates in a perceived ambiguity. The matter of whether any of Jones’s characteristics are authentic is complicated by the presentness of the event itself (temporality makes it seem undeniably real).

One Man Show was popular enough to be nominated for a Grammy but is not considered to be an example of performance art, and I would like to consider the popularity of this video (at the time) as a barrier to its status as art. Having crossed the boundaries between the art, music, and film industry, this video remains a pop cultural relic of Jones’s experimental music.

Performance art is one of the latest additions to the canon of art history, and poses a challenge to any viewers expecting to find a truly objective means of interpreting such events. Peggy Phelan claims that “performance’s only life is in the present.” She further speculates that performance risks being “real” based on the speculation that, “To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.” According to Phelan, its virtue lies in its non-reproductivity; performance art is deemed authentic for its elusive essence yet is

96 The artist’s body in performance has been described as an object of capitalist desire by theorists such as Vito Acconci and Dan Graham. Graham cited “the concentration of power through capital” as a driving force in popular culture/shows. Throughout this analysis, I have noticed the prominence of symbolic references to systems that depend upon financing-namely, high fashion, the military/the State, and popular culture, Ibid., 52.

ultimately distanced from spectators for its temporary reality. Phelan’s observation that performance is not easily inserted into this model for reproduction reveals the narrow space that fosters reality and meaning. Sameness appears to have a dual sided connection to the process of commodification, which depends on organizing bodily features into essential features to be consumed and re-consumed, while encouraging the value of uniqueness in order to extend a product’s value. Peggy Phelan makes this clear when she explains performance as an act/event in which “the body is metonymous of self…of ‘presence’”. Is the female black body given this much valued presence in art, and through what corporeal features? What about popular association with raced bodies as “Other”? What is problematic about Phelan’s argument pertains to the self as a composite of not just flesh but temporality and spatial qualities. The self is claimed as an eventual possibility, just as “reality” is faithfully discussed by Graham in his discussion of video.

In conclusion, pop culture icons such as Grace Jones tend to be omitted in discussions about the formation of cultural standards for representation and style. Nevertheless, despite outsider status or marginal visibility, racialized and sexualized imagery is pervasive in our collective public and private surroundings. Chela Sandoval’s visionary discussion of oppositional aesthetics regarding Third World feminism’s appropriation of film and video production illustrated the same intersection that I am referring to. By exploring (and not necessarily opposing) the “constant variances that stood at the crux of…unity” through popular media, individuals can take on the veneer of

98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 150.
the normative while communicating something beyond consumption or desire. Sandoval cited the availability of video as a turning point in feminist liberatory strategies, and although she focused her analysis on only feminist videos, I would like to suggest that, despite the contribution of Goude’s fetishizing vision, Grace Jones’s work corresponds to what Sandoval described in her discussion as “third cinema.” Sandoval also referred to the portability of video, and considered it a product that allowed its new authors in the 1960s to provide the women’s movement the opportunity to expose, affirm, and clarify what had been ignored for so long by the dominant media—the ‘truth’ of women’s experience

Sandoval believed that Third World feminism was a result of a growing discontentedness with feminist politics identified the movement’s formation in the early 80s, during which Jones was highly involved in the art world. It may seem like a stretch to compare her to this type of production but what most stands out about Sandoval’s interpretation involves the conception of video as a highly accessible medium that can re-establish private and public space/territory. Grace Jones displaced the mutually exclusive pairing of public and private identity through mediatising popular and mundane subject matter simultaneously. Throughout her career, Jones has been

101 Ibid., 152.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 158.
understood as a figure whose real life is identical to her cinematic image. In *One Man Show*, the concept of reality is challenged by using real but unknowable body. Having found success in the high performance styles of the fashion world, she also established a wildly eccentric personality in the disco scene prior to the making of this video. Her roles in popular films have been simultaneously criticized for exploiting stereotypes about black women and hailed as self-conscious pantomimes of ignorance regarding those very same myths. The value of Jones’s video is its ability to fill the gap between these two viewpoints about Jones’s symbolic presence in popular American culture. Sandoval saw the video as a medium that could prove to be “an insurgent movement that shatters the construction of any one mode of aesthetic or political representation as the single ‘most correct’ site of truth” in the hands of those with an oppositional consciousness.\(^\text{104}\)

Although oppositional strategies work well for many, it cannot be denied that Jones appealed to the high end as well as the less privileged. Therefore, I would like to suggest that political stances are sometimes highly integrated into popular culture, and it is pointless to be completely opposed to social heiroglyphs that are already highly influential. Avoiding these strategies is not always the most illuminating path in representing the global effect upon identity.

Grace Jones performances in *One Man Show* denote French, American, British, German, and Jamaican culture in less than an hour. All of these countries may contend for possible answers in deciphering her image but where to begin? The similarities among the cultural signs throughout *One Man Show* far outnumber the differences. Can

\(^{104}\text{Ibid., 160.}\)
we see where one culture ends and another begins? This question remains important throughout our expanding repertoire of images, all born from countless others. What we see is as important as what we think, as both are contingent upon each other. “Try not to miss anything” seems to be the unspoken rule for living a good life in American culture, and it is not wholly misguided. Popular culture remains a threshold for cultural experience that has been “missed” in many ways.
Figure 1: Grace Jones in arabesque pose for Island Life album cover. From top left: Sketch for album cover, actual pose by Jones, cutting and pasting of photograph used to create exaggerated arabesque pose, final version for album cover. Photograph shot by Jean Paul Goude, image taken from Guardian Unlimited Online at http://arts.guardian.co.uk/image/0,,1672997,00.html.
Figure 3: Grace Jones performing “Trust in Me” at Meltdown Festival. Image taken from Intermezzo at http://intermezzo.typepad.com/intermezzo/jarvis_cocker/index.html
Figure 4: Grace Jones and audience still photograph, image taken from John’s Blog: Live from New York City at http://gop.vox.com/library/post/ladies-and-gentlemen-3.html/#comments
Figure 4: Preparatory sketch for Grace Jones’s costumes, resembling both Minimalism and Primitivism. These sketches resemble the headdresses that Jones and her backup band wore during her performance of “Feel Up.” Image taken from The World of Grace Jones webpage, the official Grace Jones website, at http://www.theworldofgracejones.com/fan.html.
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