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## Framing Grace: Shock and Awe at the Ageless Black body

Abigail Gardner

‘Thirty years of the high life have not taken their toll on Jones’ perfect hindquarters, which she shakes and wiggles in the faces of the photographers’.

Kitty Empire 22/06/08 *The Observer*

Thirty years of such a high life may not have taken their toll on Grace Jones’ posterior but something is ‘rotten’ in the use of the term ‘hindquarters’. It is what is at stake in such language that is the concern of this paper, which maps out broadcast press and blog discourses surrounding Jones’ recent re-emergence onto the British popular music scene to establish how she becomes framed both through the vectors of race and age in ways that highlight her as an awesome and ‘awe’ful artefact . Accounts of Grace Jones’ ‘comeback’ performance at London’s Meltdown festival (June 2008) and her subsequent tour ‘frame’ her in ways that are indicative of a process of containment through awe and artefactualisation. This is not a new process (see Kershaw, 1997; Shaviro, 2008) but the addition of her age into the mix requires a reconsideration. Across a range of different media channels, there is an emphasis on trying to explain the ‘ageless’ Black body of Grace Jones. In much of the broadsheet accounts of her, these explanations are problematic; steeped in a racism which positions the ageing Black body as scary and **Other**. This artistic objectification and the incredulity manifest in media responses to her ageing body indicate an awe and uneasy fascination with the artefactual Black female body that has a long and complex history wherein Jones sits, ‘the sleek ebony fantasy of Jean Paul Goude’ (Verma, 08; Kershaw, 1997).

There is, however, a counterpoint to this format with voices emerging from a variety of different media. Commentators from some Black and Broadsheet press view her in a way that is more complex, highlighting her place within Black musical history and within the disco genre itself. This acknowledges but goes beyond seeing her as a 'diva' with all that that term entails in relation to a resistance to conventional constraints and normative womanhood (Bradshaw, 07; O'Neill, 07; Lawrence, 2006; Lobato, 2007) and positions her within a heritage of Black female performers. This is illustrative of the tension between a tired, neo-colonial (and ageist) template of conceiving of the presence of a Black female artist and from those Black and progressive voices that claim Jones as a subversive and a positive presence. Jones' continued existence within a popular music arena marks out not just a 'cultural inability to imagine real and lasting female achievement' (Bradshaw, 2007: 72) but a cultural conflict over how to make sense of an ageing Black female performer's continuing exhortation to *'Pull up to my bumper baby/ And drive it in between'*.

Before mapping out that conflict, an admission of context and authorship is called for. This paper is being delivered from a distinctly white, middle class perspective. It arose from my concern that the verbal strategies being utilised to describe Jones were problematic and the resulting paper was delivered within an all white female academic environment at York University in October 2008, itself a bastion of a higher educational establishment whose internal dynamics in relation to race and age are not the concern here but need mentioning in respect of the preponderance of whiteness inherent in them. This chapter too, is part of a collection of essays predominantly by women such as myself. Although this illustrates the parameters within which the work has been conceived and delivered, it is also important to note that it is happening and that this, in and of itself, is of worth. It is important too to

remember that the context for this paper is one predominantly weighted towards thinking about 'ageing' in relation to popular music and so, whilst race is clearly a component (sometimes an insidious one) of the ways in which Jones is positioned, it is how ageing impacts on that discourse that is the primary concern here.

### **Look Back in...: reviewing Jones**

Grace Jones had been working the New York disco scene in the late 1970s, a Jamaican model and sometimes singer, famous more for 'hanging out with' Jerry Hall and the Studio 54 gang than for any incisive musical contribution. She first impacted onto the popular music consciousness in the early 1980s with the release of *Warm Leatherette* (1980) and *Nightclubbing* (1981). The latter was to prove the breakthrough album, with hits such as *Demolition Man* and *Pull Up to the Bumper*. These records, produced by Chris Blackwell, with drum and bass by Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare, noted Jamaican reggae session musicians, were languid reggae-influenced dance tracks (a number of them covers) showcasing Jones' singular vocal style. The tracks allowed her to use her voice not only to sing in a low alto, but to punctuate the music with a vocal delivery that is akin to Gil Scott Heron's performance on 'The revolution will not be televised'. A vocal style that had been utilised on the New York punk scene too by Debbie Harry and Lou Reed, Jones managed to 'sing' without singing, evoking a 'presence' (Warner, 2003). What she did was to bring along a Jamaican style of delivery, that of 'chatting' over onto tracks but to do it in a manner that was more menacing, her delivery snarled and spoken, and distinctly articulated within a framework of androgyny but beyond any notable generic framework. This androgyny was not 'cosy' but 'cold and forbidding, ungenderable more than masculine hardbody' (Shaviro, 2008). Grace Jones was not easily decipherable.

On the *Nightclubbing* album, her vocals were matched by her looks. She was shot, torso up, dressed in a man's wide shouldered suit with her chest bones showing, flat top hair and a cigarette to one side of her mouth. A precursor to Annie Lennox's suit wearing, Jones was being presented as a performer who not only 'unpick[ed] some of the boundaries of unconventionality' (Holland, 2004:6) but chose to confuse such boundaries. Jones was an androgynous audiovisual experience, one who sat comfortably within the context of early 80's pop, where image had become even more central to pop performance through the emergence of MTV (Lewis, 1993; Vernallis, 2004).

The early 1980s was therefore the period where the Grace Jones 'brand' was presented, performed and cemented into the popular music archive. Indeed, an Independent review of her performance at the opening of the 61<sup>st</sup> Fifa Congress alludes to her as an '80's icon'. Previous to this she had been a 'fixture' on the New York glam disco scene, hired as model and partygoer. But Island's (and specifically Blackwell's) production of her as a powerful and androgynous musical presence can be dated back to *Nightclubbing*, a time when Jones was also being formed 'as' an African archetype in the art work that accompanied the album.

These dual processes, of being somehow subversive in her occupation of a space beyond or between gender and as exotic and artistic 'Other', have been essential to the maintenance of her artistic profile and key to how she is still understood. Writing on Lady Gaga, Halberstam recognises Grace Jones as a precursor to Gaga's journey 'to the edge of sense' (2011) particularly on Jones' cover of Joy Division's '*She's Lost Control*'. Jones' own excursions to the 'irrational' have been fomented within a musical brand that is characterised by its ongoing refusal to comply with conventional idioms of gender, both in

bodily and musical/vocal performance. This ability to perform at the edge of reason, as Halberstam argues, is one that has been conceived of then as both the precursor to being positioned as Other (and I will argue, as artefact and beyond not merely the feminine but the human) and too, equally, as subversive and able to be claimed as feminist in terms of ‘impact’ if not intent’ (Halberstam, 2011).

First it is worth looking back to the early 1980s to see how Grace Jones’ body was presented and manipulated in ways that are clearly congruent with conceiving of that display as artefactual. Context is important here as the early 80s was a time when image and pop were entwined in ways whereby the audiovisual became markedly important through the channel of MTV, music television. Image has always been crucial to the more ‘popular’ realms of popular music (Fuchs, 1999; Frith, 1996; Wall, 2003) but the medium of the music video was one where this alliance could be fomented so that how the performer looked became integral to their performance. For Jones, the ‘look’ was one that involved being worked on and manipulated so that it became an approximation of an African American(ised) ideal. In promotional photos of the time, Jones, in the form of Jean-Paul Goude’s rendering of her was a white man’s rendition of the African feminine – her limbs oiled sleek, set in an almost equine position and artificially elongated to make her literally *more*. This photo encapsulates one of the techniques that are still at work in the ways in which certain visual and verbal discourses within popular culture place Jones. Pulled outwards by Goude (her partner at the time of the photograph), stretched, elongated and multiplied in the music video for *Corporate Cannibal* (dir. Nick Hooker) it can be argued that her body is malleable matter to be reformed and reframed by her associates, collaborators, producers and lovers. But as Tom Horan writing in *The Telegraph* notes ‘Jones is a

compelling mixture of the defiant and the malleable'. So whilst she becomes the work of art presented by those that curate her there is a counterpoint. It is this point of tension that I want to tease out first by determining to what extent the idea of her as artefact can be traced out through a selection of press discourses that greeted her comeback performance in London in June 2008.

Jones has received critical attention *as* an artefact; in their work on disco, Jones and Kantonen (2005: 157) refer to her 'neo-cubist image' and Miriam Kershaw first sketched out the ways in which Jones problematises ideas of black feminine in 'performance art [that] contribute[d] to a reconceptualisation of Afrocentric culture and identity' (1997:19). Kershaw positions Jones not as a singer or a diva (see Lobato, 2007) but as a piece of art. As Shaviro comments in a blog on the *Corporate Cannibal* video, 'Grace Jones....as a black woman, is always already marked as a body' (2008) – unlike Madonna, he argues, she does not have the freedom to play with surface and so there is much 'more at stake' in her 'metamorphoses'. Kershaw works on the premise that Jones upsets by recalibrating ideas of the African and so using Shaviro's rubric, what is at stake is the ability to destabilise, premised as it is on a reconceptualisation of colonialism, racism and sexism. Kershaw establishes how, along with Goude and later Keith Haring (and Andy Warhol) Jones' work was performance 'art' that was replete with 'multilayered references to racial and sexual stereotypes associated with the African Diaspora and its relationship to colonial Euro-American prejudice' (p.19). Kershaw's work suggests that Jones' performances between 1978 and 1986 worked to destabilise 'racist and sexist clichés' as she 'charted a dynamic course through the history of the Black Diaspora, to celebrate its vibrant contemporary form' (p.24). Kershaw sees Jones as operating on a number of different levels of



signification where she appropriates colonial tropes (such as the Black Venus, Josephine Baker) and performs on the interstices of the postcolonial and postmodern, reconfiguring the 'primitive'. She acknowledges too that Jones performances in *I need a Man* upset the lines between the feminine and the masculine. There is then, already work out there that has established that Jones can be viewed in this way - that she can be considered to be 'art', but that this positioning has been utilised by her to destabilise the colonial gaze as well as the male gaze. What I want to progress in this respect is the 'aged gaze', or the ways in which ageing configures itself within the male and the white gaze and how Jones as a work of art might be considered as beyond such a gaze. Framing Jones as 'art' might release her from the normative expectations related to age to which other female musicians and women in the public eye are prone. Placing her within a space that is freighted with connotations of the 'artistic' may then work to attain and maintain this.

### **MELTDOWN Festival: Framing Jones**

Meltdown is a curated music festival held annually at London's South Bank. Started in 1992 it has been curated by Patti Smith (2005), John Peel (1998) and Jarvis Cocker (2007) and in 2008, the year that Jones played, by Massive Attack. Each curator has brought a different musical signature to the event but as the name suggests, they have all determined the composition of the musical exhibition in ways that clearly imply selection, rejection and compilation. This happens at other festivals but to 'curate' brings with it the idea that the acts are somehow allied to the artistic in ways that are more reliant on the discourses of fine/modern art exhibition than in other selection procedures (such as 'director' or 'organizer'). These acts are curated (or are the ingredients for the 'guest director'), and so

become part of an individual curator's chosen archive of music, bestowing upon them the validity of the artefact.

The term also brings with it the notion of the 'archive', which brings with it a sense of a custodial relationship over the musical act chosen to perform. In Derrida's (1996) classic reading of the function of the archive, its role is to commence and command, to both set in motion those records that are to be kept and to oversee those records. Without wishing to stray too far into other fields, it can be argued that Meltdown offers a personal archive in performance, in that it is the chance for the curator to offer up for public consumption their own musical archive, a veritable photo album of personal musical influences. For Massive Attack, a 'trip-hop' outfit from Bristol whose musical influences of reggae, hip hop and chill out music run through the seams of their work, Jones was an appropriate choice. Meltdown 2008 offered the audience access to Massive Attack's musical memories re-presented, collated and curated.

It is also worth considering the context within which Meltdown took place. This exhibition of musical memories as embodied in performance takes place on London's South Bank. This location is worthy of some comment in so far as it is conventionally used for Classical Music concerts and large art exhibitions. It encapsulates all that is deemed deserving of intellectual and artistic merit. That some of this work is maverick (Lee Scratch Perry curated in 2003) or keenly subversive in its roots (Nick Cave in 1999) is complicated by the fact that the South Bank is part of the establishment, the apogee of acceptable artistic endeavour. Rather than dwell on this seeming contradiction, or think about this alliance in terms of a dialectic of recuperation into the dominant, I want to ally myself with Walser, whose work seeks to move beyond such a polarity, seeking instead to 'analyze how [rock

music] arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at particular historical moments' (1993:136, in Auslander, 2004:7). Here I insert Jones into the space where arbitration might begin and do so in order to trace out what are the parallel moves of artefactualisation and subversion that Jones' performance and its reception make apparent.

### **Press Responses (1): Containing Jones**

In many of the broadsheet press responses to Jones' performance, her body and its ability to negate its material age is the main focus of praise and incredulity. By looking in detail at some of these comments that refer repeatedly to her defiance of age, she is repeatedly 'framed' as someone who is exceptional in her materiality. This insertion of an ageing Black female body that is resolutely not 'age-appropriate' in its constitution nor its presentation into the public consciousness via London's South Bank is often translated in language that is characterised by expressions of awe. When that is deconstructed, what begins to emerge is a pattern that indicates a paucity of responses available to represent her that are couched within the language of comparison; to her youth, to her body as a work of art to the bestial and to African stereotypes. These, I suggest, are highly problematic and indicative of a press discourse that cannot understand Jones without recourse to ageist and racist tropes. In this respect this paper's methodology mobilises MacDonald's 2003 reading of media discourse, a method indebted to Foucault whereby 'verbal labels and visual signifiers cannot avoid carrying social and cultural baggage' (2003:9; Van Dijk, 1991). Here the fight is over what it means to be a Black female performer still wearing suspenders and a basque and on stage at 60.

From an initial survey of literature that might help to underpin this analysis, it has become clear that there is little work on the combination of Black femininity/sexuality and ageing. Work on Black women in music has tended to confer attention on race and oppression, focussing on the political dimensions of such structural inequalities (hooks, 1992; Skegg, 1994; 1997). There is a large and evolving body of work on women (with the emphasis on gender, not race) emerging from interventions generated in the early to mid 1990s with feminist writers concentrating on historical travels through the rock and pop canon or musicologically derived detailed textual analyzes. Gender does continue to offer a rich seam of academic enquiry but rather than discussing it in general, recent work coalesces around more specific areas - on a 'type' of male persona (Hawkins, 2009), genre and gender, (Bannister, 2006) on a particular artist (Dibben, 2009) or band (Cope, 2010; Welberry and Dalziell, 2009).

The separate issue of age is one that is just starting to enter into the academic field (Whiteley, 2005) and with the increasing market potential for the older, established star to turn a profit, (especially within the arena of live performance) the move towards assessing what role and impact older women in music might have both in performance and production is emergent. As part of the academic move towards accounting for this phenomenon, I am asking how Grace Jones is framed both through the vectors of race and age. It is these two vectors that form the backbone of the press discourses that explained her Meltdown performance to audiences in June 2008.

Press accounts from broadsheet and online sources were collected shortly after her June show. The sources chosen were those with the most extensive accounts of her (The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent, The Telegraph, Mojo) and they were accounts

that I was coming across naturally in the course of my leisure and searching out with Google on 'Grace Jones\_Meltdown'. This search returned blogs such as [www.blogsguardian.co.uk](http://www.blogsguardian.co.uk), [www.openmagazine.co.uk](http://www.openmagazine.co.uk) and the Guardian's own website, [www.guardian.co.uk/music](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music) These papers, both off and on line, are those whose arts coverage is usually extensive and arguably high brow, suited to the coverage of Jones at the South Bank when we think of Jones as performance artist and the South Bank as the repository of all that British culture deems 'art' worthy.

First there are those comments that refer to Jones' ability to maintain a body that should not really be hers at such an age. These comments can all be corralled under the vernacular expression of 'surprise': 'Doesn't she look good for her age' appears on [www.blogsguardian.co.uk](http://www.blogsguardian.co.uk) 'How on earth is it possible for her to look so fab at 60?', and a superlative accompanies the description of her having 'The best legs I have ever seen on a 60 year old'. This sense of the exceptional is carried on in the [www.mojo4music.com/blog](http://www.mojo4music.com/blog) where amazement at 'How bogglingly well-preserved she looks, displaying a toned, sharpened physique that would be astonishing on someone even half her age.' These comments are all marked by an awe at Jones' body over and above her performance. This could be argued to be an obvious point of reference since Jones' body is so much part of her performance and has been since her modelling and early disco days. However, what is disconcerting is the sense that her refusal to comply with an accepted trajectory of decay and decrepitude is noteworthy – she is 'well-preserved' and it is this that starts to fold into the perception of as an artefact. 'Well-preserved' could apply to a pickled substance perhaps, conferring on Jones the nature of a preserve not a person. It also connotes something 'ancient' - a ceramic unearthed at an archaeological dig, and so when attached to

describing a body, it starts to position that body as somehow 'maintained' as an objet d'art. Maintenance might be applied to other strands of commentary that are applied to her in so far as comments that she is 'toned' and 'sharpened' foreground the notion of the body as a 'project' (Haug, 1997), one that requires work and maintenance. Jones therefore is delivered as something that sits on the cusp of 'body' and 'objet' in a similar way as she destabilizes the borders of race and gender (Shaviro, 2008).

In this respect, we can start to appreciate how Jones has been noted to have elided the distinction between body and art, a process that not only has served to foreground her role as muse and canvas but also suggests too an inhuman quality that some press accounts pick up on. on [www.kathmanduk2.wordpress.com](http://www.kathmanduk2.wordpress.com) Andy Gill discusses Jones' 'willingness to serve as statuesque muse in collaborations with talented visual and sound designers such as the artist Jean-Paul Goude and produced Trevor Horn. Goude's various presentations of Jones' as angular ebony sculpture, almost a machine with attitude, were perfectly complemented by Horns' dense, implacable productions, in which her vocals were often further dehumanised by being spoken rather than sung. She is regarded as one of the more impressive artworks of the Eighties, a dubious accolade...' This notion of Jones as the automaton is also notable in the following account of the Meltdown performance:

Pleased to meet you, your meat is sweet to me... you're my life support, you're my life sport,' booms Grace Jones' 10ft-tall face from a white screen. Her face melts and stretches like the liquid metal cyborg from Terminator 2, as thumping tribal bass backs her android poetry. It's an apt opening for one of the first musicians of the late 20th century to fully grasp and exploit the importance of image. A white curtain is lowered from the ceiling of the pitch-black Royal Festival Hall and rotating red and green lasers

make you feel as if you're careering through space. Gutter funk signals the opening notes to 1981's *Nightclubbing*, but there's still no sign of Grace Jones. Gradually the curtain is raised and on the platform above the bandstands Jones, the muse of pop art pioneer Andy Warhol, who also served as Keith Haring's canvas and the sleek ebony fantasy of Jean Paul Goude. Where art and music collide, a star still shines.

(Rahul Verma 20.06.08)

Both 'cyborg' and 'android' indicate the non-human qualities of Jones (see also Shaviro, 2008). This too is mentioned as part of her construction by Miranda Sawyer in *The Observer* who cites her as being an 'angled edifice' 'transformed...from a human being' (2008).

Such a discursive strategy, of allying her with machine and architecture, does reflect on the nature of her music, an avant-funk construed at the time in the early 1980s when such collisions and alliances between 'man' and 'music' were being enabled by the developments in production technologies, but here when applied to Jones, they work only to remove her from the terrain of the feminine to conceive of her as somehow beyond gender.

There is another more worrying tendency at play in positioning Jones as beyond the human. There are accounts of her that ally her or parts of her body with animals and this needs unpacking because of its implications for our understanding of the Black body in general and of Grace Jones' ageing Black body in particular. As Miranda Sawyer writes in a review as part of the publicity campaign for the album that Jones was touring in 2008 (Hurricane) Jones is 'Not bad for, well, however old she is: Grace is vague about her age,

but she's at least 58, possibly 60. You'd call her a game old bird, except she's far more fabulous: slash cheekbones, full lips, small, glittering eyes' (2008).

It is not news to hear the word 'Bird' applied to a woman but to frame Jones as a 'game old bird' is to somehow belittle her and reduce her cultural impact to that of a rather fun loving granny. This recourse to animal metaphor can be found too in a surprising comment from The Observer's music critic, Kitty Empire where the Jones' 'machine' is constructed as bestial.

Thirty years of the high life have not taken their toll on Jones' perfect hindquarters, which she shakes and wiggles in the faces of the photographers. In case anyone had forgotten quite how rude a song 'Pull up to the Bumper' is, she leers 'Pull up to my bumper baby/ And drive it in between,' while thwacking her buttock.

She is a veteran of shock tactics. The Jamaican preacher's daughter first found fame as a model-turned-party animal in the age of disco. Her exhibitionist streak was greased by a series of stylists, transforming the former Miss Mendoza into one of the mightiest visual totems of the Eighties'.....' Jones' stature as a work of art remains assured'.

(Kitty Empire 22/06/08 in *The Observer*)



So Jones is the ‘old bird’ with the ‘perfect hindquarters’, her ageing Black body translated across to the audiences of the Guardian and the Observer in epithets of the animal.

Hindquarters belong to horses, to traded meat and here is an echo of the discourses of the slave trade when Black women were traded for their fertility and a physique conducive to labour. The phrase ‘hindquarters’ draws attention to Jones’ buttocks in a way that might be construed as distinctly retrogressive and reminiscent of those discourses surrounding Sara Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus (see Gilman, 1985; Hobson, 2003). It cuts Jones up into her body parts, again placing her beyond the (unmarked and white) feminine where her Blackness and its refusal to follow the routes of ageing white femininity are literally ‘marked’.

By these methods, Jones is Africanised and this strategy is one that further mythologises her body, delivering it into a paradigm that understands the Black body as African artefact. Gill refers to her as an ‘imperious Neo-Nubian princess’ (Gill, 2008). There is much to unpick in Gill’s description of her, with ‘Nubian’ recalling Leni Riefenstahl’s *Last of the Nuba* and its associations with German National Socialism, and the ‘neo’ establishing Jones again as allied in some respect to ‘art’ (neo cubist). Allying this with ‘princess’, with all the connotations that term brings with it (she has also been termed ‘terrifying queen’) remove her from the realm of the ‘ordinary’ to the ‘extraordinary’ (Dyer, 1979) and work to place her elsewhere, as Other.

In these areas of comparison where Jones’ body is highlighted as exceptional for her age, likened to animal parts and referred ‘back to Africa’ there is a pattern that can be said to unite them all; she serves to exemplify difference. Her body is different in that it showcases a refusal to comply with white expectations of ageing and it is this that is the

axle of tension around which the press responses to her coalesce. The following describes how:

‘There are few 60-year-olds who could keep up with Jones’.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7465083.stm>

At first she moves stiffly, robotically, like she’s just been revived from cryogenic slumber.

This would, at least, explain how bogglingly well preserved she looks, displaying a toned, sharpened physique that would be astonishing on someone even half her age.

[http://www.mojo4music.com/blog/2008/06/grace\\_jones\\_live\\_at\\_meltdown.html](http://www.mojo4music.com/blog/2008/06/grace_jones_live_at_meltdown.html)

The same metaphors reappear; robot, astonishment, comparison with others. The same strategies are in place; that of placing Jones beyond the known into the abnormal, to view her as exotica. These are constitutively different to press accounts that praise Jones for her insertion of an unapologetic blackness into white culture.

### **Press Responses (2) Reclaiming Jones**

This section presents those responses to Jones that claim her as a subversive Black presence who has worked to recalibrate strategies of spectatorship and display. These are voices that refer to earlier models of Black feminine sexuality to argue that she is a part of a continuum of Black femininity. Within these accounts she becomes a powerful symbol of

Black femininity and pride, inserting an unapologetic and un-whitened feminine into a culture where the 'white' remains unmarked (Dyer, 1997).

It is perhaps worth starting off with Miranda Sawyer's review of Jones, since whilst it positions her problematically as a 'game old bird' it does too offer up the argument that Jones is an important figure since 'her image,[....subverted the broadsheet fetishisation of black women'. This argument is not developed, but it is taken up by writers from the Black press who position Jones as a performer who forces a rethinking of Black femininity.

In an online (UK based) magazine dedicated to issues of importance to the Black community <http://www.thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=601> the following is written on Jones:

Grace Jones is Josephine Baker reincarnated and updated. Her performances became legendary. But rather than a spectacle to be consumed, she was a knife that sliced the eye of every voyeur. Who could look at her and not be forced to see themselves in ways they had never noticed before? Imagine: a lithe, muscular, dark-skinned, Africanoid-featured black woman (i.e. by American standards, an ugly duckling) transforms into cat-woman — cat, as in panther; no sexually submissive meow, instead, a sexually aggressive growl.

Grace's French paramour and ex-husband, Jean-Paul Goude conceived and directed her image until, as he admits, the image consumed him. Andy Warhol painted pictures of her.

Keith Haring painted pictures on her. Yet her career has outlived all her image-makers. Pygmalion is dead, long live the statuesque Grace Jones.

What is being suggested here is that Jones' performativity is resistive because it forces a rethinking of ways of being, in this respect, of being a Black female performer. What Jones is doing for this reviewer is causing not only gender trouble but race trouble. Applying Butler's (1990) famous concept; that of the ways in which not performing ones gender 'right' could account for random and incalculable gender trouble (1990), Jones performs her raced gender as not only outside of the acceptabilities of age but in ways that force us to reconsider what Blackness and femininity mean when presented in her body. This again takes us back to Walser's idea that it is not sufficient to think through popular music within a dialectic of resistance and recuperation (something that marks Butler's work) but that to think instead of the ways in which tensions between such points are performed and received. Here it is, on Jones' body, its presentation and representation that the tension around what an ageing Black feminine might mean.

This meaning is qualitatively different perhaps for two different audiences but I am uneasy about according certain premises to the white press and others to a Black one. This is heading off down the route of an essentialism and although, for the purposes of enquiry, I have split the paper into those two, it has been done so because the material found in them was markedly different and worthy of acknowledgement. The broadsheet press was less eager to embrace Jones as part of a continuum of lauded Black performers; comments on Jones here were predominantly lead by strategies of containment, markedly different to those coming from the Black community which, in contrast, asserted pride and a historical

tradition. When two voices are so radically different, it becomes apparent that there might be tensions although it is worrying to note that such different responses might be indicative of two ways of conceiving of the ageing Black body split across race. There are precedents for the white containment of the Other through a neo-colonial artefactualisation (as art work, animal, Other) and it is this containment that lies at the heart of the tension that Jones presents in her ongoing performances. These might be construed as part of a discursive terrain whereby expressive black feminine sexuality has been configured as problematic for both white audiences and for conservative Black Jamaican audiences, for example (see work on ‘whining’/Jamaican dancehall Bakare-Yusuf, 2005; Noble, 2008). What links these is the fear of the Other, where that is symbolic of an unrestrained sexuality.

What is also important to note is that there are fewer responses to Jones from the Black Press, none from *The Voice*, Britain’s most prominent Black newspaper, apart from blogs lauding her 80’s flat top (<http://diaryofakinkycurlytransitioner.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/hair-idolgrace-jones/>). This paucity suggests three things; the first is that Jones does not speak exclusively to a Black audience. Despite her music being rooted in reggae riffs, her material covers torch songs, disco, and her audience at Meltdown was predominantly white (and gay) a trend characteristic of the disco scene from whence she came (Lawrence, 2006). From the critical work on her, she has been conceived of as a ‘performance artist’ and so perhaps is less ‘owned’ as a singer ‘by’ any one particular community. Second it highlights both the lack of Black voices employed in the broadsheet British press and Black owned and run independent presses. Lastly it may indicate that as a white academic middle class woman I

may not have access to channels of discourse that claim Jones as anything other than ‘neo’ – ‘Afro’-‘robot’-‘bird’.

### **Disco diva: contextualising Jones**

As a counterpoint to the pessimism of the previous arguments on the polarity of representation, and in sharp opposition to the idea that race might be constitutive of two different approaches to conceiving Grace Jones, she herself has argued that she is beyond colour. In 1993 she told the NME that ‘I’ve always had this kind of image that’s allowed me to pass the colour barrier, and I have an idea for a film where I could play a white girl....it would be similar to de Niro’s gaining weight for *Raging Bull* – I like the political implications of that’ (see Lobato, 2007:136). Of note here is the idea that she might be transgressing binaries in such a way as to have impact. Shaviro takes up this idea in his blog on the accompanying video to the Meltdown performance where he writes how: Jones no longer accepts the subordination that Western culture has so long written into designations of both ‘woman’ and ‘black’;

but she does this neither by recuperating femininity and blackness as positive states, nor by claiming for herself the privileges of the masculine and the white; but rather by subjecting the whole field of these oppositions to radical distortion, to implosion, or to some sort of hyperspatial torsion and distortion.

(Shaviro, 2008)

What her presence on stage at Meltdown did was to further this idea of a political impact but this, as I have argued, is framed around the ways in which she either looks nothing like how she should or how she looks like she did: processes of disavowal and nostalgia.

Continuing with this second notion, Lobato's (2007) work on her places her as a particularly deviant diva and discusses how her recent re-emergence onto the dance scene acts as a nostalgic vehicle for 80s, in particular, for the transgressive club cultures of that decade. This section first addresses his contribution as it offers a way into understanding perhaps why Jones is an important figure again in contemporary culture and then to an awareness of the importance of generic context in a brief look at the medium of disco itself and how it relates to Jones' and her reception.

Lobato's paper sits within a collection of essays on the diva (Doty, 2008) and is one of very few critical interventions to deal with Jones. It does so in the spirit of 'homage and hagiography' (p.134), a substantially different agenda to this paper's interrogation of the way in which Jones' age is treated within different sections of the press. Most resonant is Lobato's claim that Jones' particular 'brand of androgynous excess may be staging something of a comeback in today's pop culture imaginary' (2007:137). He mentions bands such as The Scissor Sisters and Miss Kitten and notes too how her work is being sampled and re-engineered by 'taste-making dance labels like Strut, DMC, Nuphonic and Yoshitoshi' (p.134). Lobato notes how: Jones is allowed to perform as she is back in fashion as part of pop's cyclic process because:

In the past five or so years, certain musical subcultures have displayed a renewed interest in Jones' music, particularly in her early 1980s albums, whose austere pop aesthetic – what Simon

Reynolds and Joy Press call ‘the eroticisation of alienation’ – is beginning to sound cutting edge again, in a back-to-the-future kind of a way.

(2007:137)

Jones’ sound and her image reconnect in ways that Lobato claims speak to a new audience for whom the 1980s is now mythologized, eager to consume an ‘excessive star figure’ (p.137). His insertion of her into the role of ‘diva’ also needs unpacking by turning to some of those critical interventions on this figure that are relevant to Jones and how age might sit within the rubric of divadom.

Work on the diva has looked to female characters within film and music who might be said to sit outside the dominant expectations of a normative femininity (Bradshaw, 2008:71).

Tracing out the story of the diva by setting out its trajectory, Bradshaw’s paper on Bette Midler in *The Rose* notes how the diva is:

[an] underdog with big talent and/or hunger for fame  
overcomes hardships of impoverished beginnings to make it  
big; along the way makes choice to sacrifice normative  
womanhood for artistic and/or commercial success; with  
stardom comes the crisis of maintaining stardom; inevitable  
star dims, either through tragedy or ageing; diva dies alone.

(2008:71)



Her account also details how the diva ‘marks a cultural inability to imagine real and lasting female achievement’ (p.72) and can only be punished by destruction (p.74), which we, the audience, sadistically encourage and expect. She further ‘serves as a microcosm of cultural attitudes [that are] a fundamentally misogynist response to female ambition and success’ (p.71). These assertions can be mapped onto the press responses to Jones in that they are the responses of a misogynist press unable to account for the 60 year old Black body in ways other than tired colonial tropes of fetishism and the bestial.

As Lobato argues, Jones talked of ‘passing barriers’ and he too is keen to highlight her transgressive potential. In a similar fashion, O’Neill’s work on divas offers up how divas are figures who exist above and beyond the ‘normal’. Writing from a queer perspective, O’Neill describes them as ‘excessively talented women performers...whose talents exceed the limited boundaries of romantic interest, good wife and good mother’ (2007:23). They are thus marked out by not doing their gender right. By not giving up their art (Bradshaw, 2008:75) to fit into the heterosexual matrix and reproductive domesticity, and thus clearly rejecting ‘participation in the forms and structure of the capitalist nuclear family’ (Bradshaw, 2008:75) they sit uneasily on the sides of a culture determined by a heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and clearly ‘bear[s] the traces of a failed normative socialisation’ (p.23). Seen through this prism, Jones functions as a continuing reminder of the possibility of existing beyond the parameters of expected femininity. What Jones’ presence also serves to represent is a rejection of the menopausal body as post-sexual since she interjects the menopausal body into a popular music culture that predominantly adores of youth and its sexuality (Whiteley, 2005). The press comments on her body that express awe at her continuing sexuality are freighted with an undertone of unease at the menopausal body on

display. Jones is continuing to 'make a spectacle of herself' (Russo:1995) by confusing the normative 'injunctions' to 'not make a spectacle of yourself, ....which includes acting your age' (Woodward on Russo, 1999:xvii).

It may also be worth considering how useful O'Neill's framing of the diva as one who 'makes a laughing stock of heterosexuality by associating it with a style that has lost its power to compel assent' (2007:23) is to thinking through Jones performance and its reception in London 2008. This version of the diva is one that is queer and contemptuous of heteronormativity. It is camp where camp is politically disengaged, extravagant and marked by the love of excess and artifice. Sontag's (1964) seminal contribution on camp establishes it as an aestheticised response to the world played out as theatre. In terms of questions of taste, it does not limit itself to an axis of good versus bad but offers up commentary through theatrical and declamatory gesture and so we might easily place Jones in the 'camp' camp since her shows are marked by an extravagant theatricality.

For thirty years, this was the 'landmark' (Cleto, 1999:10) word on camp and there was no room in it for politics. Rejecting the apolitical and ahistorical characteristics of camp, Robertson's (1996) feminist reading places it instead as a historically contextualised practice that emerges at specific moments of anti-feminist backlash or 'high-camp epochs' (p.18). This is the version of camp that can be mobilised when thinking about Jones' humour and the ways in which her continued presence within the popular terrain might be conceived as challenging. Robertson's (1996) work is an investigation into key female figures in popular film and music through the lens of what she calls 'feminist camp'. Her argument is that the camp 'effect' takes place when what was once deemed acceptable and 'natural' is no longer so. In this vision, camp is not an apolitical and ahistorical sensibility but a tool in the hands

of women wishing to comment on alienation through reconceptualising past models of identity and desire. Past cultural products are then ripe for reconsideration through what she calls ‘an ironic, laughing distanciation’ (Robertson, 1996:5). Building on Andrew Ross’ work on this aspect, she writes how it:

occurs at the moment when cultural products (for instance, stars, fashions, genres, and stereotypes) of an earlier moment of production have lost their power to dominate cultural meanings and become available ‘in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste’.

(Ross, 1993:139 cited in Robertson, 1996:4-5)

This might offer a way into conceiving of how Jones is continuing to be ‘political’ - not by refusing to be bound by race as she intimates in the 1993 NME interview, but by throwing into popular British culture a version of Black femininity that lampoons its own fetishisation and asks for a reconsideration of Black female sexuality when positioned within an ageing body. By framing herself within the confines of the British cultural establishment she questions her artefactualisation as ageing disco diva. Jones reconfigures the acceptable and forces into the spotlight an ageing Black creative theatricality that both laughs at itself and forces us to engage. We are again at the point of ‘tension’, Walser’s term for the knotty juncture that refuses to fit into an either/or dialectic. This is because camp’s ‘simultaneous pleasures of alienation and absorption refuse simplistic categories of dominant-verses-resistant readings’ (p.17). If we consider how Robertson’s camp sets it up as a tool through which the ‘female spectator [can] laugh[s] at and play[s]with her own

image by making fun of, and out of, that image – without losing sight of the real power the image has over her’ (p.17) then we can start to consider what Jones is doing here; how she places centre stage an ageing Black feminine that cannot be accounted for within discursive frameworks other than those that repeatedly mobilise ageism or racism, that continue to emerge in liberal, broadsheet conceptions of the ’60 plus’ Black performer.

We need now to make a move across to the dance floor in so far as the first part of Jones’ status as disco diva needs unpacking. Disco has been a genre defined critically by its corporeality, its affective environment and its ‘establishing a milieu in which female vocalists were able to carve out a significant space for artistic expression’ (Lawrence, 2006: 6, 11). Disco, in Lawrence’s argument, is marked out as a place removed from a masculine intellectual rationale and is, instead (and quite diametrically opposed as) female, queer and of the body. It had ‘liberationist potential’ (2006) in forging a space for queer, Black and female bodies to meet, dance, produce and perform (see...). Although I would not want to limit Jones to the disco genre, it was her establishing context and it could be argued that it is indeed her ongoing corporeal presence, her ‘queerness’<sup>1</sup> and an ongoing fascination with her brand of femaleness that are the basis for the press comments on her. As Shaviro writes in a blog on the *Corporate Cannibal* video, which was released at the same time as the Meltdown performance, Jones is exceptional because whilst she emerged from the disco scene which was a world associated with ‘campy performance’ and ‘performing femininity’ her sexuality was an ‘aggressive’ one that was presented within a body that has never *looked like* anyone else’ (Shaviro, 2008) and perhaps because of this her refusal to comply with expectations of age or race is made on the understanding that she is a one off. Jones has continued to perform since 2008 Meltdown, doing club openings to ‘support her lavish

lifestyle' (Lobato, 2007:137). Quite simply, because she doesn't look like anyone else, she *can*.

### **Wrapping up and asking more: a conclusion**

There are questions that arise from this brief consideration of the framing of Jones as 'aweful' artefact. The first of these is to ask what this initial interrogation of her position as an ageing Black female star might give us in the sense of asking how she is made to 'mean'. This asks why dominant press strategies continue to hark back to problematic tropes for delivering the black and ageing body. It asks why Jones has to be allied to the artefact or the a-human and considers that there might still be strategies at work within a dominant broadsheet press culture that are unable to cope with a Black ageing feminine artistic presence that moves beyond such simple stereotyping. Voices from Black papers and blogs that praised her as part of Black cultural history were few.

The second is to note that there is an absence of critical work on the ways in which race and age collide in broadsheet press discourses that this paper has attempted to address. What is at stake is the ways in which the unruly older body might cause upset. As Shaviro has noted, 'In messing so seriously with both gender and race, Jones pushes the human, transforming herself (before it became fashionable) into a posthuman, or transhuman, a robot' (2008). Shaviro is right – Jones does upset these distinctions and the language of the robotic has been used to describe her in the press discourses that form the bedrock of this paper. However, age is missing from his account – he joyfully ignores it by foregrounding Jones' cultural impact. For him it is quite literally unre'mark'able. But age was not invisible for those concerned with Jones at the South Bank in the summer of 2008, or rather; its

very invisibility within the site of Jones' body was cause for debate. Jones' body was unmarked by age - she did not fit into the 'the visual idiom of the older woman' (Woodward, K: 1999:279) and so is marked out as special and worthy of comment, comment that as I have argued, draws on racist and ageist stereotypes. This resulted in verbal strategies being deployed that considered her an artefact that might be preserved or an 'awe'ful body to be compared with its former self, with animals and with robots. The epithets and exclamations that followed formed the basis of this paper, amongst them analyzes of the discursive patterns that continue to reduce a performer such as Jones to her 'perfect hindquarters'. We are talking about Grace Jones here, artist, muse, model, posthuman, camp diva, flat-topped hard body, and chanteuse – not a horse.

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