

Grace Jones, Afro Punk, and Other Fierce Provocations: An Introduction to “Sartorial Politics, Intersectionality, and Queer Worldmaking”

Eric Darnell Pritchard

In the spring of 2015, it was announced that the iconic Grace Jones—supermodel, actress, singer, songwriter, and all around aesthetic troublemaker—would headline the “Fancy Dress Ball” at that summer’s Afro Punk Festival. The Brooklyn festival, which made its debut in 2005 as part of New York’s Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), was cofounded by James Spooner and Mathew Morgan in 2002. Since that time, Afro Punk has consistently emerged as a movement that “encouraged rebellious, freethinking risk-takers in music, art, film, comedy, fashion, and culture-atlarge [sic] . . . that ‘STANDS FOR: NO SEXISM NO RACISM NO ABLEISM NO AGEISM NO HOMOPHOBIA NO FAT-PHOBIA NO TRANSPHOBIA NO HATEFULNESS. AFROPUNK stands for . . . Safety for all.’”¹ Since 2005, the festival has grown and grown, expanding to over 70,000 attendees with Afro Punk fests held all over the world—from the mothership of Brooklyn to Atlanta, London, South Africa, and Paris. For Brooklyn, every year finds cultural critics, photographers, and journalists flocking to Afro Punk to cover the groundswell of creative genius emanating from the festival grounds now held in the neighborhood of Fort Greene’s Commodore Barry Park.

In the days before her performance, Jones, via Facebook, put the chil’ren on notice that given the ball’s title, and in the spirit of fierceness, and the occasion of her presence, they better slay in the name of Afro Punk:

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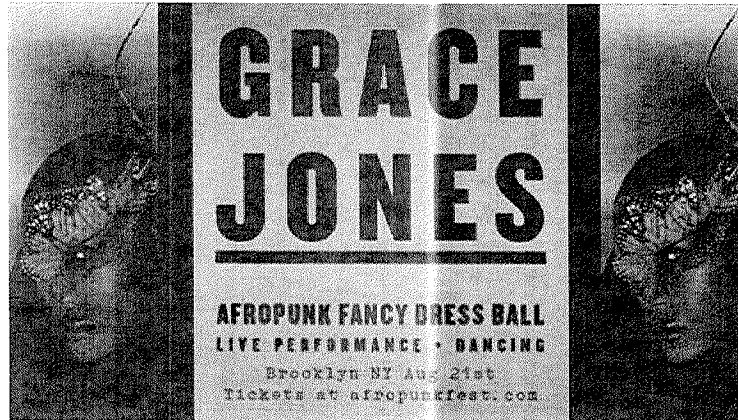
Grace Jones

August 20, 2015 · 📷

I'm coming for you Brooklyn, this Friday at the AFROPUNK Fancy Dress Ball.

You better dress to impress me.

Tickets: <http://afropunkfest.com/tickets>



And when Muvah' Grace gives you her commandments, the chil'ren listen. And when she, then sixty-seven years old, takes to the Afro Punk stage topless, covered in drawings in white body paint, a white wig and headdress, black lipstick and eye shadow, a cape, and hula hoop, you have a high bar to clear to impress the legend.

Although there is no shortage of creativity and cultural production on which one might focus their attention, the fashion of Afro Punk—perhaps only rivaled by the music—commands the biggest share of the mainstream press, with publications such as *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, and *People*, all offering slideshows, articles, or audio-videos documenting the fierceness of the style of Afro Punk attendees.

In a review of fashion at the 2015 Afro Punk Festival, Marjon Carlos wrote, "As with anything punk—be it the boundary-pushing music, dress, or politics of its most hard-core loyalists—there is always a sense of urgency. The guitar must thrash harder, the music must be louder, and yes, the fashion must be bolder. The message of rebellion and personal freedom has to propagate quickly, honestly, and without pretense." The Afro Punk Festival offered "style with a

same sense of immediacy and purpose. Bucking trends and rules, their dress played mercilessly with color and proportion—yet it was the subtle collision of detailing that drove the most fully realized looks home. SZA's oversized tank was as impactful as a runway gown, especially as she leapt in the air while tousling her heap of copper curls. Traditional wax print was tied and repurposed into modern crop tops and jumpsuits, retro seventies glam mingled with Prada sneakers, and Americana and Afrofuturism motifs.³ Reflecting on this style, all documented for *Vogue* by his Polaroid camera, photographer Ben Rasmussen says, "It wasn't just the fashion, it was their presence. Everyone we photographed was dressed beautifully, but what moved me was the energy and confidence that they exuded. . . . It is inspiring to see that sense of self."⁴

So, raise your hand if it comes as a surprise that Jones—the patron saint of renegade aesthetics—was selected as the headliner of Afro Punk? I didn't think so. In fact, the only thing surprising about the announcement of Jones as headliner—evident in the responses of many in social media comment sections and blogs—was not that it was even happening at all, but that it was *just* now happening.

Few artists break boundaries—sonically, visually, stylistically, culturally—in ways that are felt across both genre and generations like Grace Jones. She is the essence of the presence, beauty, energy, confidence, and sense of self of which Rasmussen speaks. One would be hard pressed to find a person who self-identifies or is identified as subcultural or countercultural—especially one who is historically informed, pop culture inclined, black, queer, feminist, punk, or otherwise obsessively aesthete—who would not count Jones or one of her iconic moments in one or more aspects of their senses, as essential. I contend that what might be called "the Grace Jones Archive," with fashion a kaleidoscopic force in the constellation of performances with which Jones creates and recreates herself and contexts, is itself a queer "world-making project," what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner conceptualize as that "space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies."⁵

The archive is open. Maybe she inspired you to become more flexible so you too could bend and contort yourself into a scene of "Island Life." Or, perhaps she hula-hooped you into a trance, moving the cylindrical toy around her waist as she, mic in hand, belted out one of her popular songs. It could very well be her legendary beauty—her fierceness piercing the still life of every photo she has taken, or her masterful, delicious storytelling in her recently released memoirs. In whatever incarnation you encountered Grace Jones, you, like me, are likely to have gotten your life, or multiple lives because Grace slays you and you are reborn. Grace is reincarnation.⁶

Grace Jones represents the best of so many aesthetically sublime and delicious possibilities and realizations for global fashion and popular culture. In addition to her album covers, music videos, and fashion editorials, she is etched into our minds through so many other moments: her role of eccentric fashion model Strangé in the 1992 film *Boomerang*; any one of the many photos of her live performances in her long career, such as a 1987 performance where she collaborated with artist Keith Haring for her stage costume; and her memorable runway walks such as at the Spring 1989 Patrick Kelly show in Paris, where she walked the runway dressed in a black bathing suit and cape adorned with an applique of neon stars and planets, red tights, a bustle of individual scarves of various colors hanging from her waste, and a hat with a long pink ponytail hanging out of the top. In each of these moments and so many more, the camera shutter opens and closes on her to fulfill the promise, play, and pulchritude of every single image she has created. Her visual and performance archive is always embodying and emboldening the radical potential of fashion, music, dance, performance art, and photography for exploding the neat boundaries built around race, gender, sexuality, time, and space from one moment to the next.

Indeed, Grace Jones illustrates the very exigencies for this special issue on "Sartorial Politics, Intersectionality, and Queer Worldmaking." The focus of this issue is exploring the relationship between queer worldmaking and intersectionality. In particular, the theory and praxis of black feminisms, and women of color feminisms from which intersectionality emerges and continues to operate consequentially in critical inquiry, are central to my conceptualization of and a foundation for this volume. The special issue uses fashion and style as the surface for the explorations of power and structure in the convergences, complexities, and contestations of such a crucial conversation.

Fashion does and has always mattered in queer worldmaking: there is the 1950s and 1960s "homophile" movement activism of the Mattachine Society and their deployment of sartorial respectability as a tactic of advocacy for gay men and women; the function of different colored handkerchiefs and bandanas and various forms of gendered clothing as a solicitation or expression of desire; the rainbow, a symbol of LGBT rights activism, will be forever fashioned into buttons, bracelets, earrings, sweaters, gowns, and other clothing and accessories; and the more troubling ways fashion has historically been—and is currently—used in the surveillance and regulation of queerness, such as the "appropriate dress policy" at the all-male historically black institution, Morehouse College, that made students wearing clothes flagged as women's garments a matter for which they could be punished.⁷ These are but a small sample of the sartorial in relation to queer life, culture, and politics. Each of the links I mention among fashion,

style, and queer life, culture, and politics are a text that evidence, as Laurie Essig and Sujata Moorti note in their introduction to a previous QED special issue:

facilitates an optic of multiplicities . . . permits us to see things straight on, from the dominant point of view, and simultaneously look at things from a less straightforward and more queer vantage point. It is this seeing things as we are supposed to and also as we are not supposed to that makes queer theory such an important tool for looking at how power operates in the social world. Of course, this is the most basic insight of queer theory—that power has a way of disguising/naturalizing the way things are as the way things are meant to be. This is exactly why queer theory remains central to the project of understanding—and changing—the world.⁸

Work at the intersections of queer studies and fashion studies is one example of a dialogue that has contributed to and applied queer theory to the effect Essig and Moorti note above, creating a true dialogue that reflects scholarly, pedagogical, artistic, and activist intellectual responses about the work of the sartorial in queer cultural, social, and political practices that pushes into interesting new directions. Indeed, within five years, we have seen a proliferation of scholarly works that have examined some of the current and historical connections among fashion and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer life and culture. For instance, 2013 saw the publication of two important volumes: Valerie Steele's *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk*, a companion to a symposium and Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology exhibit of the same name, as well as Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas's *Queer Style*.⁹ Each work demonstrates, as Valerie Steele argues, "that fashion history cannot truly be understood without taking account of the creative contributions of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and other queer individuals and communities."¹⁰ These recent works have done much to redress the erasure of LGBTQ contributions to fashion and style, and show how fashion and style function complexly as practices of self-fashioning, storytelling, and as a disruptor of norms. For example, in *A Queer History of Fashion* Steele demonstrates that there is much to gain from a queer exploration of fashion, "yet surprisingly little has been published about high fashion as a site of gay cultural production."¹¹ Noting the limited examination of the intersections of fashion and gay cultural production, Steele points out a paradox in this intersection, namely that concurrent to overlooking this intersection "it is widely believed that most male fashion designers are gay. Is this just a stereotype? Or do gay men really have a special relationship with fashion? To what extent have lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people also made significant contributions to fashion? Do gay styles set trends that straight people follow? Fashion and style have played an important role within LGBTQ (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer) community, both pre- and post-Stonewall, and even as early as the eighteenth century."¹²

These questions and statements highlight the intersections of queer life, culture, politics, and yes, queer labor as historically and currently intertwined with fashion as a mode of invention, industry, form, and resistance. To understand, document, and display the long-occurring and still emerging relationship between LGBTQ culture and fashion, Steele deploys “queer” to be “more encompassing” of the various ways LGBTQ people, culture, and politics have contributed to and created themselves through fashion and style.¹³ Deploying queer, Steele argues that “if we look at the history of fashion through a queer lens, exploring aesthetic sensibilities and unconventional dress choices made by LGBTQ people we see *how* central gay culture has been to the creation of modern fashion.”¹⁴ The “how” includes “the historic presence of [LGBT] people in the fashion system, not only as fashion designers, but also as journalists, photographers, hairdressers, make-up artists, stylists, retailers, and models . . . the creativity and resistance to oppression expressed by LGBTQ subcultural and street styles, which have often transgressed sex and gender roles [and the] dissident ways of relating fashion as a cultural form have resulted in a gay or queer sensibility that embraces both idealizing and transgressive aesthetic styles.”¹⁵ As noted, part of the labor of this special issue of *QED* is to explore the intersections between queer and fashion, but to do so through its entanglement with another critically imperative mode of theory and praxis: intersectionality. For it is certain, as Essig and Moorti write, “queer worldmaking must involve not just queer worlds, but queer ideas, queer lectures, and queer methodologies as way [sic] of imagining a world beyond hegemonic heteronormativity” as it “explore[s] the myriad ways in which heteronormativity organizes all of social life, including gay and lesbian lives.”¹⁶ But, as numerous scholars of black queer theory and queer of color critique have argued and shown—including E. Patrick Johnson, Cathy Cohen, Sharon Patricia Holland, José Esteban Muñoz, Roderick Ferguson, Gayatri Gopinath, David Eng, and Sandra K. Soto—“seeing the world queerly is not in itself sufficient. We must encourage the inclusion of queer ways of seeing in critical race theory, feminism, and postcolonial theory, to name a few, not just to make queer worlds intersectional, but to infuse these fields with queerness.”¹⁷

As a scholar who also generates, deploys, and is accountable to queer of color critique—my entry into it, feminism, and queer theory is a genealogy that always starts with the interventions of black feminisms and women of color feminist theory and praxis writ large. My pursuit of a conversation in and through queer theory is always pursuant to intersectionality, only one of the keywords and praxis of women of color feminist traditions that has shaped my scholarly, pedagogical, activist, and creative life. Thus, this genealogy also shapes this special issue as one that attends to the specificity of the queerness, fashion, and style entanglement through a lens that centers intersectionality.

Intersectionality, a concept first introduced in a 1989 article by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a black feminist legal studies scholar and critical race theorist, is as Brittney Cooper argues, “the most visible and enduring contribution that feminism, and in particular black feminism, has made to critical social theory in the last quarter century.”¹⁸ As first theorized by Crenshaw, intersectionality is a critical intervention that seeks to expose the limitations of discourses of identity and difference that treated race and gender as single identity variables, rather than mutually constructing categories of identity, oppression, and analysis.¹⁹ Intersectionality, Crenshaw writes, illustrates “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed,” writing specifically about the experiences of black women and other women of color.²⁰ Since this initial articulation, the term “intersectionality” has been taken up by numerous scholars to complicate analyses of identity and power, in particular through the exploration of other categories of identity and systems of power. Following in this tradition, scholars in fashion studies have contributed works that have articulated an analysis of race and gender in their examinations of the sartorial and beauty culture that has expanded and deepened our understanding within this area of study. Among the more recent titles are Minh-Ha T. Pham’s *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* (2015), Tanisha C. Ford’s *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2015), Carol Tulloch’s *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (2015), and Mimi Thi Nguyen’s article “The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force.” Each provides an intersectional analysis of race, racialization, and gender in analyses of fashion and style performances within the context of global capitalism, narratives of violence and as a tool of resistance and pleasure, the role of adornment in the fashioning of black diasporic identity, and as a material of criminality and state violence, respectively.²¹ This scholarly, pedagogical, artistic, and activist dialogue on fashion and its relationship to social justice, identity, self-making, resistance, pleasure, and power, among other topics of critical social theory and praxis, has continued to grow through more recent works exploring fashion, race, gender, and sexuality in the United States and internationally: Elizabeth Way’s historical study of the life and work of two black women central to fashion and American history—Elizabeth Keckly, a nineteenth-century abolitionist and dressmaker, who made garments for several First Ladies of the United States, including Mary Todd Lincoln—and Ann Lowe, most famous for designing Jacqueline Kennedy’s wedding dress in 1953; Marcel Rosa-Salas and Isabel Flower’s *Top Rank* Magazine and podcast; Rikki Byrd and Kimberly M. Jenkins’ *Fashion and Race Syllabus*, an online resource exploring “fashion and representation”; a special forum in the

International Journal of Fashion Studies on “Black Fashion Studies,” edited by Rikki Byrd; and the recent publication of Shantrelle P. Lewis’s highly anticipated book, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style*, based on Lewis’s phenomenal traveling exhibit of the same name.²² These works and others like them are crucial, because they forecast what is possible and demonstrate the need to have conversations on sartorial politics and analyses of power, representation, social justice, and expression. In light of these contributions from queer, critical race, and women of color feminist approaches to fashion studies, this special issue takes the next steps toward a larger conversation on fashion, style, intersectionality, and queer worldmaking that have been planted but have yet to bloom.

My motivation to curate a volume that would feature works that pursue this conversation specifically for *QED* was a question posed by Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama, founding editors of the journal, in the 2013 inaugural issue of *QED*: “What potentialities might we foment, foster, and enact by bringing together GLBTQ worldmakers from multiple, intersectional domains?”²³ This provocation prompted my own queer worldmaking and pursuit of queer potentialities in the form of this issue to explore queer theory and intersectionalities queer relations using fashion as surface, the very thread and fabric in which the critical interventions here are dressed.

Responding to this question, this special issue of *QED* brings together scholarly articles, critical essays, conversations, and a plurality of voices to examine the relationship among fashion, style, and queerness through other matters of identity and difference, including race, class, sexuality, nationality, gender, size, and disability. As you read, you will find that the contributions to this issue maintain an eye toward the implications of these matters for what they can tell us about power, structure, and the continued necessity of intersectionality as a theoretical lens and activist tool or tactic when placed in conversation with fashion and queer worldmaking. The contents of this special issue pursue a constellation of interrelated questions: How do fashion and style inform our understandings of power and politics? How has the sartorial been deployed as a mode of survival for queer people historically and contemporarily? What narratives of queer worldmaking does fashion tell or silence, particularly in consideration of adornment in everyday life? How might intersectionality and other analyses forged in what Audre Lorde called “the crucibles of difference”²⁴ function as a discursive edifice in examining relationships between the sartorial and queer life and culture? What activist and social movement work does the sartorial do or foreclose in the pursuit of transformative possibilities?

Our exploration of these questions begins with six scholarly articles centered on a wide range of disciplinary, theoretical, and subjects of analysis in the

presentation of research reflecting the themes of the issue. The scholarly articles are followed by a forum, “Style for a Change: Fashion, Everyday Life, and Social Transformation.” The authors in this forum also come from a wide range of intellectual traditions and, in the tradition of *QED*, include both academic and nonacademic worldmakers—professors, poets, activists, journalists, curators, and performers—writing about issues that range from explorations of fashion, style, and beauty in relation to disability, race, bodies, queer and transgender activism, fetishization of modest fashion, global capitalism, and commodification. The “Queer Conversation” section features Katie Manthey—a professor and creator of Dress Profesh, a website that explores assumptions about professional dress—in conversation on two especially crucial topics—“fatshion” activism, a portmanteau of fat and fashion, and genderqueer fashion amongst academics. The issue concludes with reviews of recent books. I collaborated with *QED*’s Book Review Editor, Karma Chávez, to specially curate for this issue book reviews that touch on this issue’s themes. Thanks to Karma and the scholars who contributed reviews.

As I conclude this introduction and leave you to reading the work of the contributors, I wish to thank some other people without whom this special issue would not be possible. First and foremost, thank you to *QED*’s editors, Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama, for their enthusiasm about the issue from the moment I submitted the prospectus, for their support throughout the various stages of the editorial process, and for creating *QED*—a wonderful venue for a myriad of queer worldmaking pursuits. My gratitude to all the contributors for their work and for being such a pleasure to work with at every stage in the editorial process; I am honored by their presence in these pages. Thank you to the wonderful editorial team at Michigan State University Press, especially MSU Press journals editor Natalie Eidenier. I am grateful to each of the anonymous peer reviewers who provided the contributors with such terrific feedback on our work. Thanks also to Gwendolyn D. Pough, an editor of special issues of journals herself, for encouraging me to do this special issue and for providing me with great advice at crucial times in the preparation of this volume. Also, special thanks to David Luis Glisch-Sanchez for listening to my initial and evolving ideas about the special issue, and championing its completion from beginning to end.

NOTES

1. “About Us,” *Afro Punk*, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://afropunk.myshopify.com/pages/about-us>; emphasis in original.

2. Marjon Carlos, "The Bold and the Beautiful: Best Street Style at Afro Punk," *Vogue.com*, August 25, 2015, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://www.vogue.com/projects/13298989/afropunk-fest-2015-street-style/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 558.
6. A version of this paragraph and the following paragraph was first published as "A Moment of Grace: In Praise of Black Girl Arrogance," *Glamourtunist.com*, November 2, 2015, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://glamourtunist.com/a-moment-of-grace-in-praise-of-black-girl-arrogance/>.
7. Lateef Mungin, "All-Male College Cracks Down on Cross-Dressing," *CNN*, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/10/17/college.dress.code/>.
8. Laurie Essig and Sujata Moorti, "Introduction to the Special Issue," *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (2016): 3.
9. Valerie Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New York: Fashion Institute of Technology & Yale University Press, 2013); Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Queer Style* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
10. Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion*, 11.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid., 7; emphasis added.
15. Ibid., 11.
16. Laurie Essig and Sujata Moorti, "Introduction."
17. Laurie Essig and Sujata Moorti, "Introduction."
18. Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199328581-e-20>.
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20. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1245.
21. Minh-Ha T. Pham, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015), 791–816.

22. Elizabeth Way, "Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe: Recovering an African American Fashion Legacy That Clothed the American Elite," *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 1 (2015): 115–41; Marcel Rosas-Salas and Isabel Flower, *Top Rank Magazine*, <http://www.toprankmag.com> and *Top Rank Magazine Podcast*, <https://soundcloud.com/toprankmagazine>; Rikki Byrd and Kimberly Jenkins, *The Fashion and Race Syllabus*, <https://fashionandrace.wordpress.com>; "Black Fashion Studies," ed. Rikki Byrd, *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017); Shantrelle P. Lewis, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (New York: Aperture, 2017).
23. Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Queer Editorial Overture," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Inaugural Issue (Fall 2013), vi.
24. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

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