

A Black Body in a White Paris

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In 1925 a young black dancer named Josephine Baker took Paris by storm with her performance in *Le Revue Nègre*. She was catapulted into superstardom and was soon known all across the globe for her dancing, singing, and acting. She was something exotic and sensual, other and primitive; but above all, Josephine Baker was entertaining. Josephine Baker is particularly difficult to pin down as representing a distinct culture. In many ways, she created her own culture. As Ezra Elizabeth asserts in her book *The Colonial Unconscious*, Baker was “a floating signifier of cultural difference...she could evoke Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and France, by turns or all at once as the occasion required.”¹ Josephine Baker’s career seems to raise more question than it answers about the young star. Was Josephine Baker just another black hypersexualised body subjected to a white colonial gaze? Did Josephine Baker perpetuate or subvert stereotypes of African primitivism? How did Josephine Baker simultaneously embody “the primitive” and “the modern”? By examining the visual culture associated with Josephine Baker such as her many dances, the lithographic art of Paul Colin’s *Le Tumulte Noir*, the Bakerfix advertisements, and the silent film *La Sirene des Tropiques*, I will illustrate the complexity of what Josephine Baker represented during the Paris jazz age as both a primitive and modern public figure.

After the First World War, France became disillusioned by the brutal realities of the “civilized world” and yearned for something more pure and natural. Colonial powers such as France had long been fascinated by the primitiveness of the colonies and had displayed its colonies in many ethnographic displays designed to perpetuate racial differences and establish

¹ Ezra Elizabeth, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 99.

whites as civilized, more evolved, and modern compared to non-whites.² These ethnographic displays built the foundation for the many racial stereotypes which permeated the 1920s and some of which remain engrained in European culture today. The fascination with the primitiveness of the colonies was reinvigorated during the 1920s but “innate characteristics” of the colonies such as lack of intelligence and incivility were no longer viewed as vices of the uncivilized but as virtues.³ Africa represented raw sensuality as opposed to the cold rationality of the European mind, and for this reason blacks were generally embraced. Racism did exist. The French colonial agenda was based on the superiority of French culture over all others; however, compared to the US, where Jim Crow Laws were ever present, Paris was a step ahead. Black aesthetic and culture excited the Parisians, and soon African-American music and dance began to penetrate French culture. The black body was not only embraced but celebrated, and no one more so than Josephine Baker.

Josephine Baker, Freda J. Macdonald, was born in St. Louis Missouri, on June, 1906.⁴ She lived in a small shack with her mother Carrie MacDonald and her childhood experience was riddled with the depredations of poverty and racism that plagued blacks in the US. Dancing offered Josephine an escape. Music and dancing were always a part of Josephine Baker’s childhood; her neighbours taught her the steps to dances like the Mess Around and the Itch.⁵ At age

² Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the ‘Native’ People and the Making of European Identities*. (London UK: Leicester University Press, 1999), 1.

³ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 32.

⁴ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 50.

⁵ Karen Dalton and Henry Gates, “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen Through Parisian Eyes.” *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 4 (summer, 1998), 908.

13, Josephine left home and began working at a nightclub called Old Chauffeur's Club. It was at the Chauffeur's Club that she met the Jones family and became a part of their act, playing the trombone, dancing, and comically crossing her eyes. Soon after the Jones band Josephine became a member of the vaudeville dance troupe the Dixie Steppers and stole the show with her wacky antics.⁶ The famous vaudeville choreographer Ned Wayburn modified the chorus line in 1920's vaudeville by adding a dancer at the end of line who goofed off, missed steps, and performed other antics of comic relief.⁷ During her time as a Dixie Stepper, Josephine Baker popularized this role. Indeed, Josephine's "end-girl antics", as feminist historian Tanya Hardin calls it, was one of the main reasons why Josephine Baker was so successful as a dancer.⁸ By the time Josephine left the United States and travelled to Paris on September 16, 1925 as a member of Caroline Reagan's *La Revue Nègre* she had become a master of end-girl antics and an incredible vaudeville dancer.⁹

Josephine Baker's talent lay in her abilities as a performer. She performed nude before countless Parisian audiences in her many famous dances such as *Danse Sauvage* and her banana skirt dance. During the 1900s there was a particular obsession among anthropologists and ethnographers surrounding the dancing black body. As Mae Henderson explains in her article "Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre", there was a unique "science" that developed around dance and anthropologists linked primitivism to dance by claiming "direct observation of the

⁶ Stovall, *Paris Noir*; 50.

⁷ Elspeth Brown, "The Commodification of Aesthetic Feeling: Race, Sexuality, and the 1920s Stage Model." *Feminist Studies*, 40, 1, (2014), 79.

⁸ Tanya Hardin, "Josephine Baker and the Shadow of Spectacle." *Dance Chronicle*, 38, 2 (2015), 185.

⁹ Stovall, *Paris Noir*; 52.

‘native’ yielded ‘insight into the nature of dance’”.¹⁰ By this measure audiences who saw Josephine Baker’s performances were actively participating in a sort of colonial voyeurism.

With *La Revue Nègre* Josephine performed at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées in Paris and, being recognized as a skillful dancer, had a special dance choreographed for her by Jacques Charles called the *Danse Sauvage*.¹¹ The *Danse Sauvage* was an expression of many stereotypes the French had about blacks. Josephine was clad in feathers, naked from the waist up, and dancing to the rhythm of beating jungle drums. The nudity shocked and amazed the audience and Baker’s black gyrating erotic body became an expression of primitive sexuality. Nudity had long been associated with the colonies and was used as a powerful example of the uncivilized native.¹² Her dancing convoked the jungles of Africa and it was exactly the unadulterated incivility for which the Parisian’s hungered. The *Danse Sauvage* was the first of many performances in which Josephine presented her body as a black spectacle to the white colonial gaze.

The Banana Dance, which is perhaps Baker’s most famous dance, further exemplifies the primitiveness Baker embodied but also the modernity. The dance featured Baker playing Fatou, an African woman clothed in nothing more than a skirt of bananas. When Baker performed the dance she would climb down a large prop tree in a very animalistic fashion to the sound of drums which were being beaten by scantily clad “savage” men.¹³ Once she reached the stage

¹⁰ Mae Henderson, “Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: from Ethnography to Performance.” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 2003), 112.

¹¹ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 53.

¹² In her article “States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination”, Philippa Levine traces the parallel between a lack of clothing and savagery, as well as primitiveness, as far back as the seventeenth century.

¹³ dsmrtgrl. “Josephine Baker’s Banana Dance”. Filmed [1927]. YouTube, 1:04. Posted [April 14, 2008]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmw5eGh888Y>

floor she would shake her famous derriere in the face of the white explorer who had been sleeping beneath the tree. Thus, Baker entered into the realm of the colonial imagination as an object of sexual fantasy come to life. In her article “Dialects of the Banana Skirt”, Alicja Sowinska analyzes the evolution of the banana skirt through photographs. Sowinska explains that demonstrated throughout these photographs there is a duality between the uncurated natural body, expressed through the banana skirt as an example of savagery, and the curated cultural body, expressed through the jewelry and other accessories as an example of stardom.¹⁴ Josephine Baker’s body signified a complex cross road between nature and culture, between the primitive and the modern.

The banana dance represented unbridled black sexuality and Baker was viewed as a woman with an insatiable appetite for the exotic by the Parisians. In this regard Josephine seems to have been perpetuating the stereotypes of African’s as hyper-sexualized beings. But it is also important to note the playfulness of the banana skirt as well. Many scholars and biographers of Baker explain the banana dance as both exotic and parodic.¹⁵ She therefore also subverts them by openly mocking her own erotic performances through use of her famous vaudeville “end-girl antics”. Even in her most exotic performances she retains her comedic genius and openly mocks the stereotypes which she embodies; she is an active participant of colonialism but engages as a comedic participant more than a serious one. In his article “Josephine Baker’s Colonial

¹⁴ Alicja Sowinska, “Dialects of the Banana Skirt: Ambiguities of Josephine Baker’s Self-Representation.” *Michigan Feminist Studies*, (Spring 2006), 64.

¹⁵ Alicja Sowinska examines how the banana skirt invoked the phallic but also notes that bananas had long been used in comic theater, for example slipping on a banana peel, and therefore determines that Baker was both embracing the stereotype of the sexual other but also poking fun at it. Mae Henderson also holds to the notion that Josephine Baker subverted stereotypes through comedic means which allowed her to manipulate, ridicule, and derive empowerment from her personas like Fatou.

Pastiche”, Matthew Guterl calls Josephine Baker’s ability to mock empire her “Colonial Pastiche” and explains that as “a comedic critic of empire, she stitched together the whole messy universe of colonialism into one vast backdrop and then offered herself up as an exemplar of everything outside of France”.¹⁶ Josephine Baker simultaneously perpetuated and subverted racial stereotypes in her performances.

The great American writer e.e. cummings further describes the complexity of how Josephine baker’s banana dance evoked the primitive and the modern:

“She enters through a dense electric twilight, walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff, down a huge jungle tree- as a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable something equally non-primitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.”¹⁷

Cummings described Josephine as “something” which reflects the difficulty of explaining exactly what she represents. She represents a contradiction of being since she is “neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both”. The modern and the primitive were both at play when Josephine danced across the stage in her sensual banana skirt. The duality of Josephine as both primitive and modern is further exemplified in Paul Colin’s lithographic collection *Le Tumulte Noir*.

Le Tumulte Noir is a collection of lithographs produced in 1927, predominantly by the artist Paul Colin to celebrate the Parisian jazz age. Paul Colin’s career took off when he ran into a wartime friend, Andre Davon, who had recently gotten a job as co-producer at Theatre des

¹⁶ Matthew Guterl, “Josephine Baker’s Colonial Pastiche”, *Black Camera*, 1, 2 (Summer 2010), 26.

¹⁷ Phil Powrie and Eric Rebillard, “Josephine Baker and Pierre Batcheff in *La Sirène des tropiques*.” *Studies in French Cinema*, 8, 3, (2008), 245.

Champs-Elysées, which was being newly renovated as a music hall.¹⁸ Davon hired Colin and at the Champs-Elysees Colin produced an average of four posters every month on top of designing sets and props for upcoming theater performances. Alicja Sowinska claims that it was Paul Colin who designed Josephine Baker's famous banana skirt.¹⁹ Paul Colin received notoriety for Champs Elysees posters that featured his unique Art Deco style. He could capture the essence of a performer using a minimalist pallet of shapes and colors without creating a caricature.²⁰ The owner of Theatre des Champs-Elysees quickly got Colin working on a new set of posters for the performance *Le Revue Negre* which featured the rising star Josephine Baker.

The first posters that Colin produced were very crude since Colin's only exposure to blacks was through the minstrel show caricature posters he had seen while working at the Champs-Elysees. But once he saw Baker and *Le Revue Negre* perform, he modified the posters to represent the performances. Baker was so delighted with Colin's work that she had him illustrate her autobiography *Les Memoires de Josephine Baker* which was published in 1927 the same year as *Le Tumulte Noir*.²¹ *Le Tumulte Noir* is an amalgamation of lithographs which depict the Parisian obsession with the black dancing body and celebrates "the black craze" that Josephine Baker spearheaded in the 1920s. There are two very different lithographs, both of which Colin produced, that depict Baker in two contrasting manners: as an elegant erotic black body and as a primitive dangerous sexual native.

¹⁸ Karen Dalton and Henry Gates, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen Through Parisian Eyes." *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 4 (summer, 1998), 919.

¹⁹ Sowinska, "Dialects of the Banana Skirt", 59.

²⁰ Dalton and Gates, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin", 919.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 922.

The lithograph on the left depicts Josephine in her famous banana skirt and her movements, indeed her statue, is posed elegantly. Her skin is colored much lighter than the image on the right. Lithograph plate number 40, the image on the right, is much cruder. Paul Colin has accentuated the “Negroid” features of Baker: her lips are large, her skin is darker, and her movements are



Figure 1 These two lithographs, plate no.1 and plate no. 40, are part of Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte Noir* which was published by Éditions d'art in 1927.



Figure 2 These two lithographs, plate no. 8 and plate no. 17, are part of Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte Noir* which was published by Éditions d'art in 1927.

more animalistic. She is caged in behind bars while she thrusts her chest out towards the viewer; her sexuality is dangerous, and is a fantasy never to be realized. Lithograph number 40 also has Josephine Baker dressed in a flapper girl skirt which defined the New or Modern Woman, short hair was also a fashionably modern.²²

Le Tumulte Noir further displays the primitiveness and modernity of black body when the work of George Gour-sat is compared to Paul Colin's. George Goursat, a famous caricaturist who drew celebrities such as Coco Channel, produced plate number 8

²² Mary Louis Roberts, “Sampson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Fashion in 1920s France,” *American Historical Review* 98,3 (June, 1993), 663.

which features a chimpanzee striking a very similar pose to the lithograph depicting a black male dressed in a suit.²³ When these two lithographs are placed beside each other they present a very fascinating juxtaposition between the primitive chimpanzee and the modern black man clad in the latest male fashion. The chimpanzee's left arm and right leg are positioned in the exact same manner as the black man in the suit. Notice how the cane of black man is bent and looks similar to the tail of chimp in plate 8. This mimicry expresses the black man in terms of the chimpanzee and reflects the colonial view that blacks were less evolved than their white counterparts since they shared more similarities with our primate ancestors.²⁴ *Le Tumulte Noir* has several other rich lithographs which depict the black body in a white Paris but all of them reflect the duality of the black body as something both primitive and modern.

As well as inspiring artists such as Paul Colin, Josephine Baker also inspired her own brand name products. Josephine Baker was the first superstar to be successfully marketed. She inspired her own brand of hair gel, Bakerfix, a fashion line, and her own brand of cosmetics designed to darken white skin.²⁵ The advertisements used to market Baker have remained virtually untouched by scholars who only mention these products in passing or not at all.²⁶ The commodification of Josephine Baker that took place when she was being marketed to the Parisians associates her with modernity. This association can be seen in the advertisements of Bakerfix that

²³ George Goursat, "Le Tumulte Noir" Lithograph, 8. Paris, Succés: Éditions d'art, 1927. From artnet.com: http://www.artnet.com/artists/paul-colin/le-tumulte-noir-caricature-artist-georges-goursat-XDS9b3g3_VRnvwWxdW-PCeQ2 (February 6, 2017).

²⁴ Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions*, 39.

²⁵ Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious*, 99.

²⁶ Both Ezra Elizabeth and Alicja Sowinska mention the many products associated with Josephine Baker but they only do so to express her popularity as a performer and neither of them analyse the modernity of Baker in relation to her various products such as Bakerfix.

appeared in magazines such as *The Paris Life* in the early 1930s. This association can be seen in the advertisements of Bakerfix that appeared in magazines such as *La Vie Parisienne* in the early 1930s. Bakerfix was a composite hair gel that was often advertised with automobiles. The above



Figure 3 Bakerfix advertisement taken from the August 08, 1931 publication of *La Vie parisienne* as reproduced by Gallica.com

advertisement has a young Parisian man behind the wheel of an automobile with his scarf billowing in the wind. The advertisement declares that

“despite the wind and your speed” your hair will remain “clean and correct” and that if you fix your hair with Bakerfix before you take the wheel your hair will stay in place.

As Tag Gronberg notes in her article “Paris 1925”, cars were usually paralleled to female modernity as an extension of the female body and often advertised as a fashion accessory.²⁷ But during the 1925 Paris exhibition Le Corbusier’s pavilion *L’Esprit Nouveau* redefined cars in connotation with male modernity.²⁸ Bakerfix is fascinating because it is a male product which expresses cars in terms of male modernity and yet it is named after a black female. There was also a Josephine Baker doll which was advertised during the opening for Josephine Baker’s first

²⁷ Tag Gronberg, “Paris 1925: Consuming Modernity,” in Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, Ghislaine Wood eds, *Art Deco 1910-1939* (Bulfinch Press, 2003), 162.

²⁸ Tag Gronberg, “Cars and jars: *L’Esprit Nouveau* and a geometry of the city”, chapter 5 of Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the city in 1920 Paris* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 1132.

movie *La Sirene des Tropiques*. The 60m high “amusing” doll was bare chested wearing the famous banana skirt and advertised as “an adornment sitting on the sofa or as a car mascot”.²⁹ The Bakerfix advertisements, and Baker-doll advertisement, directly associated Josephine Baker to the modernity of automobiles and therefore perpetuated the notion of Josephine Baker as a site of modernity.

Josephine Baker was highly commercialized and she was the embodiment of primitiveness and modernity. The last source of visual culture, which will be analyzed in this essay, that depicts Josephine Baker’s duality of nature and culture is the silent film *La Sirene des Tropiques*. *La Sirène des Tropiques* was the first of three films, the other two were *Zou Zou* (1934) and *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), that Josephine Baker starred in and it was released in 1927.³⁰ In the silent film Josephine Baker played Papitou, a native of the fictional colony Monte Pablo, who falls in love with a André Berval, a Parisian man played by Pierre Batcheff, and travels to Paris and becomes a famous dancer.³¹ The film is an interesting parallel to the life of Josephine Baker. Baker was not from a French colony but an expatriate from the United States and yet the Parisians viewed her as representing the colonies, and specifically Africa.³²

The first thing the viewer will notice about Paptiou is that she cannot seem to keep her clothes on. Whether she is cooling down in the river or having a bath while crossing the ocean

²⁹Ylva Habel, “To Stockholm, with Love: The Critical Reception of Josephine Baker, 1927-33.” *Film History*, 17, 1 (2005), 130.

³⁰ Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious*, 100, 115.

³¹ Michael Munninghoff, “La Sirene des Tropiques (EYE 2012)”. Filmed [1927]. YouTube, 51:43. Posted [January 15, 2013]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_d7qUUgnJ4&t=2045s

³² Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 54.

The links provided take you right to the scenes in the movie being discussed (press Ctrl and click on the URL).

Papitou is routinely nude throughout the film.³³ This nudity depicts her as sexualized primitive since, as we have previously seen, nudity was often paralleled to incivility. When Papitou is not naked her clothing becomes a myriad of primitiveness and modernity. In the beginning of the film, set in Monte Pablo, Papitou is wearing a flapper girl skirt while simultaneously wearing exotic gold jewelry and a head scarf, probably to suggest North Africa or the West Indies, which contrasts with her modern hairstyle.³⁴ Papitou's wardrobe very confusingly presents her as both modern and primitive. Papitou's body, and by extension Baker's, is further rendered as a cross-road between the primitive and the modern when Papitou dresses herself in a Victorian dress, to ready herself for Paris, and yet she still wears her gold bangles and earrings: it almost appears as though Papitou is an illustration from *Le Tumulte Noir* come to life, a chaotic black body stuck in a stasis of culture and nature.³⁵

The setting, Monte Pablo, further exemplifies the blurring between modern and primitive that occurs throughout the film. The natives of Monte Pablo live in huts with grass roofs and wear grass skirts, which suggests Polynesian influence, but in the evening they dance the Charleston around a bonfire while musicians play guitar.³⁶ The Charleston was the modern dance of Paris and yet the inhabitants of Monte Pablo, miles away from France, seem to dance the evenings away with the Charleston.

³³Michael. "La Sirene des Tropiques (EYE 2012)". Filmed [1927]. YouTube, 51:43. Posted [January 15, 2013]:: https://youtu.be/C_d7qUUgnJ4?t=780

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Location and liminal space becomes important to the blurring of primitive and modern in *La Sirène de Tropiques*. The film is structured in a manner which juxtaposes Monte Pablo and Paris. The first location, of course is Monte Pablo and the film spends roughly 20 minutes focused on this location. The second location is Paris, the site of modernity, and the film spends roughly 20 minutes focusing on Papitou's Parisian adventure as a rising star. But in-between these two settings Papitou goes on her transatlantic voyage. The boat represents the liminal space between the primitive and the modern and Papitou's body, and therefore Baker's, becomes a crossroad of the primitive and the modern. The blurring of primitive and modern is exemplified in the scene where Papitou hides in the coal room, and unintentionally rolls around in coal thus darkening her skin, and then she hides in a flour bin, thus whitening her skin in a sort of reverse blackface.³⁷ This is a particularly comically moment in the film but as Phil Powrie says this "relatively conventional slapstick routine blurs the boundaries of skin color".³⁸ Baker's body is once again rendered as a simultaneous representation of the primitive and the modern, of nature and culture, of black and white.

Josephine Baker enjoyed an incredible career as a performer and she continually pushed the envelope of acceptability. The Parisians were amazed by her incredible black gyrating body which represented all of the colonies, indeed all of Africa, in performances such as *Danse Sauvage*. Baker utilized her vaudeville background as an "end-girl" to humorously subvert the racialized stereotypes but she also perpetuated them with her exotic performances as seen with

³⁷ Michael. "La Sirene des Tropiques (EYE 2012)". Filmed [1927]. YouTube, 51:43. Posted [January 15, 2013]: https://youtu.be/C_d7qUUgnJ4?t=1854

³⁸ Powrie and Rebillard, "Josephine Baker and Pierre Batcheff", 256.

her banana skirt dance. Her body captivated the minds of artists, such as Paul Colin, and she was often depicted as a black body that represented both the primitive and the modern. She was heavily marketed and successfully commodified through association with the modernity of cars due to her Bakerfix hair gel product advertisements. Baker's first film *La Sirène de Tropiques* also blurred her body as both primitive and modern and established her as a movie star as well as a dancer and singer. Josephine Baker cast her dark body over the city of light and created a shadow which encompassed all things primitive but also all things modern.

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