Bound to the Banana: Re-Evaluating the Discourse Surrounding Josephine Baker's "Banana Dance"

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"Mold yourself an image and set it outside the doorway. When he comes he will seize it and drag it away-thinking he has the real you. Then when he is gone you can say your say and sing your song."[1]

~Zora Neale Hurston, "You Don't Know Us Negroes"

Black dance is a long-held obsession within white culture. Long before Josephine Baker rose to stardom for her gyrations, white entertainers donned blackface to "Jump Jim Crow" and exaggerate what they thought were prime reflections of the Black race. Their performances were incredibly successful and required Black dancers to conduct careful strategies to survive and thrive within such racist minstrelsy. Yet rather than present an outright refusal of the dominant white patriarchy, Black performers flipped the script as to "who was dancing, who was observing, and during what historic juncture the dance was being assessed."[2] Dancers like Juba Lane and Aida Overton Walker undertook "a bricolage of influences and modifications,"[3] to create a dance of "dynamic suggestion [with] every posture [giving] the impression that the dancer will do much more."[4] For these Black entertainers, dance thus came to signify Black subcultural invention and it shifted audiences towards finishing the action the performer, not the viewer, suggested.[5] Akin to her predecessors, Josephine Baker adopted a wide variety of genres like "comic clowning and tap, to percussive traditional dance moves, to glamorous theatrical dance."[6] The style was unlike the Charleston or other Harlem-based social dances of her peers.

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[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays,* eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Genevieve West (New York: Amistad, 2022), 111.

[2] David Krasner, "Rewriting the Body: Aida Overton Walker and the Social Formation of Cakewalking," *Theatre Survey* 37, no. 2 (1996): 81.

[3] David Krasner, "The Real Thing," in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. Brundage W. Fitzhugh (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 114.

[4] Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings,* eds. Zora Neale Hurston and Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), 358.

[5] Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," 358.

[6] Felicia McCarren, "The Use-Value of 'Josephine Baker,'" in "Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight," ed. Kaiama Glover, special issue, *The Scholar & Feminist Online* Double Issue 6, nos. 1-2 (Fall 2007/Spring 2008): 3.

This dance had legs, drums, and most notably, a rear end.[7] In the following article, I intend to examine one of Baker's early performances at the Folies Bergère, the "Banana Dance," to evaluate the subversive modes Baker employed to garner cultural capital in the Western market. Through cultural reference, physical gesture, use of ecology, and masculine alterations to her appearance, I will track how Baker manipulated Western standards for Black bodies to perform a subtextual image that enabled her to attain financial and sociopolitical success.

Fascination with Black forms at the turn of twentieth-century France extended far beyond Baker's "Banana Dance" and other rhythmic performances. As part of the state's *"mission civilisatrice*," or "civilizing mission," French lawmakers believed they were the "representatives to uplift 'primitive' cultures that did not yet benefit" [8] from the long held democratic rights of French citizens. The country colonized several parts of Africa during this era, including Tunisia, Madagascar, and Morocco. Meanwhile in the arts, "the passion for all things black had its artistic roots in the period 'nègre' of 1907–9 when the cubist movement […drew from…] African art for the first time as 'objets d'art, rather than as curious objects [curios].'"[9] Georges Braque claimed, "The African masks opened a new horizon to me. They made it possible for me to make contact with instinctive things, with inhibited feeling that went against the false [Western] tradition which I hated."[10] Yet even though artists claimed that "blackness" was the key to a new European modernity and personal artistic renewal, the appreciation for Black culture was only skin deep. Petrine Archer-Straw, in *Negrophilia,* explains that Black people rarely existed within these circles. She writes, "[Black people] and their mystique are the invisible presence"[11] in French cultural texts and ephemera. "Their anonymity is fused with the fashion, style, and fetish ridden interiors,"[12] rather than existing in the space as willing, engaged participants.

After World War I however, a shift in political and social attitudes led l'arte nègre into a symbiotic relationship with "a stylized africanisme born out of colonialism."[13] Unlike the original anti-establishment nature of l'arte negre, the new "'African aesthetic' was a state-supported style that related more to the postwar rappel à l'ordre (call to order) and conformity."[14] French negrophilia thus now offered two readings within popular culture. One remained couched in the superficial qualities of Parisian vogue and its claims of liberation via Black forms. The

[7] Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 21.

[8] Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 5.

[9] Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 12 and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "L'Art nègre et le cubisme," *Présence Africaine* 3 (1948): 367

[10] Dora Vallier, "Braque la peinture et nous," *Cahiers d'art*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (1954): 14

[11] Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 19.

[12] Archer-Straw, 19.

[13] Archer-Straw, 65.

[14] Archer-Straw, 65-66.

other, meanwhile, used Blackness as a celebration of colonial triumph and the aggrandizement of "'liberté, égalite, fraternité.'"[15]

Black dance was a prime conduit for said cultural shifts. According to Europeans, "western culture had over-intellectualized dance and suppressed spontaneity," [16] over the last century. This transformed dance into a perfected, mechanical form that lacked the vivacity of human emotion and expression. The only way to reconnect, according to Alicja Sowinska, was to go "back to its historical roots; which meant distant, primitive spaces, spiritual and oriental adventures."[17] The adventures performed of course were aborted exhibitions of "traditional African dance," where "native" tribesman conducted primal warrior pageantries on stages across Parisian society, including the Folies Bergère.[18] By the 1920s, the famous cabaret music hall relied extensively on the primitivization of Black culture to display interplays of white and Black bodies where the white performer consistently conducted a dance of domination over their Black counterpart. The same year Baker's troupe La Revue Nègre arrived in Paris, one of the Folies Bergère's acts paired Benglia, a Senegalese national and popular performer, with an unnamed white female dancer who was fully nude save for a fig leaf covering her genitalia. During the dance, she sat splayed across "his knee and stretched her nude body all over his," while "eleven other coal-black Negroes and a like number of white women similarly undressed" performed throughout the rest of the show.[19]

This historical objectification of Black bodies by the Folies Bergère notably played into the performance repertoire Baker's troupe crafted for their opening night. Alongside an "anthology of visual clichés' about the life of African Americans in the United States," [20] [21] Baker and her dance partner performed "Danse Sauvage;" where Baker too splayed her body across the back of her partner Joe Alex. "Barely covered in a pink feather loincloth, doing a full split while hanging upside down,"[22] Baker and her Black counterpart leaned into the company's inherent reliance on Black stereotypes to then exploit established negrophilic narratives in

[15] Archer-Straw, 18.

[16] Alicja Sowinska, "Dialectics of the Banana Skirt: The Ambiguities of Josephine Baker's Self-Representation," *Michigan Feminist Studies* 05 (2006): 57.

[17] Sowinska, 57.

[18] In the Folies Bergére's production of *Les Zoulous* in 1878, the show featured a number where "native" Africans prepared for combat, conduct a warrior dance for expectant audiences. Promotional poster can be found in Petrine Archer-Straw's *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2000.)

[19] "Black-White Dances Common in Paris," *The Afro-American*, August 16, 1930, 9.

[20] Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra,* 20.

[21] The company of *La Revue Nègre*, opened at the Folies Bergère on October 2, 1925 and included the work of choreographer Louis Douglas, blues singer Maud de Forest, jazz musician Sidney Bechet, and pianist Claude Hopkins. Their setlist included numbers such as "Darkey Impressions," "Louisiana Camp Meeting," and "Mississippi Steam Boat Race."

[22] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Skin Deep: Josephine Baker and the Colonial Fetish." *Camera Obscura A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 23, no. 69 (2008): 44.

French circles. By re-employing miscegenation visuals presented by the venue, Baker began to manipulate her way into the appropriative psyche of French culture.

The best display of Baker's bodily significations began in 1926 when she started to perform as a singular object for European viewers to consume. As part of La Revue's show *La Folie du Jour*, Baker presented a skit commonly referred to as the "Danse des Bananas," or for future reference, the "Banana Dance." In the dance, Baker performed as a native girl named Fatou who lives in an undisclosed jungle location. The plot follows her discovery of a white explorer asleep on the banks of a river and her attempts to wake him with a series of bodily gyrations. Through bent knees and the extension of her buttocks to the sky, Baker transformed the initial steps of a Charleston into a "primitive" dance of seduction. Observers like British writer Nancy Cunard noted how Baker's "whirl-wind limbs speeding and stamping through the exactitudes of the fierce 'hot rhythm,'"[23] closely aligned with the gesticulations French countrymen perceived as "African." The "dancing could be compared to the purest in African motion,"[24] she argued. "[I]t was free, perfect and exact, by the way it centered admirably in the spare gold banana fronds round the dynamic hips."[25]

The "Banana Dance" debuted a quarter century into the emergence of French Modernism and easily played into the country's negrophilic craze. As described by French dance journalist, André Levinson, following his spectatorship of the event:

> In the short pas de deux of the savages, which came as the finale of the Revue Nègre, there was a wild splendor and magnificent animality. Certain of Miss Baker's poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entwined and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture. The plastic sense of a race of sculptors came to life and the frenzy of African Eros swept over the audience. It was no longer a grotesque dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that haunted Baudelaire. The dancer's personality had transcended the character of her dance.[26]

Viewed as an image embedded in France's mythos of African identity, Baker's frame inscribed itself into the culture's established norms of artistic expression. She was the Black Venus of their dreams. Her bare, angular form captured the African sculptures French artists worshipped; and it denied the traditional balletic conventions of Western art with its corpse-like rigidity and necessity of distanced absence.[27] Rooted to the ground and bent down in stabilized, statuesque

[23] Nancy Cunard ed., *Negro Anthology* (New York: Negro University Press, [1934] 1969), 329.

[24] Cunard, 329.

[25] Cunard, 329. For images of the "Banana Dance," please refer to Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996.)

[26] Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola, eds., *André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 74.

[27] Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute (Series) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48.

balance, Baker played one part of the body against the other in a simultaneous, but segmented motion.[28] A daring vision that titillated viewers with squirming thrusts and perpetual angularity, Baker was "an unforgettable female ebony statue" that lured her explorers away from their Post-War stupor and into a new realm of imperial reverie.[29] Her body and its movement thus brought forward a reality to what was once only an "African" imaginary.

Beyond Baker's continual employment of simplified "African" dance imagery, the setting and plot structure played their own influence over France's "ethnographic colonialist fantasy."[30] Since the 1860s, Africa existed between the boundary:

> [...] of the real and the unreal, at once the site of civilizing missions and scientific expeditions and the 'heart of darkness' where every expedition was like a personal journey into the unknown to confront one's own fears and phobias. Africa was the dark continent in both geographical and psychological terms, fueling fantasies for the driven, disillusioned and disaffected of European society who sought a place either to lose, to find or to expand oneself.[31]

The name Baker affixed to her role, Fatou, alluded to these deeper psychological attachments. Named after a character in French novelist Pierre Loti's second book *The Romance of a Spahi*, the original Fatou was a Black woman in sub-Saharan Africa who served as the love interest of a French colonial soldier stationed there. The greater novel explores the cultural differences between the two and the questionable futurity of their love outside of an exoticized setting. While the story fixedly remained within an imperialistic gaze, Baker's citation from this text demonstrated her knowledge of French literary circles and their colonial constructs. Through her choice to present Fatou on stage in living, breathing motion, Baker gained an even deeper ability to wrap audiences in a "citation about the European fantasy of savage femininity."[32] Furthermore, it encouraged viewers to believe that "they were white explorers voyaging to the edge of civilization, encountering the savage, incorporating it into themselves by making love with a savage woman."[33]

However, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, Baker knowingly employed references that held complicated and potentially critical portrayals of white obsession. This multi-level

[28] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996), 8.

[29] Janet Flanner, *Paris Was Yesterday, 1925-1939* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1973), xxi. For reference to figures comparing Baker's body to objects found in African art and French artistic circles during the Modernist era, please refer to James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.)

[30] Alicja Sowinska, "Dialectics of the Banana Skirt," 55.

[31] Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 30

[32] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Skin Deep," 73.

[33] Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 22.

dimensionality to her "Banana Dance" thus reflected two guiding notions within modernist culture that enabled Black artists like Baker to dance their own dance within these outwardly racist entertainments. The two devices, "the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery," offered Black people the opportunity to assume a minstrel-like mask to conceal the real human underneath or don a persona that "distinguishes rather than conceals."[34] The former provided a barrier and space of safety for Black people to interact with white folk. The latter allowed for a celebration of Black difference that "secure[d] territorial advantage" and heightened chances of survival.[35] Within either form, the key was to assume the very mask initially forced upon the Black body to inevitably destroy the colonial need to fetishize the other. In Baker's case, she "disputed the construct of an African American essence by overstating the effects of that assumed essence on the body's exterior."[36] Her exaggerated walk, animal-like movements, and reliance on bananas as costume exposed her supposed primitivity as an ongoing act proscribed by white viewership,[37] which made Baker's "Banana Dance" a "performed performance [...] that intended its affectation to be conspicuous."[38] Cast under this new light, the staged Africa at La Revue was now her own commodified spectacle, allowing her to "claim cultural capital in the climate of Anglo-American modernism and its aesthetic scramble for Africa."[39]

Baker's masking in her presentation of blackness also extended beyond literary reference and bodily movement. Baker commonly mugged for the camera as it were, crossing her eyes and pulling faces to draw attention away from her colonized body and toward the irony of her actions.[40] With such onset comic physiognomy, she portrayed her visage as an exaggerated

[34] Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker," in *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance*, eds. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Alison D. Goeller (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 54.

[35] Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15-17 and 49-51 as then summarized in Michael Borshuk's "An Intelligence of the Body," 50.

[36] Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body," 50.

[37] Many critical articles "were replete with animal metaphors for Baker's body. She was seen as a surprising animal with long legs and shining teeth, a tropical bird of paradise who was free, supple, and vigorous, and beautiful as a panther" or in other cases she "was also a monkey, whose long legs and arms made it seem quite likely that she spent her time jumping and swinging from branch to branch in some tropical forest." For more details regarding this phenomenon, see Jennifer Anne Boittin's *Colonial Metropolis*, page 6-7.

[38] Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body," 50.

[39] Louis Chude-Sokie, *The Last Darkey: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 177.

[40] Earlier in her career, Baker commonly employed similar comic gestures and expressions as part of her routines for Vaudeville troupes like the Jones Family Band and the Dixie Steppers. After joining Sissle and Blake's *Shuffle Along* as the road company mascot, her comic visage would be the reason she moved from the end of the chorus line, to star of their follow-up show, *Chocolate Dandies*. As found on page 910 of Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates' book, *Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes*, "She was beautiful but it was never her beauty that attracted your eyes. In those days her brown body was disguised by an ordinary chorus costume. She had a trick of letting her knees fold under her, eccentric-wise. And her eyes, just wild about… her eyes crossed. Nothing very beautiful about a cross-eyed coloured girl. Nothing very appealing. But it was the folding knees and the cross-eyes that helped bring back the choruses for those unforgettable encores."

caricature by employing techniques intended to draw laughter even when performing motions of gratuitous sexuality. This added sense of parody to her dance utilized a common trope used in African American performance where Black performers subverted "the dominant representation by moving away from 'reality' and 'authenticity' and toward the humorous and imaginative."[41] Black entertainers therefore continued to mask themselves in the same routines instilled by whites, but ridiculed the confines in which they were placed. Evidence of this includes performances like Williams and Walker's "Two Real Coons" and characters like Bob Cole's Willie Wayside. Within Baker's performance, her distorted facial expressions in combination with the "overwrought dramatizations of how blacks were believed to behave," thus provided a caricatured dance that bled into the nonsensical.[42] Baker leered, puffed up her cheeks, twisted, turned, and then ran "away on all fours, with stiff legs, her behind higher than her head."[43] Through this display white audiences obtained what they wanted; an animal-like, Black woman draped in bananas on all fours with her rear end on full display. However, the combination of degradation, sexualization, and personal ridicule imposed a challenge to "the veracity of primitivist conventions by pushing them into absurdity and exposing [the] essentially contrived nature" of racist stereotypes. With the conventions of a racialized hierarchy disrupted, Baker performed "not from the 'top down,'" but literally the "'bottom up.'"[44]

That said, there were Black detractors of Baker's parodic style. In Will Marion Cook's 1925 review of La Revue Nègre, he lambasted the show as a distorted representation of real Black culture, declaring that "the prostituting of Negro talent by encouraging imitation of all that is weak, low, and-vicious must stop.... From now on let's have the real thing."[45] But what was the real thing? While Cook craved the authenticity of Black experience in the theatre, his peers clung to the inauthentic:

> The chosen mode of black Manhattan was one of contrasting, shifting rhythms as a fractured but infinite series of improvisations never culminating in the denouement of unmasking.... Disguise was so necessary to the black performer that final unmasking, stasis, "telling it straight," ... became the ultimate taboo? ...Harlem's greatest natural resource, its birthright art of expressiveness, also constituted its most self-conscious and strategic defense. The black moderns were perhaps the supreme players in the masquerade that was 1920s Manhattan culture, players whose disguises were doubly necessary ones

[41] David Krasner, "'The Mirror Up To Nature:' Modernist Aesthetics and Racial Authenticity in African American Theatre, 1895-1900," *Theatre History Studies* 16 (June 1996): 30.

[42] Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body," 50.

[43] Hedwig Muller, "Parlez-Moi d'Amour: On the Tenth Anniversary of the Death of Josephine Baker," *Ballet International* (April 1985): 20-25. For a photographic reference, please refer to George Hoyningen-Huene's photograph for *Vanity Fair* in October 01, 1934. The image can be found through ArtStor.

[44] Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body," 50.

[45] Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra,* 80.

> that could not be, and were not intended to be, fully decoded by their white audiences and collaborators....[46]

As for Black entertainers, their own communities often encouraged them to act like refined aristocrats in the public sphere. This was not solely due to personal protection, but also "because as highly visible entertainers they represented 'the race' to white and black audiences alike."[47] Such sentiment found currency in instances like the 1900 New York Race Riot, when Ernest Hogan's performance at the New York Winter Garden was interrupted by a white mob calling for the capture of not only Hogan, but "'Williams and Walker and Cole and Johnson' the only individual names in which the crowd was familiar."[48]

Thus dressed in skins that were not their own, many Black Americans performed what Zora Neale Hurston later described as the act of developing a turtle shell. The shell served as an outer mold of Black "authenticity" for white Americans to seize upon that in no way represented the true identity that burrowed underneath.[49] In my eyes, I believe Baker constructed two turtle shells. The first was the provocative performance style discussed in the first half of this article. The second encircled itself around her head. Smooth, round, and simple on the outside, but complexly coiled underneath, Baker's Eton crop was part and parcel to her iconic image that made her famous during her early career.[50] The Eton crop was a severe departure from the coiffures of the past few decades, as well as other dominant 1920s styles such as the Dutch Boy or the Marcel wave. Slicked tightly to the head, the Eton crop was the shortest of all hairstyles in fashion and received its name from a haircut predominantly worn by adolescent boys at England's Eton College. Not a style first made for grown women, the Eton crop enabled Baker to perform another disruptive layer that refused the racist and sexist expectations of her audience. On one hand a hypersexualized version of colonized femininity and on the other a masculinized androgyny (through the slicked down haircut and phallic banana pieces),[51] Baker developed her

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[46] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 105-106.

[47] Rachel Anne Gillett, "Jazz Women, Gender Politics, and the Francophone Atlantic," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 110.

[48] "Ernest Hogan Regretted Writing Famous Coon Song," *The Afro-American*, August 16, 1930, 9.

[49] Zora Neale Hurston, *You Don't Know Us Negroes*, 107.

[50] For a photographic reference, please refer to George Hoyningen-Huene's photograph in *Vanity Fair* – issue dated October 1, 1934. The image can be found through ArtStor or on Condé Nast with the description "Portrait of American singer and dancer Josephine Baker with cross-eyed eyes."

[51] Beyond the inherent Freudian connotations associated with the banana, the fruit's suggestive power was an unspoken, running joke in the music-hall tradition. From comic skits of slipping on banana peels to Frank Silver and Irving Cohn's song "Yes We Have No Bananas," bananas were generally harmless in their outer appearance; more of a joke pertaining to a lack of male virility than an overabundance. Baker's banana was often described as "flaccid," innocuously swinging from side-to-side as she danced with musical abandon. Yet as argued by Alicja Sowinska, "There is other indication that the banana skirt, presumed merely witty and playful by some, might have been treated more seriously by Baker. Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase report that when Baker's manager and future husband (Pepito Abatino) put on the banana belt and parodied Baker's dance, she protested saying, 'Pepito, you should not

own "culture of dissemblance."[52] By providing the "appearance of openness and disclosure," Baker's act and costume actually tucked her inner self away from her oppressors.[53] With masculine features like the Eton crop and banana phalluses lining her waist, the accentuation of her feminine body through movement was shrouded by a veil of confusion for numerous audience members. Rather than crave the capture of Black flesh, many intelligentsias left the show stuck in the existential confines of their own racial categorizations. Pierre de Régnier, columnist for *Candide*, expressed his confliction quite clearly to his readers, "was she horrible, delicious? . . . Black or white . . . . Woman or [something else]."[54] Another spectator, German philosopher Theodor Lessing also commented that "[Baker] dances so primitively and so genderless that one doesn't know if one is watching a girl or a lovely boy."[55] No longer male nor female to white consumers, Baker obscured the boundary between sexes; thereby becoming a genderless entity that challenged Western desire with "their" own white male organ.

However, even with all her stratagems of subversive showmanship, most Black and white people who knew her work chose to make Baker into their own image. Baker's Black peers in America remained steadfast in their "commitment to uplifting the race" by campaigning "for moral authority and for a position of respectability from which to speak publicly."[56] This worked in stark contrast to Western Modernism's push to make Blackness marketable (i.e. minstrel and/or sexual.) In Black circles, Baker and her "Banana Dance" received extreme revisions in the media to remain within respectability politics. Baker became a more demure, pleasing outlook of imposed Black femininity where she wore ball gowns and was "pretty," "dainty," and "a relatively 'proper' designation of desirability."[57] *The Crisis* chose to champion her as a Black Cinderella that reached "the top of the ladder of Success" through hard work, a "joyous

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mock the tools of my work.'" This would suggest that although to most Baker's banana remained a dangling appendage of a harmlessly comic variety, the banana did not possess one singular meaning through her dance. Three photographs of Baker in her "Danse des Bananas" costume can be found in Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates' "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 903-34.

[52] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*. eds. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela Di Leonardo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 434.

[53] Hine, 434.

[54] Pierre de Régnier, "'Is It a Man? Is It a Woman?': La Revue nègre," *Candide*, November 12, 1925.

[55] Nancy Nenno, "Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 155.

[56] Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30 and Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), xviii.

[57] Charlene B. Regester, "The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star - Josephine Baker Racialized, Sexualized, and Politicized in the African-American Press, the Mainstream Press, and FBI Files," in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist*, eds. Mae G. Henderson and Charlene B. Regester (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017) 40 and 94.

personality," "wild grace," and "dusky beauty."[58] "And the beauty of it all is that this slender brown girl, who has become the most talked of person in Paris, has retained the simplicity of youth which is the secret of her charm."[59]

White society on the other hand, continued to conscript Baker's image into the portraiture of male eroticism. Paul Colin's famous lithographs of *Le Tumulte Noir* demonstrate this effect. The collection, otherwise known as *The Black Tumult*, was a "compilation of satirical renditions of dancers and Parisian celebrities, whom Colin often drew as black even if they were white."[60] Baker was a prime feature in the folio and was depicted on multiple occasions in autonomously compromising positions. One of the most famous images of Baker originated from this text and displayed her with back turned to the viewer, faceless, bare from the waist up, and only clothed in her famous banana skirt. In another, Baker's face is visible, but her bare breasts thrust forward to the assumed audience in the foreground. Her arms and legs bend in different angles and her left eye travels up left towards the sky along with a teasing smile. The pose and dress suggest Baker is mid-performance and yet, a notable addition of gray bars line the image vertically. "She appears either physically barred from it, and symbolically imprisoned [...] or lifted above it,"[61] writes Alicja Sowinska. It is "as if [Baker is] on display and fixed to always stay where she 'belongs.'"[62]

Baker was incredibly conscious of the exploitation she faced within these polarly separate audiences. As reported in later biographies, Baker claimed that "the intelligence of my body [is what] I exploited, and that is what has turned me into an international star."[63] Hence from her perspective, the "Banana Dance" always remained an intricately crafted interplay of Black and white imagery on a thematic, parodic, and physical level. It was an attempt to subvert not only colonialist-driven, racist performance but also a challenge to the perceptions of Black female individuality. In her mind "Baker's body, not her whole being,"[64] was what was for sale. Yet by resignifying historically ingrained tropes through parody, scholars of Baker today argue that:

> [...] it is precisely the dominant discursive order that controls and produces the available primary codes or signs of signification. The parodic performer must THEREFORE appropriate the dominant codes of signification, even when the aim is to re-signify meaning. THUS, when mocking, satirizing, parodying, or otherwise subverting and calling

[58] "Josephine Baker," *The Crisis* 34, no. 3 (May 1927): 86.

[59] "Josephine Baker," 86. This issue contains an image of Baker, dressed in a long dress with a tulle skirt. She poses for the camera with a demure, but still coy smile; hands placed carefully on top of one another atop the skirt.

[60] Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 22.

[61] Alicja Sowinska, "Dialectics of the Banana Skirt," 67.

[62] Sowinska, 67. For reference images, please refer to Paul Colin, Henry Louis Gates, and Karen C. C. *Dalton's Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: Paul Colin's Lithographs of Le Tumulte Noir in Paris, 1927* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1998).

[63] Bryan Hammond and Patrick O'Connor, *Josephine Baker* (London: Cape, 1988), 90.

[64] Alicja Sowinska, "Dialectics of the Banana Skirt," 63.

> into question the dominant and hegemonic signifying system, the employment (or re-deployment) of these available signs and codes unavoidably risks validating, if not indeed valorizing, the original system of signification. THUS, in translating black vernacular and diasporic performance into a rhetoric of parodized pastiche, Baker's performances inevitably risk reproducing gender and race cliches, caricatures, and stereotypes as they are produced by the dominant and hegemonic discourse. In a performance vocabulary based on repetition with a difference—that is, repeating the dominant structures of signification, but with an articulation of transgressive difference—the repetition runs the risk (depending on the reader, the reading position, and the scene of reading) of reinforcing dominant codes, while the difference often gets diminished or overshadowed [...] Consequently, [outside] readings often resist or overlook the intended performative re-signification, resulting in the perpetuation and circulation of signs and codes that essentialize, naturalize, and fix difference.[65]

Repetition with a difference runs risks. Black performers who don masks or rely on turtle shells might receive the power they need, but they may also remain fixedly stuck within the gaze of voyeurs. That is what scholars like Mae G. Henderson argue. She insists that "the rigidly-conventional society doomed [Baker] to always stay on the position of the outside looking in,"[66] whether that was in the community of her Black peers or the high societies of white elitism. No matter which populace Baker turned towards, she could never assume she could leave her "rightful erotic place set aside for black women in the popular imagination."[67]

I on the other hand want to suggest in this conclusion that the revolving discourse around Baker's "Banana Dance" should not be one of liberation or domestication. The focus should instead remain fixed on the more complexly interwoven reality that Baker refused the overwrought determinations of her invested audiences and instead found personal success within her own stratagems. Baker "managed to mold her image around the (African) primitive and the (American) modern,"[68] through racist stereotypes, ecological manipulation, sexual desire, humor, and masculinized aesthetics. She was a tricky, slippery image that leaned into what everyone wanted, but could never just be for one distinctive collectivity. For Baker, these opposing images are what kept her body "the 'always almost' object of the colonial fantasy."[69] And in return, she attained everything she wanted and let the audiences call her work whatever they wanted it to be. "In the magazines and newspapers of Berlin," Baker notes in her memoir, "they wrote that I was a figure of the contemporary German expressionismus, of German primitivsmus, etc....Why

[65] Mae G. Henderson, "Josephine Baker and La Revue Negre: From Ethnography to Performance," in *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist*, eds. Mae G. Henderson and Charlene B. Regester (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 166.

[66] Henderson, 166.

[67] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 75.

[68] Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 3.

[69] Boittin, 43.

not?"[70] "What does that mean anyways," she continues, "I was born in 1906, twentieth century. Alles für Josephine."[71]

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[70] Marcel Sauvage, *Les Mémoires de Joséphine Baker* (Paris: Éditions Kra, 1927), 99-100.
[71] Sauvage, 99-100. "Alles für Josephine" translates to "Everything for Josephine."

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