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## Dialectics of the Banana Skirt: The Ambiguities of Josephine Baker's Self-Representation

*Alicja Sowinska*

The archive of Josephine Baker's images is staggering. Hundreds of her photographs—dancing or frozen as in a reverie, with melancholic or comically crossed eyes, naked or glamorously clad—illustrate numerous books and writings, which portray, and attempt to explain, the celebrated African American expatriate in Paris. These photographs, paintings, and memorabilia are stored in museums and private collections; they are read and reread by performance and film scholars and those who are simply fascinated or intrigued by her countless personae. [1] Multiple binaries have been used to explain her, but I argue that Baker invites us to see her as positioned *within* the boundary line that separates these binaries. [2] I further ask what it means to be in-between, and how we are to make sense of a body that carries its spatiality marked on its body. In this paper, I offer a reading of Baker that concentrates on her infamous banana skirt as an important element of her dialectics, which brilliantly captures the contradictions and ambiguities of Josephine Baker's self-representations. [3]

Initially made of rubber, and rather playful in tone, the banana skirt gradually became glittering, then pointy, eventually turning into strategically-placed, menacing spikes that all-too-obviously invoked mental associations with male organs. Thus, she girded herself with “phalluses” catering to European sexual desires and fantasies of savage primitivism. By playing the “other” in the colonial fantasy, she teased white imagination and encouraged objectification of her body. However, it is arguable whether she reduced herself to a mere spectacle. When the curtain dropped, La Baker, as the French called her, “tried to be as civilized as possible.” [4] Her *en vogue* status dictated fashion and social

life trends in interwar Paris. By “combining tropes of civilization and savagery” and, thus, troubling the binary oppositions by which spectators tried to define her, she invites us to see her as playing with and in-between primitivist conventions and refinement. [5] Shaking her scantily-dressed behind on stage, Baker exploited European eroticisation of the black body only to deconstruct this self-constructed image on the Parisian streets.

Reading posters and photographs, I trace Baker’s banana skirt through its stages of development, from its invention in 1926 (in Paris) to its final performance in 1936 (in New York). I argue that the banana skirt was an embodiment of Baker’s contradictory character—engaged in constant dialectics between the savage and the civilized, the humorous and the glamorous, the seduction and the menace, childish naiveté and conscious self-creation, blackness and whiteness—all, mixed and soaked in sexual desire. Moreover, I read Baker’s persona with psychoanalysis as a helpful theoretical tool. I apply this theory for two reasons: first, because it attunes to Baker’s milieu, which was fascinated with Freud and accommodated his interpretations of human behavior; and second, because the subject—the phallic banana skirt—encourages me to use this still powerful and popular apparatus of analysis. However, acknowledging the limitations of the Freudian theory, I also inform my analysis with Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of it, contending that Baker’s mysterious ambivalence, as an embodiment of female fluidity that “resists all adequate definition,” [6] might be precisely what she would prefer to be understood as her consciously-created legacy.

### **“Coffee skin, ebony eyes” [7]—French fascination with Baker**

In order to understand Baker’s position in the French society, it is necessary to shed light on the peculiar atmosphere of early twentieth century Paris, where she moved, still as a teenager, in 1925. [8] The ultramodern, interwar France Baker “breezed” into, was fashionably influenced by negrophilia—literally understood as a “love for black culture”—which involved white craze for black entertainment and greatly impacted French art, from sculpture and painting to music. [9] Paradoxically, the avant-garde artists of Paris were adopting, appropriating, and commercializing black culture to advance their own ideas about modernity. [10] Therefore, certain contradictions and ambiguities were already planted in the cultural stage Baker entered.

What the French meant by “black culture” was actually African folk art introduced to them by the colonial experience. In reality, blackness of the body sufficed as a signifier of the exotic. Voices extolling blacks as “natural beings” abounded, with Fernand Devoire’s praise of Baker’s performances as perhaps the most representative: “Josephine Baker, our lives on the banks of the Seine were weary and depressing before you came along. In the eyes of Paris, you are the virgin forest. You bring to us a savage rejuvenation.” [11] She aroused similar responses in other European countries. Nancy Nenno writes about Josephine

Baker's reception in Berlin, "Baker's persona and her performances coincided with Berlin's own image as both highly elegant and exceedingly decadent." She also observes that Baker embodied "what jazz had come to represent to the German urbanite: the constellation of the 'ultramodern and ultraprimitive' in one body." [12] Thus, Nenno interprets German fascination with the rejuvenating quality of "primitive" Baker as possible to thrive because mediated through America, the most modern nation. Baker's blackness could become fascinating because her Americanness diffused the stigma of threatening savageness and primitivism.

Undoubtedly, reviews published after Josephine Baker's debut in *La Revue Nègre*, in 1925, most effectively introduce the reader to the atmosphere of interwar Paris. The majority of reviewers seemed to address colonial fantasies of white, French males of the era by peppering their articles with words such as "savage," "exotic," and "primitive," and, in their descriptions of Baker's performance, frequently resorting to animal terms—to some she resembled a monkey, to others a panther, a giraffe, or a snake. A writer for the newspaper *Candide* gushed, "This is no woman, no dancer. It's *something* as exotic and elusive as music, an embodiment of all the sounds we know" [13] (my emphasis). The word "something" resounded in poet e.e. cummings's description of Baker playing a native girl, Fatou, where she put on the banana skirt for the first time:

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 mysteriously  
unkillable *Something*, equally nonprimitive and  
uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is  
beyond arithmetic. [14]

Thus, Baker was popularly situated in a sort of netherworld, suspended between civilization and savagery, and between the human and the animal. Her performances did not allow for simple definitions, but called for conflicting vocabularies evoking a variety of mental associations and an odd mixture of ideas.

In the first extremely successful show featuring the banana skirt, Baker as Fatou—cummings's human-nonhuman creature—went down a tree like a monkey (with the monkey treat around her hips) to the rhythm of barely dressed "savage" men's drums, and entered into the life of a white explorer who had been sleeping underneath the tree. The scene played on an ethnographic colonialist fantasy where, as Baker's biographer Phyllis Rose describes, audiences of the Folies-Bergère were

reenacting Gauguin's escape from bourgeois morality, his nurturing plunge into color. They were white explorers voyaging to the edge of civilization, encountering the savage, incorporating it into themselves by making love with a savage woman. [15]

The French were excited by the endless possibilities of something exotic and mysterious, yet present and accessible. Baker's stage persona, like the myth of Gauguin, conjured "a narrative that mobilize[d] powerful psychological fantasies about difference and otherness, both sexual and racial." [16]

French response to black performers—and here, Josephine Baker in particular—revealed European conviction that the authenticity of the primitive was inscribed on the surface of the body. While in America, lighter skin was more desired and more readily accepted by the society; [17] in Europe, the darker color represented a socially constructed, "true" black spirit. Critics writing about Baker's shows often made references to French colonies and faraway places of which people knew little except for the black skin of their inhabitants. "The only black community they mostly failed to mention," observes Baker's other biographer, Ean Wood, "was the one from which the show had truly come, the one in America. Josephine to them was an African—it could be seen from the way she bent her knees and jutt[ed] out her bum." [18] Similarly, in her analysis of Baker's film *Zou Zou*, Kathryn Kalinak states:

Baker, stripped of any ethnic, racial, historical, or geographic particularity, is reduced to the archetypal savage. Her image is now available to be read as what Rony has called 'the stereotype of the ethnographic primitive': immutably and transhistorically exotic and savage, a spectacle of race. [19]

Thus, the fantasy about Baker reduced her to her black body, and she was fully aware of that. In her autobiography, Baker admitted that she was amused by the critics' rich prose; as Phyllis Rose has reported: "Primitive instinct? Madness of the flesh? Tumult of the senses? 'The white imagination sure is something,' she said, 'when it comes to blacks.' They thought she was from the jungle. She knew very well she was from St. Louis." [20]

Parisian audiences seemed not to care where Baker came from. They were tired of civilization "founded on the suppression of instincts" [21] and bought into the idea that society created neuroses by inhibiting the id, which Baker was able to transgress in such seductive ways. References to Freudian psychology were quite evident: "Josephine speaks to our unconscious," wrote art critic Pierre MacOrlan, "she turns upside down our way of seeing, displacing lines, calling to mind a primitive order." [22] Ironically, this was exactly Freud's point—women

would “come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding . . . influences.” [23] And display, Baker did—her seductive Charleston was undoubtedly a dance for the “uncivilized” rear end—knees bent, rear end protruding (the image endlessly exploited in posters and caricatures). Her moves stemmed from an African tradition, shaking various parts of the body to the rhythm of music in a segmented motion, and the music to which she danced also invoked links to African ancestors. [24] Spontaneous, she was seemingly able to let her body go unguarded by layers of self-consciousness and social restraint. Europeans felt that western culture had over-intellectualized dance and suppressed spontaneity, which turned dance into a perfect *form*, a mechanical exercise. It could be renewed only (and most perfectly) by going back to its historical roots; which meant distant, primitive spaces, spiritual and oriental adventures.

This trend brought a real fascination with black “butts.” [25] As Phyllis Rose convincingly comments,

One can hardly overemphasize the importance of her rear end. Baker herself declared that people had been hiding their asses too long. “The rear end exists. I see no reason to be ashamed of it. It’s true there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they’re good only for sitting on.” With Baker’s triumph, the erotic gaze of a nation moved downward: she had uncovered a new region for desire. [26]

Undoubtedly, Baker’s banana skirt was instrumental to this drift of the gaze. The remaining cultural inhibitions were conquered with an assistance of fashionable decadence and Freudian psychology. People were exploring “new” variations in sexuality and discovering new meanings in fetishism, homosexuality, and transvestism. In the mood of openness and experimentation, Baker’s appropriation of seductive femininity was juxtaposed with occasional visual cues that offered an almost postmodern play on the construction of gender and race. Nancy Nenno’s observation that Josephine Baker’s athletic body appealed to both sexes is reflected in critic Theodor Lessing’s comment: “She dances so primitively and so genderless that one doesn’t know if one is watching a girl or a lovely boy.” [27] Her skin color allowed white, male spectators to fantasize about the forbidden pleasure of miscegenation. Those fantasies abounded, sometimes to plain absurdity. For example, in 1931, Baker, who never even visited French colonies, was nominated Queen of the Colonial Exposition. The French, feeling oppressed by their own civilization and looking for renewal, ignored the facts in favor of fantasies, thus, regressing (as one might say if employing Freudian analysis) to their own unconscious and dreams.

Baker probably realized she existed in racial and cultural borderlands [28]—a black, American woman in white, colonial Paris. She also seemed to recognize that this positioning gave her the ability to see with what Fatimah Tobing Rony called the “third eye,” “the experience of viewing oneself as an object,. . . see[ing] the very process which creates the internal splitting” and “allow[ing] for the clarity of vision even as it marks the site of socially mediated self-alienation.” [29] If Baker indeed developed this critical vision, she can be recognized as not passively accepting the status quo, but consciously creating contradictions, ambiguities, and unsettling discrepancies that resisted one-dimensional readings and transgressed her social containment.

### **Let’s play!—Yellow bananas’ sweet beginnings**

If Freudian psychology perceived women in terms of “lack” (primarily—lack of the phallic organ [30]),—then Baker symbolically became “complete” by adorning herself with bananas symbolizing penises. In her early career music-hall performances, she wore a belt of plastic or rubber bananas that swung happily from her hips, causing people to laugh and inviting them to plunge into fun and excitement. From its debut in 1926, the skirt became the dominant iconic outfit with which La Baker would be identified to this day.

The invention of the banana skirt is a very hazily-reported fact, both by Baker in her multiple autobiographies, and by Baker’s numerous biographers. Different sources give credit to various people, with Baker providing at least two contradictory accounts—one claiming that she, herself, designed the outfit with the help of her friend (a Miss Crompton), and another, that the costume’s author was Jean Cocteau. Most often, however, she veils the truth entirely: “In this revue, they had the idea to dress me with a belt of bananas! Oh! How people ridiculed this idea! And how many drawings and caricatures came out of it. Only the devil, supposedly, could have invented such a thing.” [31] Using an impersonal “they” or the imaginary “devil,” she blurs agency and sustains mystery around the skirt’s invention.

Nevertheless, the most probable version is that Paul Colin, an artist who was also Baker’s lover, created the design while painting her poster for *La Revue Nègre*. [32] In his famous lithographs collection *Le Tumulte Noir*, Colin presented two very similar posters of Baker. The first shows her in green palm leaves around her hips, which probably refers to Baker’s earlier outfit—a skirt of feathers. This poster very closely resembles the second (and most famous), with yellow bananas. The drawing presents lithe and delicate figure of Baker, dressed solely in a banana sarong evocative of a ballerina skirt. She is portrayed in a very flattering way, refined and idealized, in contrast with other Colin’s posters, which have more crude tendencies.

Nonetheless, this short lineage bolsters the postulation that the idea of dancing in a belt of bananas was probably born in a man's mind—in a white, Parisian man's mind—whose concept of blacks was informed by the tradition of minstrel shows, as revealed in his poster advertising *La Revue Nègre*, with black entertainers' exaggerated Negroid features. Colin also appealed to what his countrymen expected to see—wild, primitive, and oversexed Africans—an inclination especially visible in his other drawing juxtaposing a dressed, although a little Africanized (because already affected by the black craze), French spectator with black chorus girls portrayed as monkeys. Although it is now impossible to tell which was first—the poster or the actual skirt—Colin's contribution to Baker's image is unquestionable. Perhaps Baker, by giving other sources of the costume's invention, tried to haze its origins and reclaim control over her representation.

The phalluses in the original banana girdle of Fatou's outfit appeared witty and good-natured. Made of plastic or rubber, they sometimes had an almost homemade look about them. It is important to remember that bananas were a part of a music-hall tradition that used them not only as a focal point of comedians' skits (simple banana-peels were often inciters of the most hilarious scenes of falls and slippages in early cinema), or as an indispensable accessory of the minstrel shows (with their atavistic affiliations), but also as a suggestive joke. [33] As such, they seemed to harmlessly tease male imagination and softly manipulate and negotiate the power of blackface minstrelsy. A number of Baker's biographers have claimed that bananas should not be interpreted as anything more than a joke; implying that any subversive readings would work against Baker's intentions. However, if we accept the version of bananas as a mere joke, a question arises: Why did she play with it—with numerous creative redesigns—for so long? Considering that repeated jokes cease to be entertaining (or humorous), the banana skirt must have been contemplated by both Baker and her audience as at least doubly charged, with valuable room for interpretation by anyone.

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 mock the tools of my work." [34] What kind of work did Baker see this tool perform? Why did she protest Abatino's little skit? This reprimand suggests that she saw the skirt not as a mere joke, but as a device that could reflect and play on socially-established racial and sexual norms and, as such, problematize erotic ways of looking at women, especially black women. Ultimately, the skirt could be seen as one of myriad apparatuses Baker used to help her "articulate meaningful social criticism." [35]

The skirt of elastic bananas dangled and shook as Baker's Fatou danced dynamically and mimed sex. As Patrick O'Connor vividly illustrated,

Made of rubber, they swung and vibrated to the frenzy of her dance. She pushed forward her stomach, swung her hips, twisted her arms and legs and pushed up her bottom, as she clenched her fists and motioned her arms like a runner, her feet remained still as she shook the fruit backwards and forwards until it moved in angles of 180 degrees. [36]

In this highly-seductive dance, bananas became a fetish that revealed the double attitude of the male audience—both denying and testifying to the psychological evidence of female castration. [37] However, the banana skirt might be read as empowering on both sides of the stage. Male spectators could safely fantasize about being an African explorer confronted with a native woman, and Baker, through her gender and race manipulations, could feel a degree of control over an audience that kept coming back for more.

Bananas were also an effective marketing tool in Baker's commodification. After her crushing success in *La Revue Nègre* at the Folies-Bergère, her fame swept over Europe and bananas appeared everywhere. Baker inspired an impressive range of creativity. Alice B. Toklas "minced" and "mixed" the product on display, "shook" and "blended" it, creating a pudding called *Custard Joséphine Baker!* Dolls dressed in banana skirts were sold across Europe by the thousands. Stickers publicizing Baker's movie, *Zou Zou*, were distributed among fruit vendors in Paris (to be placed on bananas they sold). Baker advised women to make moisturizers from bananas in order to fight wrinkles. She also advertised Le Bakerfix, a pomade to slick down hair, which brought her more revenue than all other endeavors (except for her stage appearances). [38] Interestingly, the advertisement presented Baker wearing a skirt of little tubes containing the hairdressing, as a nod to her notorious banana skirt. Similarly, *La Revue Nègre* poster presented her advertising the show in a belt of yellow tickets. Baker could have a sense of herself as a commodity—as Phyllis Rose wrote, and since she "recognized that however fervent her admirers were, in some way they all wanted to exploit her, . . . it seemed only fair that she should be able to exploit them in return." [39] Seen in this light, the banana skirt became a handy means of mutual exploitation.

### **"The Gold Rush"—Modernizing the skirt**

Having experienced almost unconditional acceptance and unending applause in Paris, Josephine Baker embarked on an artistic journey of fantasy and creativity on the theme of yellow, which led to multiple rebirths of the banana skirt. During her European tour in 1927, and subsequently in Uruguay, Chile, and

Argentina, where the infamous costume aroused such controversy that she had to give a private performance for a police committee before being permitted to wear it, [40] Baker presented the banana skirt in a harder, more spangled version. It was redesigned for a scene called “The Gold Rush.” The modernized, golden bananas became a flock of glittering, pointy phalluses suggesting that, although she did not have a phallus of her own, she was rather successful at collecting them as trophies. This suggestion paid homage to her alleged sexual potency. Someone in Berlin called her “a beast for sex,” [41] another claimed “she was looking for the perfect penis, and she looked hard.” [42] Stories of men lined in front of her room abounded, and purportedly no one could satiate her sexual appetite.

“Erect bananas” inscribed her as the site of white, heterosexual fantasies about black women that could not be dreamt with regard to white women. As bell hooks puts it:

Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant. [43]

The bananas, therefore, invoked not only Baker’s exoticized body, but also its accessibility, since the fruits could be easily stripped and “consumed.” This objectification of Baker’s black body has historical roots in French colonialism, with its fascination with black women and their supposedly-unbridled sexuality. This matter is further explained by Tracy Sharpley:

Under slavery, the black female became a commodity to be bought and sold as well as sexually exploited at the whim of the French. This sexual vulnerability translated into the creation of the fantasmatic, masculinist colonial discourse—a function of the gaze—that writes and integrates the black woman into a pre-existing system of knowledge and representation, that defines black women as hypersexual. [44]

It seems that Josephine Baker perfectly understood that her position in Parisian society depended on her willingness to “play the game” and she consciously conformed to the racial stereotypes when she created an image of herself as a savage femme fatale. At the same time, she would not allow her audience to feel too confident about this one-dimensional representation. Her banana skirt served as double entendre, and so did her off-stage spectacle. Although she confessed feeling like a “circus animal in a fancy dress,” [45] Baker gladly put on elegant clothes and delighted in compliments about her beauty. Complicit with her own

objectification, she exposed her body even more and intentionally participated in the creation of it as an ideological artifact. In Berlin, she posed for photographers more undressed than ever—frequently assuming animalistic poses catering to the Berliners’ desires to see her as a “wild and free jungle nudist.” [46]

The unconditional acclamation Baker received from the mostly white, and mostly masculine public could hardly be different. After all, Baker’s banana skirt was a highly-sexual costume—with naked legs and breasts, underscored by phallic shapes of bananas and spiced with suggestive aggression via tiny thorns and spikes. According to Mary Ann Doane, “sexuality is the realm where fear and desire find their most intimate connection, where notions of otherness and the exotic/erotic are often conflated.” [47] This explicit conflation was instrumental to Baker’s success. Although the skirt brought attention to the exotic—Baker’s body, not her whole being—thus reducing her to a spectacle, the sensuality of her constant movement denied fragmentation, bringing attention to the rest of the body. Dancing, Baker united action and objectification, fear and excitement, sending a message of resistance and agency while simultaneously challenging her audience.

As Baker’s photographs further reveal, she troubled her “primitive banana girl” image even more. Bananas on Baker’s hips are always accompanied by drooping jewelry on her neck—projecting a savage and a star persona in one image. At the same time, in those photographs Baker is often fixed in a submissive position, bent over or crouching (which could be read as an indication of heightened sexuality). The juxtaposition of primitive/sexual and refined elements in her costume reflects the concurrence of her onstage savageness and offstage glamour. Thus, she personifies many of the phenomena described in Freud’s and Fanon’s psychoanalytical studies: Freudian clash between the civilized and the primitive, Fanon’s breach between black and white [where the black becomes psychoanalyzable only through (and because of) the contact with whiteness], and both thinkers’ manifest conflict between man and woman, with eroticism as a way of establishing contact.

While psychoanalysis proves a useful tool for examination of Baker’s self-representations, one must be aware of its limitations, since, as Luce Irigaray argues, female sexuality, perceived in masculine parameters, “has eluded psycho-analysis.” [48] In her playfulness with the banana costume, and therefore with her own self-representations, Baker reflects Irigaray’s idea of an “other woman” who counters male representations of her(self). Just as the conceptual “other woman,” Baker escaped confinement of the patriarchal symbolic system and transgressed imposed social definitions. As Petrine Archer-Straw put it, “Josephine could be all things to everybody—it was the secret to her success.” [49] She successfully embodied multiple avenues of resistance that

occasionally helped her transgress psychoanalytical classifications and exceed patriarchal representations.

### **From bananas to tusks—The last performance**

In the mid-1930s, Baker pushed her stage persona to an even more risqué degree, and she did so in her native United States. At the time, American black revues routinely mitigated white anxieties about black entertainers by employing humor and reinforcing stereotypes that allowed white audiences to ridicule the black characters and not feel threatened by them. Baker performed in such shows. Afraid of being forced to sing “mammy songs,” she hesitated to return to the States for years. After the American public reproached her for this neglect, she decided to return, but, as her autobiographies show, she was determined to “show” Americans how far she had evolved and how sophisticated she had become.

In her New York performance, forbidden by decency regulations to appear bare-breasted, La Baker wore a rather peculiar bikini version of the earlier banana skirt. She did cover her breasts, but retaliated by embellishing them with sturdy, white, four-inch spikes. These same spikes also protruded from her rear and pubic regions. They were designed as tusks and meant to refer to the banana skirt; but, from a distance, not only did they not resemble the mockingly-phallic shapes of the previous versions, but looked ugly and aggressive. The effect, therefore, was rather menacing than wittily sexy. This costume was read by Karen Burns as “Baker’s revenge against the banana skirt’s skin-flick enactment of difference. Bent phalluses swaying on a band became a prickly suit of armor.” [50]

Thus, Baker again displayed herself as a sexual object that “holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire.” [51] However, she troubled the pleasure of looking with a symbolic threat—when the bananas turned aggressive, they acquired the potential to invoke the Freudian image of female castration, or, as Luce Irigaray might put it, of signifying female “lack,” and, with it, male anxiety. The male unconscious could escape and deny this anxiety by looking for a substitute fetish. Bananas could be fetishized, but so could Baker, who wore them. The threat was contained by her celebrity. Baker, by discomposing the pleasurable look with the aggressive message, tried to subvert her eroticized female body and trouble its partly self-inflicted fetishization.

In the Ziegfield Follies show, “armored” Baker danced the conga with a group of male performers, one by one knocking them over. This number was followed by a mix of waltzes, tangos, and ballet, saturated with silks and muslins, with a hint of interracial sex. The American public was shocked, albeit not because Baker was too “exotic” for them, but because she broke the social taboos against black performers and revealed an unthinkable ambivalence about her stage

persona. She refused to submit to the standards set for black entertainers in America and, for that, she was met “with a slap in the face, delivered with a force behind which lay all the strength of centuries of repression and prejudice. . . . It was the biggest professional disappointment of her life.” [52] The American public was not ready for Baker’s statements. Sophistication and refinement were not attributes they were seeking in a black performer. Certainly, she would have been much more successful had she performed in the original “primitive” banana skirt. What could be read as Baker’s experimental playfulness with her own image was *not* appreciated in America.

Disenchantment with her country reminded Baker of her unpleasant memories of poverty and rejection, from which she thought she had successfully escaped. She reacted by focusing her energy on her body and engaging in beautifying endeavors. “What a wonderful revenge for an ugly duckling,” she commented while working on her new, refined public image. [53] Uneasy and insecure because of her once unacceptably-dark skin for American show business, betrayed by her father (who left her before she had a chance to know him), rejected by a French suitor who would make love to her but never consider marriage, Josephine Baker experimented with strategies that would both protect her from emotional hurt and satisfy what she conveyed as thirst for love and unconditional approval. As Phyllis Rose concludes, “To show that she was in control, most especially when she was not, would turn out to be her deepest psychic necessity, and her favorite psychic maneuver was to anticipate a possible attack and claim it as her own initiative.” [54]

Occasionally, however, her strategies ended by betraying Baker, herself. Playing with European expectations of blackness eventually turned into playing to whiteness. When she put aside the exotic skirt and wore the glamorous dress, the reflection in the mirror did not seem to please her. She spent hours bleaching her skin. As dancer Henry Watkins remembers, “Joe wanted at any price to become white. She would fill her bathtub with goat’s milk, Eau de Javel (which is like Clorox), lemon, honey, and hot water, then plunge into it. In the process she would burn her pussy.” [55] She regularly rubbed her skin with lemon and powdered her whole body with the lightest face powder available on the market. Her desire to be white (reflected in her famous song “Si j’étais blanche!”/If only I was white!) became an obsession informed by what Fanon deemed the supposed “inferiority complex” of blacks. [56] Although the song itself might be read as yet another manipulation, some of Baker’s life affairs and representation tactics, provoke a reflection that whiteness was, indeed, her (inevitably unrealizable) wish.

Her white husbands provided a passport to the white world; but her notorious blonde wig, which was often interpreted as endorsing racist aesthetics, met with scorn from her deepest admirers. One of them, a famous French caricaturist, Sem, parodied her desire to be accepted by the French society in his wicked

cartoon portraying Baker bejeweled but with a monkey's tail. [57] It was one of the cruel reminders that, although her audiences appreciated La Baker's beauty and exotic rarity, she would never become "one of them;" and, in some fundamental way, she did not really "count." She was loved for being an exotic and entertaining companion, but she should never assume she could leave her "rightful erotic place set aside for black women in the popular imagination." [58] The rigidly-conventional society doomed her to always stay on the position of the outside looking in. Paul Colin's posters very explicitly situate her outside and separated from her audience. She appears either physically barred from it, and symbolically imprisoned (like in the poster presenting extremely dark skinned Baker behind bars), or lifted above it, as if on display and fixed to always stay where she "belongs" (like in the poster showing Baker dancing on top of a grand piano). However, as Fatimah Tobing Rony concludes, "If Baker was not able to escape her predicament, her awareness of it and the finesse and exuberant parody of her theatrical performance allowed her at times to transcend the gilded cage of her situation." [59] The ambivalence of her banana skirt might have constituted an apt apparatus for achieving that end.

## **Conclusion**

The banana skirt reflected and played on socially-established racial and sexual norms in a way that problematized the eroticized objectification of black women. Pictorial representations of Josephine Baker worked in the imaginative sphere of the French, patriarchal society, so often unaware of its own racism. [60] In this society, where woman was bound by the phallogocentric order as bearer, not maker of meaning, [61] she served as an object of male gazes, obsessions, and desires, as men played out their fantasies. The male unconscious structured the ways of looking, but Baker was capable of conscious recreation of the looked-at, and thus, she could channel the looking. Her body can be seen as a site of competing images, which allowed her to insert herself into an ideological inscription of gender and race as both fascinating and threatening. She polarized her image to protect it from the imposition of damaging representations of black femininity. This self-protection sometimes assumed comical dimensions, as in the case of her famous eye-crossing, which functioned

. . . like a magical gesture of self-defense in a specifically erotic arena. It wards off the relentlessly erotic gaze of whoever might have been looking at her as, mythically, one warding off vampires by making the sign of the cross. Afraid in some way of evoking undiluted sexual excitement, she thwarts the deeply provocative contact of eye with eye not just by averting her own eyes but by jamming them grotesquely up against one another. [62]

Creating her own image, Josephine Baker made choices that would always place her in the spotlight, forcing people deconstruct what they had just constructed. If she embodied a savage on stage, she would behave like a lady on the street; if men were dying for her as seductress, she would put on a man's suit and bend gender boundaries; if she was called a "black Venus," she would treat her head with a blonde wig. When the perception of her became too refined, she walked her pet leopard down the Champs-Élysées [63] or crossed her eyes and made faces, as if parodically commenting on her beauty and the conventions of culture that made her famous.

Her ambiguous self-representations became a form of resistance but, as Michael Borshuk argued, "she never attempted a mere reversal of damaging conventions; rather, her shows seemed to confirm stereotypes so they could tear them apart." [64] She once admitted, "It is the intelligence of my body that I exploited, and that is what has turned me into an international star." [65] Throughout her long career, Josephine Baker constantly forced her spectators into continual construction and deconstruction of her image. In the process, she fashioned very complicated dynamics that not only kept both her admirers and critics stimulated, but also vexed and mystified "reading" her. The banana skirt can be understood as one of Baker's masquerades, which seemed to be saying that racial and gender categorizations are, themselves, a façade that can be used to manipulate the audience in unexpected ways. Swiftly interchanging her masks of race, gender, and sexuality, Josephine Baker invites us to see her as the ultimate master of her performance.

## Notes

1. I was inspired to write this paper while working as an intern on the exhibition *Josephine Baker: Image and Icon*. The exhibition was organized in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Baker's birth by the Sheldon Art Galleries in St. Louis (April 28-August 26, 2006). I should like to thank the curator, Olivia Lahs-Gonzales, for this remarkable opportunity.
2. Similarly, Michael Borshuk argued that Baker consciously positioned herself within the discourse governed by white stereotypes in order to subvert them. See Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker" in: Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, Alison D. Goeller, eds., *Embodying Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2001).
3. I see the dialectic method as useful in this analysis, because it clearly reveals the play of contradictions Josephine Baker displayed in creating her stage persona. Interconnectedness of these contradictions and the changing character of her self-representations encourage seeing her as in "fluid movement."

4. Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine* (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1988), 55.
5. See Wendy Martin, “‘Remembering the Jungle’: Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody.” In: Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford University Press, 1995), 310-325.
6. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.
7. In these words Ernest Hemingway described his fascination with Josephine Baker. Later, he added she was “the most sensational woman anybody ever saw. Or ever will.” In: Bryan Hammond and Patrick O’Connor, *Josephine Baker* (London: Bulfinch Press, 1991), 44, ii.
8. Josephine Baker was born in 1906 in St. Louis, but she spent most of her life in Paris, where she died in 1975.
9. Painters such as Gauguin, Picasso, and Matisse, as well as sculptor Constantin Brancusi, especially reflected their admiration for African imagery in their art. But so did musicians, even classical composers, such as Debussy and Stravinsky. Nevertheless, the epitome of negrophilia in France was her fascination with jazz. For an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, see Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
10. *Ibid.*, 51.
11. Josephine, having the passage translated to her, turned the mirror back at Europe saying, “To me, Paris is the virgin forest.” Quoted by Ean Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story* (London: Sanctuary Publishing Ltd., 2000), 91.
12. Nancy Nenno, “Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin” in: Katharina von Ankum, ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 155.
13. Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 55.
14. Hammond and O’Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 41; my emphasis.
15. Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 22.

16. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native." *Art in America* (July 1989), p. 120.
17. Young Josephine Baker, as the darkest girl in the chorus, was often relegated to the furthest place in the chorus line or forced to heavily powder her face. Her dark skin also limited her chances for success on the American stage.
18. Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story*, 84.
19. Kathryn Kalinak, "Disciplining Josephine Baker: Gender, Race, and the Limits of Disciplinarity" in: James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer, eds., *Music and Cinema* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), p. 330. See also Debra B. Silverman, "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*: Untangling the Webs of Exoticism. *African American Review*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Winter 1993), 599-614.
20. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 81.
21. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 25.
22. Lynn Haney, *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1981), 67.
23. Thomas Parisi, *Civilization and Its Discontents: An Anthropology for the Future?* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 94.
24. Michael Borshuk has explored the importance of dance in understanding Baker in his article, "An Intelligence of the Body."
25. bell hooks very insightfully explores this phenomenon in her essay "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," which makes chapter 4 of hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 61-77.
26. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 24.
27. Nenno, "Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space," 155.
28. By "borderlands" I understand the cultural, psychological, and sexual borderlands as theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa. In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa states, "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory;" and later, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary." In: Gloria

Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 19 and 25.

29. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

30. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

31. Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993), 135.

32. Here I agree with Patrick O'Connor's observations about the origins of the skirt. See O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 57.

33. O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 41.

34. Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993), 173.

35. Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body," 47.

36. O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 41.

37. See Freud, "Fetishism," 218.

38. Baker and Chase, *Josephine*, 171.

39. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 87.

40. Hammond and O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 83.

41. Baker and Chase, *Josephine*, 133.

42. Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 87.

43. hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," 65-66.

44. Tracy Sharpley, "Through the White Male Gaze—Black Venus" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1994), quoted by Kalinak, 320.

45. Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 66.

46. Wood, *The Josephine Baker Story*, 111.

47. Mary Anne Doane, "Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema" in: *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 217.
48. Irigaray, *This Sex*, 196.
49. Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 133.
50. Karen Burns, "A House for Josephine Baker" in: Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai, eds., *Postcolonial Space(s)* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 60.
51. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in: Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 62.
52. Hammond and O'Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 103.
53. Donald Bogle, *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 51.
54. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 15.
55. Baker and Chase, *Josephine*, 137.
56. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 60.
57. Later, Paul Colin would take revenge on Sem and paint his own Sem-as-monkey poster published in his collection *Le Tumulte Noir*.
58. hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," 75.
59. Rony, *The Third Eye*, 203.
60. Although, as Dalton and Gates underscore, "compared to America, France was a color-blind land of tolerance." In: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Karen C.C. Dalton, Introduction to *Josephine Baker and La Revue Negre: Paul Colin's Lithographs of Le Tumulte Noir in Paris, 1927* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 4.
61. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 62.
62. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 109.

63. When Baker was parading on the streets with her leopard, Chiquita, “Parisians joked that it was impossible to tell which end of the leash held the wild animal” (Wood, 165).

64. Borshuk, “An Intelligence of the Body,” 43.

65. Hammond and O’Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 90.

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