

Josephine Baker: An Intelligent Body, An Erotic Soul, A Kinetic Mind
By Margo Jefferson

Here is the body of Josephine Baker: **one flawless unit of flesh, muscle, limb, bone and joint.**¹ Colette, a provincial turned Parisian like Josephine, and the great-great granddaughter of a quadroon, (which by the race laws of the United States would have made her a Negro writer), itemized and extolled her oval knees, the ankles that **“flower from the clear, beautiful, even-textured brown skin... the hard work of company rehearsals...the years and coaching, all of which had “perfected an elongated and discreet bone-structure and retained the admirable convexity of her thighs. Josephine’s shoulder-blades are unobtrusive, her shoulders light, she has the belly of a young girl with a high-placed navel...Her huge eyes, outlined in black and blue, gaze forth, her cheeks are flushed, the moist and dazzling sweetness of her teeth shows between dark and violet lips...”**

Wherever she was, wherever she went, Josephine was a foreign body; she never belonged fully to anybody or any body politic. And in a world where black culture was so often deemed a threat to, even a crime against Western civilization, Josephine Baker was the body of the offense.

Now, think of the soul as the body’s twin: its animating breath and spirit – *le gros-bon ange* at the crossroads of all civilizations. Think of Josephine as the Psyche who chose to be chosen by Eros. She was always envisioning a spectacular future: for herself first; for the whole world eventually.

“Originality is the modification of ideas,” and this woman never met an idea she couldn’t modify. **Civilization is the exchange of ideas between groups. While she lived and moved in the midst of a white civilization, everything that she touched was re-interpreted for her own use.**² She was a theater star who aroused the fantasies and anxieties of millions. She turned herself into a political visionary who longed to embody the hopes of millions.

Josephine Baker produced three autobiographies – just like Frederick Douglass. When she wrote a novel, she took Pauline Hopkins’ daring title, *Of One Blood*, one step beyond: she called it *My Blood In Your Veins*. **A great performer is an author who writes a book each night onstage.**³ Josephine Baker was a great performer. A great celebrity too, which meant she devised and revised words in every medium.

We’re here to speak of Josephine Baker in many tongues; to watch and listen for all the ways she uses body, voice, imagination; history, geography, culture to speak. **One needs a hundred**

¹ “one flawless unit of fact...”, William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

² Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Black Expression,” altered.

³ Willa Cather, *The World and The Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, altered

pairs of eyes to get ‘round this woman.⁴ Here are some glimpses. There are of course many more.

Great soloists never really perform alone. They always contain other traditions and impulses; allusions to an unseen bodies. We know so little about Josephine’s predecessors. Alice Whitman, “Queen of the Tappers,” who could Shim Sham Shimmy, **“mostly from the waist down,”** dimpled kneecaps quivering all the while. Ida Forsyne, with her Russian folk dance and her ragtime toe dance. (**“Go on, Ida, show ‘em!”** Bessie Smith shouted from the wings.) Ethel Williams, hurling her limbs into the Texas Tommy, and balling the jack while she circle danced.

Ma Rainey sang, **“All the boys in the neighborhood/They say your Black Bottom is really good.”** Ethel Waters sang, **“Now, it ain’t no Charleston, ain’t no Pigeon Wing/Nobody has to give you no lessons to shake that thing...”** Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter sang: **“Strut your stuff, You ain’t seen nothin like it/ Cake Walking Babies From Home.”**

Josephine Baker was the first great vernacular woman dancer to take these dances and give them permanent star status. Her home was far away, but there she was, in New York, Paris, Berlin, Buenos Aires: syncopating, demonstrating; cakewalking in pointe shoes and plumed tail feathers; swinging-step into a Paris dive to show off her black bottom her hoofing and her ballet girl chaine turns. You feel the pleasure of weight released in her Charleston; her legs follow a slight curve upwards – you can see the thigh muscles powering her – and her arms rotate through the air as if it were slightly resistant, slightly buoyant like water. Improvisation, composition, signature moves and the vamping – ready shtick that keeps an audience happy till you’re willing to give them something more.

She was born between two generations of great black women performers: Bessie Smith, Clara Smith and Ethel Waters on one side; Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Sarah Vaughan on the other. And don’t forget those elusive theater legends in black and white: Florence Mills and Adele Astaire. Mills caught the melancholy that shadowed Harlem merriment, (**“I’m a little blackbird looking for a bluebird”**); Astaire caught the hedonism of Nordic smart set niceties. Josephine found a use for both: she played the merry soubrette, the lyric ingenue, the top hat, white tie and tails dandy Listen to her voice as it develops, floating and skipping along on high notes, doll’s house thin and garish-bright at first, then morphing into a silk-light conduit for operetta ornament, a plush disuse of jazz intonations and inflections.

Sing and dance, Josephine. **Excite, incite,**⁵ pose and promenade. *She said:* **“It is the intelligence of my body that I have exploited.”** “Exploit” has the same root as “explicate,” meaning “to unfold.” She was notorious for exposing her body, minimally embellished with pearls, or bananas. “Exposed” has the same root as “expound,” meaning to set out, to place.

Her head, that brown egg of a head head was often the most heavily-costumed portion of her body: first there was the cap of hair and the art-deco forehead curl, later there was the high, thick, swinging ponytail and headdresses elaborate as palace gates. Explicate, unfold, expound; set out and place. All of this will be done with the map of Josephine’s body: it will become **“a mobile army of metaphors”**⁶ calling up Africa, the Caribbean, America, and Europe; playing on the borders between modernism and primitivism, between high and popular art, civilization

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, altered.

⁵ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, altered

⁶ Frederick Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”

and savagery. It will be a valuable, one-of-a-kind symbol of the global art traffic in black bodies and souls.

Josephine Baker was at the center of modernism's drive to colonize Negro creativity and to police Negro art. The intellectuals and journalists at the center of this drive reasoned it this way: there were resources a-plenty in this Negro stuff, but "**the nigger sculpture,**" the sounds of "**the nigger bands**"⁷ that found a way into the work of so many white artists were the crude material of art: the Negro didn't understand how to give it significant lasting form. And if, occasionally it looked as if a few Negroes had given the stuff significant lasting form, that was a happy accident. They didn't know they were doing it. When they made a conscious attempt to create serious art, they resorted to mimicry – naïve and grandiose mimicry. "**Too much 'art' and not enough Africa**"⁸ was a typical verdict. Artlessness was their only shot at art.

This aesthetic ideology ruled Josephine Baker's films. The French imagination had no interest in a character who was not a pure-in-heart primitive from a place that was a former colony. She made three movies, and each one took the story of her rise from obscurity to celebrity and wrapped it in a see-through layer of colonial fantasy. No St. Louis, no Harlem. No forbears, (though *Zouzou* harks back to Columbus's belief that he'd discovered India: her French guardian says she was born in Polynesia of Chinese-Indian parents). Josephine's character always starts out as a merry peasant or laundress. Then, through a set of accidents and the ploys of some canny Frenchman, she becomes the toast of Paris. In the end, she returns to happy tropical obscurity or languishes in the gilded cage of stardom. No film allowed Josephine to glorify her rise, her conquests, her role as a cultural buccaneer – as Mae West did over and over. These are Cinderella stories that end sadly-ever-after because this Cinderella can never scrub the dirt off her face. A white prince marries a white princess. Race royals must mate. French audiences had to be carefully taught that this superstar, hailing from a country more powerful than theirs, appearing in their most glamorous theaters, speaking their language, wearing their best clothes, collecting European lovers, was actually a permanent citizen of a land called "Their Basic Black Savagery." There, talent and craft are happy pre-conscious accidents. There, humor is always broad and often grotesque. There, sensuality is never far from the bestial.

Watch the scene in *Princess Tam-Tam*, where Josephine abandons herself to the call of the drums in a chic Parisian ballroom. **What is Africa to me?**⁹ When she dances it is the well-placed pelvic throb, legs apart, feet rooted, thigh muscles doing their work for all to see; the face – a series of quick-change masks, each signalling **ferocious abandon**.¹⁰ We watch the faces of the jaded French sophisticates: shock, embarrassment, disdain. We are being asked to do the impossible: to live inside those reactions and to vault pass them – for Josephine is a star, the creature of desire – to live out her virtuosic abandon and yet withhold some of our pleasure. I can't outwit this scene. It contains too many treacheries.

So let's turn away from that, and regard Josephine Baker as a New Negro and a New Woman. *The New Negro*: independent-thinking international, in the advance guard of the African diaspora, **scaling the racial mountain, expressing her individual dark-skinned self**

⁷ Clive Bell, *Since Cezanne*

⁸ Ashton Stevens

⁹ Countee Cullen, "Africa"

¹⁰ Hurston, *ibid*

without fear or shame,¹¹ inventing, new characteristics of Negro Expression every day. **Dynamic suggestion. Ferocious abandon. The rhythm of segments.**¹² **Tropic nonchalance.**¹³

The New Woman: determined to exercise her mind and her talents fully, to effect change in society; ready to **“experiment with herself, to capitalize her natural resources and get her money’s worth...to apply business methods to being young.”**¹⁴

And then there is the *New Negro Woman*, still compromised by, still compensating for (and compensation is a form of penance) sexually-defiled-beast-of-labor past: **“struck in the face daily by the contempt of the world about her; knowing that the ideals of beauty built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely.”**¹⁵

Josephine vaulted past being a lady. She made herself a global New Negro Woman – a woman of means, a woman of fashion and of appetites, artist and muse, most faithful to herself. Writing her books onstage night after night, collaborating with ghostwriters, improvising with reporters, to document her life and self.

You have been called prehuman, Miss Baker, a monkey, a leopard, a sign that man is reverting to the apes. **“People have done me the honor of comparing me to an animal.”**

Your masculine admirers are legion, Miss Baker. Who do you love? **“I love wives of gentlemen because it is frightening to think that without them I would be alone with all the men on earth.”**

How many years after emancipation did race-men and women bemoan the shame of the Negro woman, lament the caste restrictions of femininity (**A Negro woman cannot be a lady.**)¹⁶ She must continue to fight **“poverty, proscription and prejudice,”**¹⁷ alongside the Negro man, but in her own particular sphere she must labor to **uphold purity, honor chastity and rebut derision.**¹⁸

“Visiting the slave market in Boston one day in 1761, Mrs. John Wheatley was attracted by the modest demeanor and intelligent countenance of a delicate-looking black girl just from the slave ship. She was quite nude save for a piece of coarse carpet she had tied around her loins...”

What fascinates in this scene, (described by that wise woman of progressive uplift, Anna Julia Cooper) is the glimpse of the naked girl who would become Phyllis Wheatley, the avatar of propriety in Negro life and letters (And isn’t propriety always a form of dress)? Maybe there’s a touch of the artist there too, in that piece of carpet. It could have been a rag. But there she was, studying and deftly mimicking 18th century prosody; publishing, travelling to England, meeting George Washington. **We use what we’ve got to get what we want.**¹⁹ Josephine did the same.

¹¹ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” altered

¹² Hurston, *ibid*

¹³ Alain Locke, “Enter The New Negro”

¹⁴ Zelda Fitzgerald, “Eulogy on the Flapper”

¹⁵ Elsie McDonald, “The Task of Negro Womanhood”

¹⁶ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*

¹⁷ Frederick Douglass, *My Life and Times*

¹⁸ My variation on the “povety, chastity and derision,” theme in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*

¹⁹ Lyn Collins, “*Think (About It)*”, *altered*

She mimicked every performer she saw who had something worth mimicking. Then she ran it through **“the alembic of her genius.”**²⁰ She can make ugly beauty out of minstrel antics (the eyes roll, the mouth spreads in a half-moon demonchild grin; the feathered rump thrusts up decisively and out derisively. She can do Femme Glamour, Drag King top-hat-and-tails chic, showgirl élan.

She can even do modesty. **“Josephine naked will teach other performers the meaning of modesty,”** said Colette. Her body was her armor when she went naked.

It had been a tool of labor when she worked as a maid in St. Louis; it would remain a tool, an instrument to be labored over. But like so many black women who left domestic work for show business in those years, she learned to labor with her mind and soul, too. **“She could clown joy into you.”** That’s what Ethel Waters saw. **We don’t just labor to be beautiful.**²¹ We labor to produce – and to experience – joy.

Josephine Baker played the muse to great artists. That’s one of the duties of great women performers. The Le Corbusier designs for her chateau; the art of Covarrubias, Colin and Calder; the designs of Poiret and Balenciaga; the way Balanchine coded her body into his jazz ballet aesthetic. Just this year, Imani Winds, a classical quintet of African and Latino musicians (four of them women), has created a full-length piece about her called *“Josephine Baker: A Life of le Jazz Hot!”*

And she was her own muse. She made her life a spectacular travelling production; she found new roles and plotlines for herself (military spy, political activist, global mother); she knew leading men; she hired and fired supporting players. Look at her life and you’ll find a web of tropes and symbols. Here are a few of my favorites.

- Josephine’s childhood nickname was Tumpy, **“because I was as fat as Humpty Dumpty,”** she claimed. Who learned better than she the lesson Humpty Dumpty forced upon Alice: that words can mean whatever you want them to mean? Deeds, too. **“The question is: who is to be master?”**²²
- Josephine gladly fled America for Europe in 1925. When she returned in 1937 to star in *The Ziegfeld Follies*, one critic sniffily called her **“the most prominent Negress since Eliza in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”**²³ Well, her life *was* a series of flights. She fled toil, fitful maternal care, sexual bargains struck and marriages made too soon. In 1917, she had seen the burning houses of blacks as they fled the murderous white mobs of East St. Louis. Forever after she swore it was the not the houses she saw, but the people. **“I see them running, to get to the bridge,” she insisted. “I have been running ever since.”** Running toward safety, toward pleasure, toward, glory.
- For her first lead role on Broadway she played Topsy Anna in Sissle and Blake’s *The Chocolate Dandies*. She and Sissle gave Topsy a black face, white lips (from whence came the sounds of a muted saxophone). A mammy-made checked dress and frog-foot clown shoes. As Anna she displayed a smart, flapper bob, a gold lame gown with dyed-to-match shoes, and the prettily-angled leg and clasped hands of a hostess about to favor

²⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*

²¹ W.B. Yeats, “Adam’s Curse,” altered

²² Lewis Carroll, *Through The Looking-Glass*

²³ Percy Hammond, *The New York Herald Tribune*

her guests with a drawing-room ballad. Like Topsy she sang, danced and clowned. But she did not have to renounce her wicked ways for religion and missionary work – she kept and did both.

- Josephine got her break from Blacks who infiltrated the musical theater in 1921. But she got her start in from the blues women who came to power in 1920. She was taken up by the Queen of the Moaners, Clara Smith. She learned plenty about performing, and in her own way she learned the blues singer’s trick of revising shared material to suit herself. Clara sang *Freight Train Blues* with the lines, **“When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and cries/But when a man gets the blues he catches a freight train and rides.”** Josephine never sang the blues, but she found her own way to live with them. She found the will and the means to catch a train, plain, or transatlantic liner and ride.

How does it feel to spend a big chunk of your celebrated life feeling **“not black enough for the blacks and not white enough for the whites?”** How does it feel to be a problem?²⁴ Double consciousness is a triple burden for performers: how do they live except by seeing themselves through the eyes of their audience and manipulating what the audience sees at the same time? Ruling and subjecting yourself time after time.

Do people of color today still have dual personalities, one for whites, one disclosed **“only in the freemasonry of the race”**?²⁵ Josephine’s personality shifts were dictated by ego, circumstance, instinct, and conviction. I’d say she foreshadowed how we live here and now. We know, we declare vehemently that race is a construction. We also know that race is a construction site we’re not going to be leaving any time soon. There was Josephine with her negligent black mother and her missing, most-likely-white father; Josephine, mocked as **“chocolate”** and **“pinkie”**; Josephine, living in and living with so many languages all at once. What are we to do with her – *and our* – **“well, if it comes to that, hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilfull guests.”**²⁶

Our great artists and performers, are figures on road maps; they needn’t be role models. Like the rest of us, she had sustained damage. Yes, she straightened her hair so much that she burned her head bare; yes, she longed to marry a well-born, well-to do white man, and she never managed to; yes her vanity and touchiness could undercut her generosity. Like childhood, class, race, and gender are **“the fiery furnace in which we are all melted down to essentials and that essential shaped for good.”**²⁷

It’s excruciating to read about her *Ziegfeld Follies* experience of 1937. She was treated like a second-tier performer not a headliner and, except for a Balanchine number, she was given second-rate material. The reviewers gloated as they dismissed and belittled her. She was not supposed to act like an international star and a citizen of France, she was supposed to act like a lower-caste American Negro glad to be home again. She was furious, she was traumatized, she fought back. She struck out, too, and when that happened, it wasn’t just white people who felt

²⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

²⁵ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*

²⁶ Katherine Mansfield, *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*

²⁷ Katherine Anne Porter, *“Reflections on Willa Cather”*

the blows. She would not give interviews to black newspapers. She would speak only French at a Harlem party in her honor. If you were a black friend from the old days you might find yourself snubbed. (If you were a white journalist asking about the old days you might be informed that she was Spanish on her father's side and on her mother's half-Indian, "**half-colored.**") A small, but to me heartbreaking, note. One of the stories that buzzed through Harlem had Ethel Waters coming to pay La Bakair her "**professional respects**" and getting snubbed. But let me say this about Ethel Waters: between 1933 and 1936, she triumphed with parodies of Josephine in not one but two Broadway productions. She played the swell-headed *Hottentot Potentate*, courtesy of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz. She played Irving Berlin's little colored girl, lost in the wiles of Paris, "*longing to be lowdown,*" and confessing:

**I've become too damned refined
And at night I hate to go down
To that flat with fifty million Frenchman tagging behind
With Harlem on my mind.**

It's all the sadder because Josephine had learned so much from Waters. No one topped her genius for mercurial mimicry.

Her American experience led Josephine Baker to her role as a leading player in the theater of race struggle.

1943: Black U.S. Army troops in Morocco are denied the chance to fight and confined to the segregated Liberty service club. Baker wows them: she gives them entertainment, she gives them uplift, she promises to come back to the States when the war is won and join the fight against segregation.

1950: She comes back to the U.S. and promptly breaks the color bar at a swank Miami nightclub. She gives interviews to black newspapers; she plays black theaters. She does her own version of a civil rights prize fight, head to head with The Stork Club, with Walter Winchell and with the Harst Coporation. Called a crypto-Communist fellow-traveller; her FBI file also notes that: 1) she had said she hated the United States; 2) she would do anything to further her career, (surely a trait she shared with J. Edgar Hoover); and 3) she had, as a young woman in France, "**been promiscuous in her sexual relations with both men and women.**"

I'm tired of thinking of women artists like Baker as divas. We marvel at diva gifts; we ogle and patronize diva excess. But goddesses belong to myth, not history, and in their fits of rage and destruction they remind me more of early models for female hysterics than for female artists. No, the great we call divas, women like Baker, Waters, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, are conquerers and liberators.

Watch. Josephine Baker is being rewarded for her World War II service by General De Gaulle. (What a coup – acting like Harriet Tubman in her war spy days while looking like Mata Hari in her glory days). Watch. Josephine Baker is raising money for Castro and the Cuban Revolution. Watch: Baker is being thanked for her work in the Movement by Martin Luther King.

I think she played the wanton goddess most when she played Mother. Her body could not conceive children. But she wanted to to create a new race, so she did what gods and goddesses

do; she used the human material at hand. She found children in poor families and in orphanages; she took them and set out to mould them into a Rainbow Tribe, a universal family that would refute racism ... and embody “ma vie en toutes les couleurs.” Her rule was absolute: gods and goddesses set the terms for human survival. I am your destiny. You must take my love on faith. In return I will care for you. However I choose to act, you will honor, obey, and worship me.

Isn't it interesting that, having shown herself to many people, she began to speak for all people? Envisioned for so long, she chose to become a visionary. She said: **“Surely the day will come when color means nothing more than skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one's soul; when birthplaces have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood.”**

What delights me is that inside this oratory, with its slightly too-opulent grandeur, I hear a trouper working changes on familiar material and coming up with something fresh. Color is no longer the cursed mark of caste, it is a matter of individual palettes and natural aesthetic selection. Religion is not proscriptive doctrine; it is a form of self-expression, like art. The land of one's birth does not define one's social or political destiny. Destiny becomes a game of chance, guided by skill and talent. And finally we come to that well-worn rhetorical trio: love, brotherhood, and understanding. She doesn't start with love, as so many orators still do – she knows that love without understanding is careless, reckless love. She knows that understanding comes from unending hard work, and that without some infusion of love it can stall at anger and despair. As for brotherhood...well, like **“all men,”** its limits are glaringly clear: how nice that it comes last. Can any of us fully escape the language of our age? In that age, everyone knew that only women who'd already claimed male prerogatives dared claim the kind of lofty male language that pretended to be universal. She lived as though it were.

That's why I cherish her honorable, tactically brilliant appearance at the 1963 March on Washington.

She arrived wearing the uniform of the Free French Army and the big, implacably black sunglasses of the grandly-aging star.

She was visible and invisible.

She was beyond sexual judgment.

She was the only decorated war hero in sight.