

Unpeeling the banana dance: The quare fugitivity of Joséphine Baker

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*Do they really want to see
the nappy pussy underneath that sweats
and stinks and grinds beneath bananas,*

*turns to seaweed in the tub? What if
I let my hair go back, or dressed
more often as a man? [...]*

What would I be to my audience then?

Elizabeth Alexander,
“The Josephine Baker Museum”¹

Born in 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri, Josephine Baker (1906–75) burst onto the French entertainment scene in 1925 as a nineteen-year-old chorus girl. Within months, she had established herself as the rage of *tout Paris* (Parisian high society) and acquired an *accent aigu* for the second vowel of her name (Burt 49). The first star of the Parisian music-hall to dance, sing, and act topless, Joséphine had initially refused to bear her breasts, threatening to return to the United States rather than do so. Her decision to stay paid off in spectacular fashion. *Vogue* magazine called her “a living Aubrey Beardsley or Picasso,” while other admirers remained content to extol her as *la Perle Noire* (the Black Pearl) (Hammond and O'Connor 74). The European world was her oyster. She received cars, diamonds, and wild animals as gifts, in addition to an estimated 1,500 marriage proposals. By 1929 she had become a millionaire (Martin 313). For some, the road to success is paved with banana peels, but Baker never seems to have slipped.

Baker was an ingenious artist with feet firmly planted in the African American movement tradition. She was a businesswoman too, with her lacquered fingertips on the pulse of European colonial desire. Her decision to don a banana cache-sexe to execute her signature moves suggests the compromises that she made to survive in the public eye. The garment allowed her to command the attention of an entire continent by inviting audiences to unpeel—discover and penetrate—her. But the banana dance also constructed Baker as a French colonial subject and showed that she was able to parlay that persona into cinematic

roles. Nowhere is this more evident than in the musical *Zouzou* (1934), in which she played a former circus attraction and cabaret sensation.

In what follows, I take up Terri Simone Francis's recent call—in the exemplary *Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism* (2021)—to bring more sophisticated critical attention to Baker's filmic performances. Drawing from Black feminist and queer theory, I argue that the bisexual Baker was a queer (or “quare”) agent of her own self-fashioning. I first demonstrate that the gilded birdcage from which Baker sang in *Zouzou* and elsewhere was lined with ethnographic literature that contributed—however unwittingly—to the French colonial project in Africa. I then interpret *Zouzou* as both French imperial ideology and autobiography, paying particular attention to the cisheteronormative power relations embedded in its scenes of character doublings, visual reproductions, and intense intimacy between Baker and her White female co-star. I conclude that Baker unpeeled the conventions of cultural performance to enact a quare fugitivity akin to *marronage* and establish a sanctuary for herself in France.

CASHING IN ON THE *CACHE-SEXE*

The first time that Baker and her troupe performed for the management of the Opéra Music-Hall des Champs Élysées, the future site of *La Revue nègre*, they plunged investor Rolf de Maré into a pit of despair. He pronounced the preview “catastrophic” (Burt 57). The show was not only “noisy and inelegant,” the Harlem dancers and musicians “didn't fit [the management's] idea of what a ‘revue nègre’ should [be]” (Burt 57). The Opéra Music-Hall des Champs Élysées subsequently contracted an outside producer whose choreography and costumes transformed the African Americans into a tribe of “natives,” clad only in feathers around their waists and calves. On opening night, Baker sang three songs to general applause—by then she had over five years in musical theatre under her belt—but critics unanimously agreed that her *danses sauvages* carried the day. Among others, André Levinson reveled in her

“crazed body,” which “in the finale reaches the heights with farouche and superb bestiality” (Janet Flanner, quoted in Hammond and O'Connor 20).

Baker made her solo debut in *La Folie du Jour* at the Folies-Bergère the following year. *Folie* was set in a jungle dripping with vines and palm fronds. A white, pith-helmeted colonist falls asleep under a mosquito net and dreams up the native girl Fatou (Figure 1). Baker descended onto the stage by climbing down a tree head-first, colorful beads swinging from her throat. As musicians banged on drums, she began “laughing at everything...She danced, miming sex” (Rose 97). Fatou had no precedent in “savage” Africa; her calculated manufacture followed the logic of the simulacrum, defined by Jean Baudrillard (167) as “an operation to deter every real process by its operational double.” As Fatou, the wet dream of imperial anthropology, Baker wore her first set of bananas.

Bananas are not indigenous to Africa. They originated in southeast Asia; only the word “banana” appears to be West African, showing up in the travel chronicles of Garcia de Orta in 1563 (Warner). Not long after its arrival in Europe, the banana became synonymous with the tropics.² After the large-scale importation of bananas to the United States in the early twentieth century, vaudeville and Hollywood began to realize their comic potential. Baker's fruity tutu married slapstick to surrealism—and to the emerging social science of *ethnologie*. Bananas became her cache-sexe, or “pubic apron,” which by the 1920s had come to symbolize the loose morals and crude designs of “primitives” on the imperial fringes. In anthropological photographs, the cache-sexe played the same role as the strategically draped veil in *fin de siècle* (turn of the century) pornography. Just as photographing “veiling is an unveiling,” depicting genital coverings, in effect, uncovered the bodies of the colonized (Gavard-Perret 25). Ethnographers drew directly from pornographic European images of cisgender women to shoot colonial subjects.

Baker's sixteen jutting bananas bear a surprising resemblance to the ithyphallic sex-covers that came under intense scrutiny in “Les cache-sexes du Centre-Africain,” published by *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* in 1932. No doubt loath to mention the erotic postcards familiar

to his learned readership, Gaston Muraz opens his article with a reference to Venus de' Medici. Surprised that natives objected to his “violating gaze,” Muraz provides readers with a guided tour of the caches-sexes fabricated by “Noire[s] fétichiste[s].” Muraz is especially fascinated by cache-sexes for women that simulate phalluses, such as those of the Sara-M'Baye-Yamodo people. They shut the orifices of the body to evil spirits, Muraz marvels, both by covering the vulva of the wearer and by penetrating her anally. He (110) adds that this cache-sexe protects the virtue of the pre-pubescent wearer and thereafter serves to indicate the identity of her fiancé, whose simulated testicles she would attach to her “penis.”

How do Muraz's cache-sexes illuminate Baker's bananas? Muraz's constant references to his images force the reader to study his subjects' groins in meticulous detail; in twenty-one of the thirty-two pictures, the natives appear headless. As anthropologist Michel Leiris confessed in his autobiography, circuses, brothels, and ethnographic museums afforded the white man an unprecedented opportunity to “stare [his] fill at [the] nipples and navel” of African women, “which [he] had never been able to do with any other woman, save in a fragmentary and stealthy manner” (Torgovnick 111). Similarly, Baker's bananas labeled her as a circus act *cum* sex worker—baring her body for the price of admission—while reinforcing her naïvely authentic persona (Peiretti-Courtis 45; Francis 112). As Fatou, Baker furnished ethnography for the masses (Henderson 127).

Her bananas curved upward but they remained in a state of floppy semi-tumescence. Rising up comically, without threat of menace, her bananas cast the “inferior” races associated with them as incapable of overthrowing French rule. Crawling on all fours, Baker performed as both castrated cisgender man and colonized virago, putting to rest fears of native rebellion as reassuringly far-fetched, despite the precedent set by the Haitian Revolution of 1791. In imperial discourses that were inherently patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisgender-sexist, Anne McClintock (55) observes, “The white race was figured as the male of the species.” These discourses had long relied on stereotypes of African men as feminine and African women as masculine. Baker did not always read as “femme” or straight; sometimes reviewers wondered whether she was a man or a



FIGURE 1 Detail, tableau of Baker as ‘Fatou,’ pictured with unnamed co-stars, *Paris Plaisirs* no. 50, 1926; Photo, Walery via *BnF Gallica*. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

woman. She was less cisgender female than “non-trans,” in anthropologist Savannah Shange's usage of the term “non-trans” as “a racially appropriate alternative to ‘cisgender’” because it “center[s] transness as a site of epistemic privilege while also not fronting like non-trans Black women wield structural power” (53n.26).

Baker seduced her public by exploiting what one might dub carnal ignorance of the body “grind[ing] beneath bananas”—to invoke poet Elizabeth Alexander's formulation in my epigraph. Her stage shows titillatingly reproduced the asymmetrical power relations implicit in cispatriarchal norms of physical intimacy and colonial submission via the cache-sexe (Burns 59). The cache-sexe also drew attention to Baker's bottom. As biographer Phyllis Rose (quoted in hooks 358) observed, “One can hardly overemphasize the importance of her rear end.” Beginning in the eighteenth century, European elites routinely cited the shape of Black women's hindquarters to confirm master narratives of civilizational superiority. Baker never entirely escaped the anti-Black voyeurism of which the tragic case of the so-called “Hottentot Venus” Saartjie Baartman has been emblematic (Henderson 126; Mitchell 137). As Terri Simone Francis contends, “Without Saartjie Baartman, there could have been no Josephine Baker” (99).

Robin Mitchell argues that modern Frenchness has been defined precisely against historical Black women whose representations circulated widely in the nineteenth century. Mitchell writes, “This ongoing compulsion has continued well into the current century, with black women (from anywhere) such as Josephine Baker both acting as an exotic Other and highlighting the foreignness of any black body within the French body politic” (16). In the twentieth century, hegemonic French vernacular discourses coded Black women from the United States and African colonial subjects differently. Portrayals of the former were marked by caricatures of enslaved people and docile servants (such the “mammy”), while the latter were depicted as primitive, disorderly, and in desperate need of civilizing via French rule (Sharpley-Whiting 111).³ The press framed Baker's glamorous savagery as revivifying, offering “savage rejuvenation” to a generation whose men had been rendered impotent by “education, affluence, and leisure” or emasculated in World War I (Burt 57; Camiscioli 594; Gilbert 223; Martin 321).

Moya Bailey coined the term *misogynoir* in 2010 to describe the anti-Black misogyny that encourages prejudice and myriad forms of violence against Black women. Baker certainly suffered from misogynoirist “thingification” of her body as an object and from generalized stereotypes of Black women as more promiscuous and less deserving of safety and dignity than white women. Yet as Donald Bogle asserts, Baker “perhaps understood her legend—her image, her career, her audiences—better than any other diva. She was a showbiz personality to her bones” (44).⁴ Baker did not recoil from the perversities that sprung from what she termed “the white imagination” (Baker and Sauvage 71). In 1933, her publicity agent sent out a press release that advertised, “her favorite dishes are plover eggs and a cannibal sandwich (raw chopped meat with onions)”

(Martin 313). According to news stories that anticipated Marilyn Monroe's claim to wear only Chanel No. 5 to bed, Baker was said to sleep in the nude and rub herself nightly “with the juice of bananas” steeped in alcohol (Nenno 157). Such reports signaled her awareness of the off-stage part her audiences had scripted for her.

Since Baker knew that her *derrière* was no larger than most non-Black women's, she compensated by thrusting it proudly up and out in portrait sessions and performances. She understood that the French craving for exoticism could be fed by dances that originated in majority-Black “ghetto cosmopolitan” cities, if they were advertised as *danses sauvages* (Nashashibi 123). These included “a substantial repertory of moves, including the Charleston, Black Bottom, Mess Around, Shimmy, Tack Annie” and other twerk-like dances (Knaut 437). While critics fixated on “the devil in her body,” Baker borrowed some of her signature moves from the Holiness Pentecostal churches of East St. Louis (Rose 27). Her memory of congregants “slain in the spirit” and moved by the Holy Ghost to “jump up” and dance in a state reminiscent of trance possession directly influenced *La Revue nègre* (Rose 69).⁵ She also mimicked boxing stances similar to those of bantamweight champion “Panama” Al Brown, who enjoyed great popularity in France. In a potent illustration of the ways that Africanist anthropology was intertwined with Black performance, Brown's fights helped to raise funds for the mission during which Marcel Griaule first documented the Dogon of the Niger Bend (Burt 56).

ZOUZOU AS FRENCH IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY

Baker was voted Queen of the Colonial International Exhibition of 1931. In the previous year and for long after its close, Baker's shows contained music and instruments from French colonial possessions (Rose 147; Borshuk). In the 1930 show *Paris qui remue* (“Swinging Paris”), she appeared as both a French colonist's Vietnamese mistress and “a Martinique beauty” (Hammond and O'Connor 88). “J'ai deux amours,” in which Baker confesses her love for *Mon pays et Paris*, was part of the sketch entitled “Ounawa.” “It is,” Rose writes, “the song of an African girl in love with a French colonist. He invites her to return with him to Paris and she wants to go, but the people of her tribe won't allow this betrayal” (147). Later in her career, Baker made a habit of changing the last line to “*Mon pays c'est Paris*,” a pledge of allegiance that could draw rapturous applause from French crowds.

Nevertheless, her election as Queen of the Colonial International Exhibition ignited a storm of protest. Critics of her imminent coronation bristled at her U.S. citizenship; the status of French as her second language; her ignorance of African dialects; and the fact that her hair was indistinguishable from “any white flapper's” (Rose 148). Author and illustrator Jeanne Ramel-Cals caricatured Baker in a very bourgeois *chapeau* and, to drive home her critique

of the Exhibition's moral fraudulence, joked that vendors had tweaked the seasoning of a traditional Alsatian *choucroute* to flatter Baker's taste (Figure 2) (18). At that point, however, Baker had left behind the United States for good. While hers was not a "literal flight from slavery," her existence was characterized by fugitivity, in the sense that this "capacious category" has been applied to Black experience in the afterlife of enslavement by theorists such as Fred Moten, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Marquis Bey, and Neil Roberts (Feldman 10). As Tina Campt (quoted in Sojoyner 516) explains, "the concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant."

With this context in mind, we can better comprehend how and why Baker identified with the title character in the musical melodrama *Zouzou*. By 1934, Baker had starred in three silent pictures, but *Zouzou*, another "empire film or colonial film," was her first talkie (Sharpley-Whiting 4).⁶ When the movie begins, Zouzou and her brother Jean (played by movie star Jean Gabin) are being exhibited as circus sideshow "freaks," twins who look nothing alike, supposedly produced by a liaison between an Indian man and Chinese woman. Jean becomes a sailor, caring for Zouzou from afar, and Zouzou gets a job at a laundry adjacent to a music hall. When Jean returns from seafaring, he finds work as an electrician at the same music hall and moves in with Zouzou. While Jean treats Zouzou with platonic affection, she is in love with him. She introduces Jean to her coworker Claire (played by Yvette Lebon) and they embark on a romantic relationship. Convinced of Zouzou's star quality, Jean schemes to get the theater manager to watch her perform, but only after he is falsely accused of murder does Zouzou join the Folies, to raise the money to hire a defense lawyer. She goes on to save both Jean and the theater by replacing their leading lady, who has absconded with her lover to Brazil.



FIGURE 2 Baker by Ramel-Cals. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Zouzou is never not on stage; her "exotic" glamour captivates even the white youngster whom she baby-sits and her white fellow laundresses as they wash chorus girls' underclothes. Francis (133) contrasts Baker's films with her earlier theatrical performances: "Whereas Baker's live dance was said to present her as a phenomenon of movement and a spectacle of percussion, rhythm, and syncopation, film narratives tended to frame her as a medium of translation or, rather, as a figure in transition, between the imagined Other's culture and its role in the West." I concur with Francis for the most part; Baker's iconic bananas are absent and her oeuvre is effectively "laundered"—in the sense of being altered to become more acceptable—by the film's representation of it. Yet her ethnographically-informed dance repertoire had facilitated her on-screen identification with African and Black Caribbean women, and Baker did not pass up the opportunity to import signature moves from her theatrical revues into *Zouzou*. Without Fatou, there would have been no *Zouzou*.⁷

Jean and Zouzou replicate an idealized relationship between France and its peripheral colonies as it might have been imagined by French theater-goers. Laminated with signifiers of East and South Asianness as well as Africanity—she is called "créole"—Zouzou requires constant supervision from Jean. He "discovers" Zouzou, providing the initiative that elevates her from laundress to theatrical sensation. In *Zouzou*'s final scene, Baker performs the song "Haiti" suspended from a wire cage, clad in feathers and with a row of rings in each ear, a style worn by Dogon women in photographs that Griaule had published from his anthropological mission (Figures 3 and 4). Jean comes to stand for the metropolitan Empire, pushing her to capitalize on her natural resources and resorting to violence to defend her, yet declining to accept her as an appropriate "better half." As an electrician, he harnesses the energies of modernity—in a nod to *Paris qui remue*, whose grand finale had "celebrated electricity"—and of the Enlightenment writ large (Hammond and O'Connor 89). Even when the relationship of dependence is reversed—and Jean needs Zouzou's help—Zouzou cannot conceive of a post-Jean existence.

From its opening frames, *Zouzou* develops its ideological agenda in a series of twinings and replacements that underscore the numerous two-dimensional visual representations of Baker in mirrors, circus posters, placards, and cabaret announcements (Groo 19). Her name itself repeats, the echo of an echo—*Zouzou*. The "real" star of *Zouzou*'s cabaret is a parody of Mistinguett, a blonde rival of Baker's on the nightclub circuit and a bonafide movie star. *Paris qui remue* was sandwiched before and after shows featuring Mistinguett, prompting critics to compare her with Baker. A writer from *Liberté* opined, "[T]hey are twin stars. The one triumphs because of her extraordinary familiarity... Joséphine's success on the other hand is because she is so foreign: from the virgin forest or the sugar-cane plantations" (Roger Kemp, quoted in Hammond and O'Connor 89). Mistinguett refused to share dressing rooms with Baker and dismissed her as a "little negress" (Rose 144). As if in



FIGURE 3 Unnamed Dogon woman with multiple earrings.⁸



FIGURE 4 Baker as Zouzou, 1934. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 5 Screenshots of Jean, Zouzou, and Claire.

retaliation, *Zouzou's* Miss Barbara (a play on Mistinguett's billing as “la Miss”) throws tantrums, oversleeps, forgets her lyrics, and cannot carry a tune (*Bennetta* 134).

But Mistinguett is not *Zouzou's* closest doppelgänger. Jean finds his ideal of womanhood (and virginal motherhood) fulfilled in the immaculate figure of Claire. *Zouzou* introduces Claire to her brother to live vicariously through their romance, but also shares physical intimacies with her—a platinum blonde who resembles the American actress Jean Harlow—that are otherwise reserved for him (Figure 5). The camera direction places *Zouzou* and Claire in several identical shots (for example, in bed waking up), and their physiques conform to the svelte ideal increasingly visible in the 1920s–’30s. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posited, regarding what she identified as the homosocial erotic triangle in literature, “the bond that links [these] two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (21). But there is no real contest between Claire (who lives with her mother, secluded in a *blanchisserie*) and her body double (who attends to the father whose circus had profited from her spectacularization). Claire embodies all that *Zouzou* cannot be and have (Groo 30).

ZOUZOU AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Baker said when filming *Zouzou*, “Everything seems easy, because I feel the story very strongly. It all seems so real, so true, that I sometimes think it's my own life being played out on the sets” (Rose 163). This statement usually has been interpreted as referring to *Zouzou's* unrequited love for Jean. Behind the scenes, Baker had fought to permit *Zouzou* to marry him but, “despite her protests, [her] roles were circumscribed by the codes that forbade her access to White men as legitimate marriage partners” (Shohat and Stam 190). In *Zouzou* as in *The Siren of the Tropics* (1927) and *Princess Tam-Tam* (1935), she falls in love with white colonists but cannot marry them. Observing that a critic had praised her as a “*Vénus noire*,” she said, “It was true that everyone seemed to love me, but I had heard no [discussion] of marriage. Venus, yes. But the [*noire*] part didn't seem to help” (Burt 61).

How *noire* she was depended on the context. Baker had been born in a white women's hospital and her family assumed that her father was white (Baker and Chase 16–17). In most anti-Black and colorist spaces she had “skin privilege” but could not “pass”; light-skinned among her siblings, Baker “looked dark” to her second husband's family (Rose 50). In France, Baker's racial difference was judged in tandem with her sameness. She critiqued artificial tanning, indicting a culture that made a commodity of melanin in whites but maligned it in other races (Barlet 5). “Am I not already lighter than the girls in Paris when they return from Juan les Pins?” Baker once quipped (Hammond and O'Connor 91). For some, she was not Black enough. She did not hesitate to croon “Si j'étais blanche” in a blonde wig and one reviewer claimed that she “always seems to me to be playing up to what the public wants the negress to be” (Haskell, quoted in Burt 62).

While these factors are relevant, I propose that we queer our understanding of Baker's statement by turning our attention from Jean to Claire. She is not only Zouzou's perfect foil; she is the focus of her most extravagant displays of affection. Zouzou caresses Claire, holds her hands, and hugs her close (Figure 6). The homoerotic overtones to their interactions did not go unnoticed at the time of *Zouzou's* release, yet “a faint hint of Lesbianism was titillating” rather than off-putting (Hammond and O'Connor 93). However, there has been scant consideration of queer desire between Baker and her female movie co-stars. Baker was not only a LGBTQ icon and ally; she was bisexual. Rommi Smith contextualizes her queerness: “Several leading Black Jazz and blues women, from Ma Rainey to Big Mama Thornton, Nina Simone to Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday to Bessie Smith—were queer-*quare* women. They either had romantic relationships with other women or challenged gender binaries and, in some instances, did both” (212). Via lingering glances and caresses, *Zouzou* faithfully renders both Baker's attraction to women and her recognition that a woman could not have become her primary partner, without the relationship destroying her career.

E. Patrick Johnson coined the term “quare” in an expansive definition recalling Alice Walker's formulation of Womanism, locating quare within “the African American vernacular for queer,” racialized LGBTQ identities, and those who “act up” in solidarity with “struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class,

religious, etc.” It is in all these senses that we can regard Baker as “quare.” She continually condemned anti-Black institutions and the misogynoir that cast her as merely “a misfit—a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’” of white womanhood (Bhabha 75; Bailey). Baker had non-Black lovers as well as intimate relationships with a number of Black women, including blues singer Clara Smith, expatriate performer Bricktop (Ada Smith), and dancers Mildred Smallwood, Bessie Allison, and Evelyn “Little Shep” Sheppard. Central to her artistic vision was an interrogation of gender and sexuality as racialized for Black women in particular.

Alyah Baker writes, “In Baker, we are able to glimpse a Queer presence: a self-possessed, liberated Black Woman in motion” (44–45). K. Allison Hammer goes further, construing her cache-sexe as “one of the most *queer* multiple dildo harnesses in the history of Black women's performance,” asserting, “Baker embodied the phallic through a femme aesthetic.... In this reading, the belt becomes a multiple-dildo harness that covertly destabilizes white male hegemony and the phallogocentric economy” (166). My own interpretation of the bananas as a cache-sexe contradicts Hammer's interpretation, but I would amplify the acknowledgment of Baker as quare. Her gender-bending was embodied and discursive; she was quoted as saying, “I have pointed knees and the breasts of a seventeen-year-old boy. But...my eyes are beautiful and my body is intelligent” (Rose 140). Accordingly, Elizabeth Alexander portrays Baker as asking, “What if/ I let my hair go back, or dressed/ more often as a man?” Gender presentation and racial performance—symbolized by the act of letting (some) Black hair “go back” to a curly texture after straightening—were inseparable for Baker.

Throughout her career, Baker manipulated stereotypes to advance her fugitivity, neither eschewing nor capitulating to them. Anthea Kraut points out that Baker's bottom-heavy dances and funny faces “enabled her to ‘signify’ on minstrel formulas in the sense that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outlines in *The Signifying Monkey*: through a process of repetition and revision with a critical difference” (438).⁹ Francis emphasizes the ludic, improvisatory, and tactical nature of Baker's “signifying”: “Baker's cinematic prismatic functions less as a resistance strategy and more as a realistic survival tactic of play and experimentation that she tapped into, consciously or not, to present the self in a protective way as she navigates varied audiences” (124).



FIGURE 6 Screenshots of Zouzou and Claire.

Francis theorizes the “cinematic prismatic” as the “meta-element of commentary [Baker] brought to her films,” and the light Baker cast through the prism of *Zouzou* looks remarkably like a rainbow flag. The cisheteronormativity of *Zouzou* forbade Claire and Zouzou from pairing romantically, but the sexual tension between them signals Baker's attunement to the erotic pleasure of other women's embraces.

Turning to Baker off-stage and off-camera, we can appreciate her enactment of a “quare” fugitivity, a “refusal of the very premises that have historically negated the lived experience of Blackness as either pathological or exceptional to white supremacy” (Tina Campt quoted in Sojoyner 527). Baker was a civil rights activist, refusing to perform in segregated venues and filing lawsuits in the United States when she received discriminatory treatment at clubs, hotels, and restaurants. She denounced antisemitism and American as well as South African apartheid, which brought her to the attention of the Department of State in 1952 (Dudziak 543–570). Baker obtained French citizenship and received the *Medaille de la Résistance* for carrying secret documents across foreign borders in World War II. She also adopted a “Rainbow Tribe” of a dozen racially and ethnically diverse children and continued to have relationships with women. She subverted anti-Black and cisheteronormative expectations in modalities of quare *marronage* throughout her life.

Baker made her home, the Château des Milandes in Dordogne, her sanctuary for thirty years. It was akin to a *palenque* or *quilombo*, to name two types of maroon settlements established by self-liberated formerly-enslaved people in the colonial Caribbean and Latin America. Drawing on the vital work of trans and Black feminist theorists, Dora Silva Santana tells us, “Quilombo can be a psychological place of resistance...a place of joy and creative work that escapes from the imposed Eurocentric aesthetic and literary models to reconnect with Afro-diasporic rhythm and imaginary” (216). This is not to romanticize Baker's expatriation or insinuate that she existed beyond the reach of misogynoir. As Rinaldo Walcott puts it, “Flight is not freedom, and neither is subterfuge. Marronage is a temporal self-emancipation that must collude with its other—captivity” (107). In some cases, maroon settlements struck bargains with slaveholding regimes to turn self-liberated people in to authorities and maintain trade relationships, in exchange for territorial integrity. Analogously, while Baker always found a way to turn the French public's expectations to her own advantage, she was not empowered to repudiate them completely.

In 2021, Baker became the first Black woman to have her remains transferred into the French Panthéon's mausoleum of national heroes. Her relationship to France was far more complex than *Panthéonisation* might imply. I have argued here that the concept of fugitivity gives us a more accurate assessment of Baker's self-fashioning and subject-formation in relation to domination. It may also assist us in breaking out of the simplistic binaries that still govern perceptions of Baker in American culture. As

Ann Anlin Cheng notes, “The story of Baker has...been taken to represent either a tale of ongoing racial and gender prejudice or a fable of political triumph. Indeed, her public image has been structured almost exclusively on a rhetoric of paradox. She is the ‘most ethereal being’ and ‘the wild beast from the jungle,’ a groundbreaking performer and a shameful sellout” (42, italics in the original). On stage, Baker had unpeeled the conventions of cultural performance, revealing coloniality and the nascent field of anthropology to be among slavery's afterlives. In *Zouzou*, she expressed her non-cisheteronormative desires amid the limitations imposed on her sexual agency. Both her theatrical and cinematic performances have much to tell us about the “wayward life” that she lived unapologetically, as what Saidiya V. Hartman calls a “beautiful experiment” in freedom (7). In the quare fugitivity that was her “happily ever after,” Baker was neither savage nor queen. She was sovereign.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Body of Life* (Tia Chucha Press, 1996), 14.
- ² It even entered seventeenth-century theological debates “as a principal candidate for the identity of the forbidden fruit itself in the Garden of Eden” (Warner).
- ³ After “Plantation,” her second show at the Folies Bergère, Baker refused to play enslaved people.
- ⁴ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer that urged me to engage with Francis's phenomenal work and brought attention to this aspect of their argument.
- ⁵ Francis (111) writes of one of *Zouzou*'s promotional materials, “A piece titled ‘Josephine Baker as Seen by Josephine Baker’ is a list, or a kind of poem, that outlines the story of her life and life principles, such as ‘I do not drink. I do not smoke. I have a religion.’”
- ⁶ It numbered among “sixty-two empire films made in the 1930s...almost all of [which] refer to France's colonies in Africa” (Sharpley-Whiting 4).
- ⁷ Francis observes that, in *Zouzou*, “[Baker] moved in the narrow, if prismatic, confines of the ethnographic roles outlined by her predecessors” (118).
- ⁸ Marcel Griaule, *Méthode de l'ethnographie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 80.
- ⁹ I would like to acknowledge the influence here of interdisciplinary artist Cristal Sabbagh, whose dance performances—like the 2007 “Tedessa”—have brought home to me the tremendous complexity of Baker's approach to these materials. Thank you.

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