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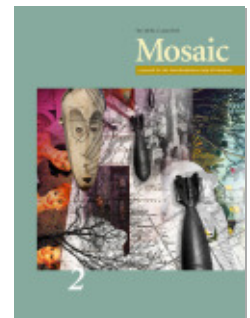
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Modernist Adolf Loos designed a house for Josephine Baker that she refused to build. This encounter, and a series of Baker “memoirs” authored by other people, form the basis for a reconsideration of her artistry as well as the role of primitivism and performance art in the development of modernism.

Hiding in Plain Sight: Problems of Modernist Self-Representation in the Encounter Between Adolf Loos and Josephine Baker

CHRISTINA SVENDSEN

Josephine Baker’s name has appeared on three autobiographies—none of which she wrote herself. They were authored by the men in her life: a journalist who helped discover her (the ironically named Marcel Sauvage); an early lover-turned-manager named Pepito Abatino; and her second husband, a fellow performer who shortened his name to “Jo” so that he would have the same nickname as hers. Most recently, a posthumous book mixing the genres of memoir and biography has been published by Jean-Claude Baker, a son she adopted when he was already an adult, who not only took her surname but also liked to use a shortened version of his Christian name that was a variant of Josephine’s own, like Jo. To differing degrees, all four of these “memoirs” openly fluctuate between third-person and first-person, with few clear indications of when the interviewer’s voice leaves off and the interviewee’s begins.

Baker’s contemporary, the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, once said, “I only master other people’s languages. My own does whatever it wants with me” (24).¹ Josephine Baker reverses his epigram: other people mastered her language, in so many ways. Yet

she too had an artistic response to this, like Kraus. Others “mastered” her language in autobiographies, onstage, or in celebrity journalism, but her skill was to create space for herself using the stereotypical terms available to her perversely as a mask to screen herself from view while remaining in full sight. Outside the official appearances scripted by others, Baker would say or do things that clashed with the image cultivated by her producers and fans—actions that aligned her with the avant-garde of the period and signaled that elements of her identity were unrepresentable in public discourse of the period. She necessarily allowed others to “master” the language she used and others used about her because legitimate, uncompromised terms of her own, to express the complicated identity of a mixed-race person, did not yet exist in the shared language. Yet she found ways to signal the presence of something withheld, something she herself was excluding from public discourse even in her most nakedly public performances. She ironized her character’s role in films like *Princesse Tam-Tam*, and deployed a series of successful—but evanescent—flamboyant actions that showed her participation in the development of modernist avant-gardes. A final attempt to construct a space outside of public discourse as a basis for private identity was her rejection of the dream house designed for her by the seminal modernist architect Adolf Loos and her adoption instead of a foreign patrimony, the French castle Les Milandes.

The encounter between Adolf Loos and Josephine Baker is a crucial, if surprising, one for understanding the early-twentieth-century tension between public and private personae and the role of performance in creating self-identity. By the end of their lives, both Loos and Baker were engaged with the difficulties of representing a public self while sheltering a private one. They did so through coordinated efforts interwoven inter- and contextually: clothing, writing, and the construction of houses to live in. Furthermore, both understood their acts of self-fashioning as the consequences of an encounter with others—by choice or by necessity. Already controversial celebrities in their own right, both were engaged in the process of artistic self-fashioning by the time they met one another. Yet the encounter seems to have clarified the process and altered the trajectory of each. Loos was a polemicist actively promoting his version of modernism through salon lectures, newspaper articles, and the construction of buildings where more and more people could participate in the performance of “modern living” in their daily lives. Baker, by contrast, was the star of scripted stage spectacles. Her truly creative modernist performance lies in the gap between the stereotypical roles she performed onstage, in the movies, or even on the pages of her “autobiographies,” and the dissonant impressions created by the way she improvised off the script, underlining the presence of an unarticulated, hidden self that exceeded racialized and sexualized stereotypes. Baker’s efforts are a precursor to

what Kimberley Benston has characterized as “autocritology” rather than autobiography. Practiced by a range of African-American writers from Toni Morrison to Henry Louis Gates, “this genre of black autocritology emerges [. . .] as an effort to dislocate the structures of representation and agency that ground identity politics in the very oppositional syntheses that it would undo” (286). Performance becomes a way to escape the inadequate existing terms. “The possibility of determinate agency is defended by the private’s abandoning the official scene of authority, leaving behind the empty echo of a semiotic cipher in favor of another performance, some other time, some other place” (286-87). Baker’s performances are an early enactment of this type of dislocation and deferral. Although she puts herself on display in nude dances and multiple “memoirs,” her off-stage actions underline her personal unavailability. Furthermore, her para-performance appearances show her to be a participant in the modernist avant-garde despite her marginalization as icon rather than actor.

Loos first saw Josephine Baker in 1925 as an audience member at the Théâtre Music-Hall on the Champs Élysées. This was Baker’s breakthrough debut with the *Revue Nègre*. Loos’s biographer, Burkhardt Rukschio, notes that Loos vied to win her attentions afterwards—a friendship that ironically left no trace in her own “memoirs.” By 1926, Loos was a regular at the cabaret Chez Joséphine, which she founded soon after her return to France to star at the Folies-Bergères. Later that year, Loos brought his fiancée, a young ballerina named Claire Beck, to Baker’s cabaret. Claire Beck-Loos includes an extensive account of the scene in a memoir she wrote about her husband. She reports that Loos loved to be on the dance floor and boasted of his ability to dance the Charleston, exclaiming: “I had an ideal teacher [*Lehrmeisterin*]: Josephine Baker!” (10).² That night, Loos greeted Josephine Baker and called her over to their table. She complained to him about the difficulty of renovating her Champs Élysées apartment to her taste, and the impossibility of adding a swimming pool. Loos expressed indignation that Baker would engage any architect other than himself to design her home.

Loos had a history of designing houses for artists like the Dadaist Tristan Tzara (still standing at 15, avenue Junot, in Montmartre). Soon after that night, on his own initiative, Loos drafted blueprints and constructed an elaborate model of what he called the *Maison Josephine Baker*. It seems to have been a spontaneous gesture of homage, inspired by his imaginative construction of her identity and needs. Although she left behind no account of her reaction when it was presented to her, Josephine Baker did not accept the design and the house was never built. This, however, did not prevent Loos from looking back in later years and calling the Josephine Baker House a masterpiece: “one of the best things I ever did” (Beck-Loos 11).

To understand this appraisal by Loos of his life-work, as well as the shadow it casts on Baker's role in the development of Viennese and Parisian modernism, it is necessary to examine the context that Baker entered when she stepped onto the stage with the *Revue Nègre*. She was acclaimed by crowds as well as by avant-garde modernists of the era. For Loos and other modernists, blackness was simultaneously a marker of extreme personal primitiveness and extreme modernity—a modernity not yet attained by whites. The construction of “blackness” was filled with unconscious contradictions. Blacks were considered childlike, juvenile versions of Europeans, yet at the same time essentially and biologically other. Furthermore, African and African-American blacks were the makers of striking new art that inspired European musicians, sculptors, painters, and writers, yet nonetheless were treated as mere objects of display within that modernist culture. Although public auctions of the slave trade had ended, both Paris and Vienna played host in those decades to semi-anthropological *zoos humains* and *Völkerschauen* that transplanted families and model villages from sub-Saharan Africa to the urban metropolis. Modern yet primitive, artists yet art-objects, individual black people were a fascinating paradox to contemporaries. Conveniently, the influence of African and African-American artists could remain unacknowledged because they fell outside of ideological definitions of artishood. They and their work could be exploited as raw materials to be transformed by modernists into art.

Loos visited an Ashanti village on display at the Kaiser's Jubilee Exhibition of 1898 in Vienna, publishing a series of articles on the Exhibition in the *Neue Freie Presse*, a major liberal newspaper. Although he did not comment extensively on the village itself, his close colleagues Karl Kraus and Peter Altenberg did, Altenberg in particular writing a collection of erotic semi-ethnographic impressionist prose poems titled *Ashantee*. Loos's outsider perspective on Vienna had been formed earlier, in a three-year trip to America undertaken at age 21, which he described as a “rite de passage” (Stewart 44). He had visited the 1893 Chicago World Fair—an event showcasing visual displays of history mythologized as a linear story of progress, with various cultures distributed at different points along the line. Loos maintained an ambivalent attitude to the commodification of national differences in the World Fair. He admired Chicago's and wrote boosterishly about Vienna's Kaiser Jubilee Exhibition, claiming: “with this dress rehearsal for the Paris Exhibition [of 1900], we can rest assured that we will come out of the competition with other nations with a respectable result” (42). Yet in 1903 he founded a journal called *Das Andere*, or *The Other*, bitingly subtitled: “a journal for the introduction of Western Culture to Austria.” Austria itself becomes the “other” for its intellectual émigré returned home.

This journal simultaneously performs an exhortatory celebration of modernity as progress while spoofing the earnest linear thinking of the World Fairs. Using his deflationary wit, Loos declares his country, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, central *and* backwards.

As a social critic, Loos was deeply concerned with the difficulties of achieving the freedom of modern personhood. For him, only modernized subjects are genuine individuals—though it is not clear to what extent one achieves a “modern” frame of mind and to what extent it is inherited. In many of his writings, the terms *primitive* and *modern* are not stable, but relative, changing valence each time a new cultural subject enters the picture. His journal’s German title, *Das Andere*, could be understood as “the alternative,” “the other thing,” or “the Other,” signaling the mobile irony of the journal’s critique as well as Loos’s ambivalent position in Viennese society, which he may be describing as foreign to himself—“otherizing” home. Loos calls his homeland primitive in relation to America and Britain, even while he carefully separates himself from peasants, “negroes,” Turks, or Papua New Guineans. His own identity is subject to shifts depending on whom he stands near. Ironically, Josephine Baker may have felt similarly, as an American off the boat from New York encouraged to perform at night as a “savage” dancer in jungle sets, yet invited into the circles of high fashion during the day. However, despite the flexibility of Loos’s critique and his willingness to find oriental backwardness in the heart of Europe, he is not able to connect with her point of view.

Loos claims that both modernity and primitivism are mental habits. In an article from *Das Andere* titled “Home,” addressed to a fashionable Viennese public, he equates making a home for oneself with defending oneself by sword. His language echoes the previous description of Baker as his teacher (*Lehrmeisterin*), but this time the content of the lesson is modern living. “Whoever wants to learn how to fence must take the rapier into his own hands. No one ever learned to fence by watching a fencing match. And whoever wants to create a home for himself must specify everything himself. Your home comes into being through you, and you come into being through your home. Moreover, whoever wants to fence needs a fencing teacher. The teacher must be able to do it. I want to be your dwelling-teacher [*Wohnungslehrer*]” (45).³ Creating a home for oneself is a stylized act of war according to Loos’s rhetoric, an act of self-defense that is also an act of mutual co-creation. Only the inhabitant can create a home for himself. Yet, bizarrely, in order to be a modern inhabitant, a person needs an intermediary first—Loos, the teacher.

In 1929, three years after seeing Josephine Baker perform with the *Revue Nègre*, Loos wrote down a lecture that he had previously performed in Vienna, publishing it

in a leading newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, as “Ornament and Crime.” It soon became a seminal modernist manifesto. Again, in certain moments of his essay, cultural progress is measured based on a person’s practices, not race. Modernity is a fragmented, diachronic space inhabited by individuals from vastly different time periods who can nonetheless cross paths with one another and even communicate—albeit with predictable misunderstandings and conflicts. Loos writes, “I might live in the year 1908, but my neighbor is living circa 1900 and that man over there lives in the year 1880. It’s a misfortune for a nation when the culture of its citizens is fragmented over such a broad span of time” (215). Disrupting his notion of “being modern” as a practice that people must learn, Loos argues that “the state of lacking modernity” is inscribed on the skin. This marking of primitivism on the body is apparently optional for European men (on whom tattoos would indicate degenerate criminal tendencies) but instinctive and universal among primitive people and women of all races. Loos’s repeated mention of ornamental “tattooing” seems to be a repression of the racial difference visible according to colonial ideologies in skin pigmentation. Non-Europeans are always already “decorated” in their brownness and blackness, to which they often add tattoos, whereas white men’s skin is a blank page, a tabula rasa. Only European men, therefore, can have agency in speeding up or slowing down the tempo of their cultural progress. Furthermore, “primitives” are not self-aware producers of art—not even in generating their ornamental tattoos. “The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boot, his oar, in short everything that he can reach. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate. [. . .] *The evolution of culture is coterminous with the disappearance of ornaments from objects of use*” (276, *emph. Loos’s*).

Modern art, architecture, and lifestyle are equated with control and blank, unreadable surfaces, whereas primitives are associated with instinctive, compulsive ornamentation. Furthermore, non-white people become interchangeable, like the “Papuan,” Loos’s model primitive. Loos reserved extra mockery for European degenerates, the *Schwarzalben*,⁴ or “black albinos,” who love ornament and rebel against the minimalist, functionalist aesthetic of modernity. Playing fast and loose with whether primitivism is biological or societal, but confirming the racial edge behind his critique, Loos writes that these *Schwarzalben* want “humanity to continue to crawl under the slavery of ornamentation” (278). Racial prejudice is meant to be the goad for individuals to become modern, and therefore to become free, in Loos’s scheme. Those who are unable to are intrinsically “black,” perhaps regardless of their actual skin colour. His commentary feeds into the widespread perception, alive well after the official end of the slave trade, that blacks were somehow things as well as people—

hybrids between the categories of person and object—even if they were no longer legally to be treated as another’s property. Disturbingly, this was a seductive idea for modernists in the 1920s, who were fascinated by the notion of people as machines. Baker’s medium of jazz, in particular, was associated with a hybridized, prosthetic aesthetic for many, including the architect Le Corbusier, who, in his essay on America, “When the Cathedrals Were White,” described jazz as “the melody of the soul joined with the rhythm of the machine” (158).

Loos frequently repeats the mantra “be modern” in *Das Andere* and in other lectures and articles, while Josephine Baker actually had the words “Sois moderne” inscribed over the entrance right below the sign for the nightclub she owned in Paris, Chez Joséphine (“At Josephine’s Home”). Yet to be modern was a struggle, involving sacrifices. Blackness marks the threat attached to becoming modern: the risk of losing one’s autonomy. Unornamented modern individuals in the culture industry bore a resemblance to cogs in factories—their outer grooves were uniform. Even objects became standardized, decoupled from history and craftsmanship. Loos perceives the animation of non-mechanically reproduced objects as a threat. In his language, ornament takes on a life of its own, a criminal life. Using the example of objects such as a wardrobe nicknamed “The Enchanted Princess” after its carvings, he writes that “Ornament is not only made by criminals, but it itself commits a crime, in that it damages people’s health, it damages the national economy, and it thereby damages a country’s cultural development” (281). His prose ascribes agency to a class of supposedly treacherous objects while simultaneously subtracting voice and agency from people whose status is called into question. “Herd-people must differentiate themselves through different colors, but the modern human needs his clothing as a mask. His individuality is so monstrously strong that it can no longer be expressed in pieces of clothing. [...] The modern man uses the ornaments of earlier and foreign cultures as he sees best. His own powers of invention are focused on other things” (288).

This logic of the “monstrous” modern individual who can appropriate “earlier and foreign cultures as he sees best” is an explicit admission of what anthropologist James Clifford calls Western culture’s “taste for appropriating otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image” (192). While this dynamic has been more widely acknowledged in the case of art that genuinely comes from outside European culture, such as Polynesian carvings or the African masks admired by Picasso, Breton, and others, it has not been fully elucidated in the case of living “ornaments” who come from within Western culture, such as Sidney Bechet (who played at one time for Baker’s performances), Langston Hughes (busboy in a Montmartre jazz club), or Baker herself. It is still common to see Baker as raw material for the art of others,

although now these statements are no longer admiring comments on her exotic visual appeal, but rather condemnations of audiences for their successful commodification of Baker as an object of desire consumed, night after night, in keeping with Western culture's gourmand "taste."

A recent critic, Terri Francis, offers a trenchant version of this critical reaction. "In the banana dance," Francis writes that "she's meant to be a fantastical creature, a bunch of bananas animated as a beautiful dancing girl, transformed by colonialist fantasy [. . .] Like the bananas, Baker had become a transnational commodity" (837). Francis's critique is not wrong yet oddly continuous with contemporary reviews of Baker in the French press treating her as a sexy object easily transported back and forth between the stage scenery of savage jungles and Southern cotton plantations. Though well-intentioned, this criticism is incomplete. Eliding the multivalence of Baker's performances, it reduces them to a consumer spectacle and fails to account for their ongoing influence on cultural life. Josephine Baker was a performance artist in her own right, exercising her creativity at some points and not at others, depending on the limited cultural terms available to her. bell hooks makes a crucial distinction that forms one of my premises: "Thinking about the history of African-American engagement with performance-as-art, it is useful to distinguish between performance that is used to manipulate in the interests of survival (the notion of wearing a mask), and performance as ritual play (as art) [. . .] One may engage in strategic performances in the interests of survival, employing the same skills one uses to perform in the interest of ritual play" (210). Baker does not need clothing for a mask when she is on stage; her performance itself is at times a complicit "mask," yet at other times a dissonant disruption of and "resistance" to racist stereotypes (211).

Leaving behind segregated American society and encountering Paris seems to have freed Baker from the conventional dancing styles of other African-Americans who toured France, such as Florence Mills and Edith Wilson. It allowed her to develop her own persona. Her Parisian managers were the first to convince Baker to stop powdering her face whiter, as was the norm for her in America, and to dance nude for the first performances of the *Revue Nègre* in 1925. However, Baker herself took her performance a step further, making it a spectacle that no one could quite recognize at the time—one that burst the pre-existing vocabulary of dance, on- and off-stage. Many people have already felt that Baker's performances qualified as avant-garde experiences for audiences, or for certain audience members, without wanting to claim that Baker herself created these effects or turned her dancing into actual art. Proving the contrary is difficult at a remove of time, since, as bell hooks points out, the difference between

commercial kitsch and critical art often amounts not to any difference in technique or presentation, but rather the “performative standpoint,” which “alters both the nature and the impact of the performance” (211). A further difficulty is the performance’s ephemerality. Unlike Baker’s film appearances, which were more heavily scripted and edited afterwards by cinematographers, her live performances were often more surprising to audiences and contained more power to disrupt and arrest. Yet they are not available for analysis. As the critic Peggy Phelan writes, “Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies. In performance art spectatorship there is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in. Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control” (148). Without a physical object as “product,” the particularity of Baker’s performances disappears from the historical record, even as it may sink into spectators’ unconscious.

Despite the difficulty of reconstructing the effect of Baker’s live performances, it is important to try. One crucial piece of evidence is a newspaper review of her *Revue Nègre* debut:

C’est alors qu’entre en scène, très vite, un personnage étrange, qui marche les genoux pliés, vêtu d’un caleçon en guenilles, et qui tient du kangourou boxeur, du sen-sen gum et du coureur cycliste.

Joséphine Baker.

Est-ce un homme? Est-ce une femme? Ses lèvres sont peintes en noir, sa peau est couleur de banane, ses cheveux déjà courts, sont collés sur sa tête comme si elle était coiffée de caviar, sa voix est suraiguë, elle est agitée d’un perpétuel tremblement, son corps se tortille comme celui d’un serpent ou plus exactement il semble être un saxophone en mouvement et les sons de l’orchestre ont l’air de sortir d’elle-même; elle est grimaçante et contusionnée, elle louche, elle gonfle ses joues, se désarticule, fait le grand écart et, finalement, part à quatre pattes, avec les jambes raides et le derrière plus haut que la tête, comme une girafe en bas âge.

Est-elle horrible, est-elle ravissante, est-elle nègre, est-elle blanche, a-t-elle des cheveux ou a-t-elle le crâne peint en noir, personne ne le sait. On n’a pas le temps de savoir. Elle revient comme elle s’en va, vite comme un air de one-step, ce n’est pas une femme, ce n’est pas une danseuse, c’est quelque chose d’extravagant et de fugitif comme la musique, l’ectoplasme si l’on peut dire, de tous les sons qu’on entend. (qtd. in Sauvage 20-23)

In this account, Baker’s performance goes well beyond primitivist stereotypes to break down the very criteria of dance performance. She may walk on all fours with her derriere in the air “like a young giraffe” and box like a kangaroo, but the same stiffness

that makes her resemble the kangaroo also makes her resemble a racing female cyclist, a fashionable, mobile symbol of ultra-modernity. She is either androgynous, or else so new as to be completely unrecognizable. Her ability to “disarticulate” her body denaturalizes it. Furthermore, her body resembles a snake or a saxophone; her grimacing, distorted body seems to produce the very sound to which she dances. Even the syntax of the newspaper review becomes contorted in a reflection of Baker’s performance, as more and more unresolved questions pile up in a single, overflowing sentence at the beginning of the last paragraph. By the end of the description, she has been literally disembodied into amorphous “ectoplasm.” Her performance takes her beyond the concepts of “negro,” “white,” “woman,” or even “dancer,” in the reviewer’s words. She is “extravagant” and “fugitive,” echoing Baudelaire’s definition of modern beauty as a mixture of the eternal and the fleeting. The comparison of Baker’s hair to “caviar” and her body to “ectoplasm” suggests not only that Baker becomes protean during the dance, but indeed that she may be able to permeate and dissolve the boundaries between herself and the audience. A year after her 1926 debut, e.e. cummings echoed the confusion of this review in *Vanity Fair*, writing that Baker was “a creature neither inhuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something” (qtd. in Hammond 41).

Frequently quoted and republished in nearly all the memoirs and biographies of Josephine Baker, the French review resonated with many early audiences of Baker’s performances. Eluding “regulation and control,” the memory of her performances seems to have circulated as a defamiliarization of racial codes as well as of popular dance styles such as the Charleston or the one-step. Indeed, Baker’s performances are typical of art movements in the twenties that aimed to destroy the boundary between high and low art as part of the process of erasing the separation between art and daily life, efforts that include the dada “trial” of Maurice Barrès, Duchamp’s “ready-mades,” and Breton’s re-imagining scenes from a racy play (*Les detraquées*) in his surrealist novel-memoir, *Nadja*. Baker’s performances had the potential to rise to art or sink to kitsch, rise to a critical intervention or sink to complicity, based on what bell hooks has called her “performative standpoint.”

Contemporary experiences of Baker’s public appearances suggest a picture that goes beyond stereotypes, vaudeville, or kitsch, modifying the “straight” meaning of scripted performances. A black female *flâneur* at a time when such a thing was nearly unimaginable, she strolled the streets of Paris with a pet leopard on a leash—a more powerful version of the dandies in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, who promenaded at the speed of their pet turtles. Baker owned a red car upholstered in snakeskin that she would race on the highway for sheer love of its speed, like Marinetti’s Futurists in the

1909 Manifesto. Her gender identity, as a black woman, was impossible for contemporaries to parse; she seemed beyond gender while at the same time nakedly female. This fluid sexual identity connects her to contemporaries like Claude Cahun and Marlene Dietrich. Baker improvised her dances. Their spontaneity recall the performance provocations by Tzara and Breton in rented theatre halls in Paris as well as jazz technique. Aspects of Baker's dancing implicitly profaned the sacred—another ingredient of avant-garde modernism. The Charleston originated in the dancing and trances of syncretic Black American religious practice, which Baker adapted for the entertainment of Europeans ignorant of the dance's history and who therefore saw it as simply “natural.” One of her memoirs quotes her quietly ironic opinion of this: “Les européens ont vu danser le charleston par les nègres. Ils en ont inventé un autre qui ne lui ressemble guère au premier, il est très bien cependant” (Sauvage 89). Baker was in fact religious; she was known to pray before some performances. Her jerky reinvention of the already commercialized Charleston surprised even fellow black performers. These parodic changes opened up room for her playfulness and originality. Finally, Baker performed from a deep awareness of social rupture. She had an impoverished childhood, which she kept secret for a long time—one very different from the pasts invented for her by stage managers as a cotton-picker in the South or a savage in the colonies. Born into a St. Louis slum, she witnessed anti-black mob violence as a child and was briefly indentured at age seven to a physically abusive white mistress. At fourteen, she ran away from home to join a theatre company. While fundamentally different from the wartime experiences of the surrealists and Dadaists, these traumatic childhood experiences still have a functional similarity: both ruptured any sense of a just or orderly society.

Early in her career, Baker began by attempting to manipulate the terms in circulation to express herself. She began to separate her own feelings and identity from the outside world and to manipulate the stereotyped reactions to her in order to create a private zone of freedom for herself. Her first efforts were clumsy but pointed. Upon hearing the news that she had been hired to tour France, Baker and a seamstress friend from Harlem designed unheard-of clothes for her debut: pearl grey golfing pants tight at the hips and loose at the ankles, paired with an orange blouse and silver hat. Sadly, the producer of the *Revue Nègre* forced her to abandon the design. In 1927, Baker participated in one of her few credited collaborations with another artist, contributing liner notes for Paul Colin's album *Le tumulte noir*. In it, she aggressively suggests that jazz and dance may act upon others as a form of possession—a trigger of involuntary automatism. “Nowadays, it's no longer safe to walk on the street. When

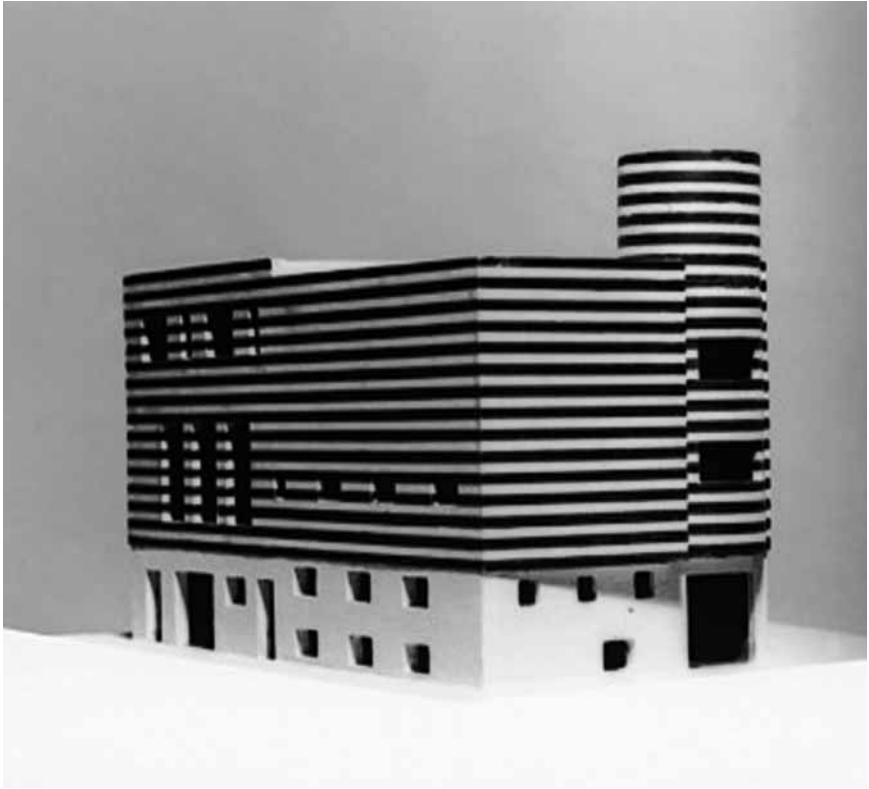
a tram conductor says ‘hey, hey’ to stop his horse, people think he meant to say ‘charleston’ and they start dancing until they drop—fainted, dead, forgotten” (qtd. in Sauvage 40). However, she inverts the agency, so that the audience of listeners is ecstatically possessed and ultimately objectified (dead)—not the conductor or the black performer. Her rebelliousness is also audible in an interview given close to the release date of her film *Princesse Tam-Tam*. In it, she characterizes film, the most technologically advanced art medium of the period, as a “negro art”—surely an ironic takedown of modernist tropes about primitivism. “Cinema is a negro art: images, dances, sun, the blackness of night” (qtd. in Sauvage 141). A last effort to express herself occurred in 1934, when she co-authored an autobiographically inflected novel titled *Mon sang dans tes veines*. The protagonists are Fred, a wealthy young white man, and Joan, the black daughter of his parents’ maid. They have grown up playing together but fall out of contact as adults—until Fred decides to bring a party of friends back to the childhood home where Joan (whose name obviously resembles “Jo,” Baker’s nickname) still lives. Fred is dangerously injured in a car accident. Because she is in love with him, when Joan learns that she alone shares Fred’s rare blood type, she donates her blood to save his life. Cured, he rejects Joan’s love. Yet he, too, is rejected in turn by his fiancée, because, unforgivably, he now has “black” blood flowing in his veins. He has become a “nègre blanc” (Abatino, Baker, and de la Camera 175). The transformation of Fred into a “white negro” is an ironic reversal of Baker’s experience in Paris—displaced from Joan onto Fred, a character with whom white readers could presumably better empathize. Too daring to be published in the United States, the novel was little known and has never been translated from the original French.

Fiction seems to have come closest to the means Baker could have used to openly express a critique of race relations, and when her novel faded from view she switched tactics. Rather than contradicting norms, she gravitated toward *détournement*. She also found ways to make money from her perceived exoticism, becoming a black woman of means. Despite the psychological costs, this allowed her to finance a degree of freedom otherwise difficult to attain as a member of a racially excluded minority, and furthermore it injected an element of dissonance into her public image that disrupted stereotypes, unsettling audiences and elevating her performances beyond consumer appeal. Baker’s refusals became silences that ate away at the edges of what was said. In addition to not writing a conventional memoir, she played film roles ambivalently; she danced in ways that broke the rules even for jazz; she evaded her status as a sex symbol, becoming the adoptive mother of twelve small children; and she also refused the spectacular house designed for her by Adolf Loos.

A comparison of the two houses Josephine Baker could have had—the modern vision by Loos and the one she ultimately chose for herself—silently speaks volumes. Loos's *chef-d'oeuvre* was a departure from his usual anti-ornamental style. A square box several stories high, the house sat on a white pedestal and was covered in horizontal stripes of alternating black and white, like a zebra. In its Parisian surroundings, it would have stuck out like a flashy advertisement of the identity of its celebrity inhabitant. The external surface of the house is an obvious reference to Baker's skin, and her partial integration into white society. The regular stripes dazzle the eye like an optical illusion or mirage, not quite stable. The interior is even more stunning. Its second floor consists almost entirely of a swimming pool walled in glass and encircled by corridors so that spectators might watch the swimmer both above and below water. The depths of the pool become a refracted and unstable prism for displaying the body, allowing spectators to see but not to touch. The house is designed for optical pleasure—not the comfort of its inhabitants.

According to art historian Beatriz Colomina's classic analysis: "In the Baker house, the body is produced as a spectacle, the object of an erotic gaze, an erotic system of looks. The exterior of this house cannot be read as a silent mask designed to conceal its interior; it is a tattooed surface which does not refer to the interior, it neither conceals nor reveals it. This fetishization of the surface is repeated in the 'interior' [. . .] Like the body, the house is all surface; it does not simply have an interior" (98). Colomina claims that spectators would have seen Baker's body as a flat surface upon the glass walls of the pool, while Baker would have seen her own reflection while being blinded to the spectators on the other side of the glass. Critic Anne Cheng has pointed out that narcissistic and voyeuristic pleasures would have been doubled for spectators as well as for Baker. She imagines a scene in which Adolf Loos gazes through the glass and sees both Baker's body and his own reflection, superimposed on top of it. "We can see the Loosian window onto the pool as also a mirror through which one sees the simultaneity of one's self and the other. [. . .] The glass view onto Baker thus gestures to identificatory longing as well as desire. The desire *to have* and the desire *to be* merge, rendering the glass and the watery skin of Baker as phenomenally transparent surfaces, at once within and without the subject" (57, *emph.* Cheng's).

Cheng and Colomina astutely analyze the "play of gazes" made possible in the Josephine Baker House. However, they mainly read Loos's objectifying yet identificatory gaze in terms of sexuality and race. Building on their work, I would add that his implicit longing extended not just to Baker's body, but also to her persona as an artist and performer. Loos's interior fantasizes Baker as an aquatic dancer, illuminated by the glare of the water's reflections underneath a glass roof. In the spectacular swimming



1. Model of the Maison Josephine Baker. Courtesy of the Albertina Museum, Vienna.

pool, Baker's body is unattainable even though she remains as a sight—paralleling how her bare skin on stage became a “costume,” a stylized performance of nudity rather than genuine nakedness. Loos's design of a theatricalized space for Baker to live out her everyday life echoes the ideals he espoused in his journal *The Other*, particularly in his desire to be a teacher of how to live in one's home. In her “primitivity,” Baker is already maddeningly more modern than he is, more of a performance artist not just in cabaret, dance, and film roles, but also constantly in her daily life as a black celebrity. Loos admired and even imitated this performance; what he missed is how Baker also escapes from the strictures of the mask via Benston's “autocritology.”

In 1926, at Chez Joséphine, Loos told his fiancée that Baker was his “ideal teacher.” Although he was referring to dance, he might just as well have been referring to the emergent genre of performance art. Loos later gave lectures about modern living that



2. Josephine Baker in tuxedo, c. 1932. Promotional photo by Studio Piaz.

included the Charleston and the blackbottom, demonstrating the dances steps onstage during the lectures (Stewart 23). A frequent public speaker and polemicist, Loos gave performances that scarcely resembled academic events; they were usually spontaneous and highly physical. "I have never prepared for a lecture. I always improvise at the last minute. It would be impossible for me to read a lecture from notes" (Beck-Loos 105). Contemporaries described his style as *Plauderkunst*, or the art of chattering off-the-cuff. Loos's polemical lectures on "how to be modern" often took place in cafés and cabarets, interrupted by hisses, applause, and shouts. As one contemporary noted, "In a truly amusing manner, [Loos] portrays the man of the previous century, describing how the position of his feet distinguishes him completely from the man of our own century. He demonstrates how old Fritz's army marched past with their feet rigidly pointing outwards. He then illustrates the way modern men walk, showing that their toes always point straight ahead. [...] Are not all unconscious gestures today interpreted as containing a deeper purpose?" (qtd. in Stewart 23). Loos's awkward mimicry and expressive gestures recall the "kangaroo" grace of Josephine Baker in her early reviews. He too takes a "primitive" source, the gait of Austrian men from the previous century, and defamiliarizes it in service of a new modern aesthetic.

The ambivalence that Loos felt about Josephine Baker's influence upon him is visible not just in his performances influenced by her "primitive" movement and dance, but also in the façade of his Baker house. Although the knee-jerk reaction of most critics is to see the black and white façade as a reference to Baker's skin or the "zebras" of her supposedly African origin, the stripes could also be read as stark Modernist abstraction. Their geometrical pattern evokes the aesthetic of the machine—as well as the animality of the zebra pattern and the ornamentality Loos attributes to primitivism and femininity. Cheng argues that these categories may be segregated ideologically but converge on the level of style, where "we can witness the profound contact between Modernism and its others" (77).

Though most critics have called the façade tattooed, this is inaccurate. Neither painted nor inscribed, it was formed from alternating bars of unmarked marble. Its logic is contact between the black and the white, not superposition or hierarchy. The purity of its colours recalls Loos's ideal modernist covering, the tuxedo. In an essay, Loos describes the tuxedo as the perfect mask for a modern individual wishing to preserve his inner privacy: it is smooth, correct, uniform, and black, allowing one to maintain one's personal anonymity and freedom on the street. In some ways, Josephine Baker's naked skin appears to be a parallel to that black modern ideal, concealing her internal subjectivity from view thanks to its beautiful, smooth, impenetrable surface.

Disavowed as a fellow Modernist, Loos's identification with Baker as an artist can be seen in the contradictory meanings of the façade that is its striped public face. Yet at the same time, it does not really represent her. Unlike the *Frack* and the house, Baker was not "black"; her light-brown skin in photographs is a visual reminder of the absurdity of racial ideology.

Baker trafficked in a quiet, practical resistance focused more on creating private freedom than altering the system of signs circulating around her on stage and in print. This is perhaps most clearly visible in the home she chose for herself. Neither modern nor even inside Paris, the Château Les Milandes is a rural fourteenth-century castle. She rented it in 1937 and later purchased it, going bankrupt in an attempt to hold on to the estate for as long as possible. Was it a ploy to hide from the public, or to lay claim to French cultural heritage? A few clues lie in her final pseudo-autobiography, a glossy pamphlet published in 1959 by Baker and her second husband Jo Bouillon and preserved in the French National Library. A blurb authored by Jo Bouillon claims that Josephine wanted the pamphlet to be printed for visitors. The inside cover contains a prayer for Baker's "rainbow" children, the group of twelve children from different countries (ranging from Vietnam to Iceland) whom she had adopted to save from the poverty she had known as a child. On the next pages, a fictionalized third-person narrative describes Baker falling asleep on a couch in the castle's main hall, dreaming of all the bloody and colourful events that had taken place there since the fourteenth century. The tale ends with her awakening and hoping, still in indirect discourse, that next time she will dream about the future of her little rainbow children. Three black-and-white photographs show a young Jo Bouillon; a long table set for dinner with the "rainbow tribe"; and, finally, a landscape of the castle's setting, including a gazebo framing the tiny figures of a woman and a single child, both so small and dark that they resemble silhouettes. Again, Josephine Baker shrinks out of view.

Describing the "Jorama," a life-size wax diorama of her at Milandes, as well as Baker's tendency to retreat into privacy even while performing and producing press releases, Cheng suggests that Baker was "expertly skilled in making models of herself, which both shield and reveal her. In short, she wears her nudity—and her images—like second skins" (66). Yet they are just another set of tools in a larger strategy of invisibility: camouflaging herself in the background that was available. According to Les Milandes' official website, as a little girl Baker had been enchanted by the fairytale of Sleeping Beauty. The pamphlet's description of her dream supports this notion, but with a twist: Baker's dreaming takes her back in time, not forward one hundred years, allowing her to mask the blank of an African-American genealogical history erased by slave traders. The castle becomes a nurturing space where she could try to recuperate

her own lost childhood and offer refuge to an adopted multiracial family. Baker chose a private utopia over a modernist house in the city. The dream rhetoric surrounding Les Milandes emphasizes the fantasy of an alternate world, one with thick defensive walls. By dreaming the castle's history, Baker internalizes her surroundings, breathing them in so that they are part of an inner world, the reverse of Loos's notion of the primitivist dependency on externalized culture. She is no longer a surface with nothing behind it. We get only a tantalizing glimpse of her inner dream-theatre—enough to know that we are on the outside. The traces are enough to tell us that—and help us begin to uncover the unacknowledged depths of her influence on the development of Parisian and Viennese modernisms.

NOTES

1/ My translation.

2/ My translation.

3/ My translation. The original reads: "Wer fechten lernen will, muß selbst das Rapier in die Hand nehmen. Vom Fechtzusehen hat noch niemand fechten gelernt. Und wer sich ein Heim schaffen will, muß selbst alles angeben. [. . .] Euer Heim wird mit euch und ihr werdet mit eurem Heim. [. . .] Und wer fechten will, braucht überdies ein Fechtlehrer. Der muß es können. Ich will euer Wohnungslehrer sein."

4/ Some critics contend that *Schwarzalben* may refer to a type of elf. This is compatible with my literal translation, "black albino." Loos often equates folklore with the primitive. For him, they are all pre-modern.

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