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## African-Americans Abroad: Josephine Baker and the Controversy Surrounding African-American Figures Outside of America

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**African-Americans Abroad: Josephine Baker and the Controversy  
Surrounding African American Figures Outside of America**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in History

in

The Department of History

by  
Ferin E. Jones  
B. A. Louisiana State University, 2015  
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This paper is dedicated to my favorite Black women. Shelis, Rita, and Laverne.

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## **Abstract**

This paper is about the complexities surrounding the African American experience in other countries. Josephine Baker was one of many figures with important stories.

## Introduction

Dear Miss Baker,

“I read with great interest your recent letter and appreciate fully the moving sentiments you have expressed. Your return to the United States to lend your own tremendous prestige to the struggle to achieve equality of treatment and opportunity for all Americans is most dramatic and impressive.”

-John F. Kennedy, November 8, 1963

Historians often discuss how Josephine Baker and others during the early twentieth century “escaped” racism in America by leaving creating their success in other countries. Race relations are mentioned but usually not the focus. The focus shifts to the positive and more popular moments in their journey abroad. Many African American stars felt conflicted about their experience abroad, and some of the conflict was not expressed until their return, or at the thought of returning. Some faced racism in a new form, racism with a history that reached further back than their lifetimes. The French were deeply tangled with Black entertainment tracing back to blackface and zoo exhibitions with “exotic others” on display. Germans were weary after the occupation of the Rhineland by Black soldiers. A different history brought a different racism, and different experiences. It is important to look at their experience through the lens of their return home or lack there of. Homecomings caused uncomfortable conversations amongst stars that shared the same skin color. I argue that defining the “success” of African Americans abroad by American standards, or the country of their escape, is not a true scale. African American stars abroad did not escape the heaviness of race relations; they experienced it on a global scale, with

a different name, often with a spotlight on their every move. How they interpreted their experience in private or with the world, is worth a look. I will do this by looking at the history of entertainment in American culture and European culture, surveying the African Americans who had success in Europe, and exploring how Josephine Baker broke barriers as a French citizen, as well as in America.

## **Chapter I. American Entertainment and Blackness**

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new generation of African Americans who had never been enslaved attempted to navigate being black in America. Musicians, writers, dancers, and actors crossed color lines and state lines and experienced what it meant to be Black outside of America. Their talent even brought them to different countries, beyond the United States and the Jim Crow era. It could be easy to conclude that they defeated all the odds of being black during a time when lynchings were at an all-time high. Josephine Baker, who was a young girl when terror hit the inhabitants of St. Louis, Missouri, knew from an early age that America was not the place she wanted to be. In this paper I survey the experiences of black entertainers, most notably Josephine Baker who never returned to the United States permanently but shook racial tensions more than she shook the bananas on her skirt.

A black entertainer in Paris in 1930 was outstanding given the circumstances. But what happened behind the scenes and what had to occur to get them there. While racism seemed to be worse in the United States for black entertainers, the lack of segregation in places such as Paris did not erase the color of their skin. When situated in places other than America, black celebrities enjoyed benefits such as intimate relationships and levels of respect outside of the States that may not have been present in America. After these experiences, many black celebrities' views on racism were more conflicted than before. For Josephine, the confliction would cost her money as well as make her choice of shows more intentional. As black celebrities they sometimes had to choose between being a good influence for a community that looked like them or an inspiration that was successful. The two often did not mix.



To understand a part of the success of these artists, we must understand the racialization of entertainment in the twentieth century. One of the most popular forms of entertainment was blackface. During pagan and medieval times, Europeans associated the color black with evil. John Strausbaugh argued, “The symbolism was basic: white/light/day equaled good, black/dark/night equaled evil. Europeans simply carried the symbolism over to ‘light’ and ‘dark’ skin.”<sup>1</sup> The act of painting a white face with black paint can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the Shakespearean play *Othello*. Although it was not the only form of blackface done by a white actor, it was the most well-known. A century later in 1751, the play was first performed in the American colonies. Strausbaugh points out that historian Dale Cockrell believed it was popular because it played into the racial fears of the founding fathers of the country.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of this play set the tone for what white colonial Americans wanted to see. White people needed validation for their use of slavery. The association of black with evil did a great deal for its presence. What better way to prove that slavery was necessary than turning the concept into entertainment? The use of *Othello*, a dark skinned man, as a form of entertainment helped disguise the racism.

Minstrel shows were popular in the United States. Blacks imitating musical creations and whites imitating black musical creations and dancing grew popular in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Strausbaugh states, “The exchange went both ways. Whites loved learning the banjo, which the Blacks had brought with them from Africa. Blacks loved the piano, and learned to play it with Promethean genius...Blacks loved to dance to Celtic jigs and reels, Whites learned to imitate

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<sup>1</sup> John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 62-71.

<sup>2</sup> Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture*, 64.

Black field hollers, and both sides shared a love for plaintive airs and ballads.” What started as an exchange of cultures, however, evolved into racist interpretations used in minstrel shows. Minstrel shows included songs with gibberish, an imitation and exaggeration of the broken dialect slaves spoke because they were refused an education. The success of the minstrel shows throughout America was rooted in the assumption of the inferiority of black people. The image of inferiority was the price the black minstrel show performers paid for their fame.

The segregation of black and white people in the United States grew in the latter part of the nineteenth century. With the separation, minstrel shows became more exaggerated because white and black people were forced to stay apart. There was no more teaching one another to play instruments, so the shows were different from reality. For many white people, their only contact with black culture was through the entertainers, black or white, in the minstrel shows. The cultures became estranged while the shows became more and more popular.<sup>3</sup> This tactic paved the way for larger issues in entertainment for black talents, especially outside of America.

Black talent abroad was meaningful but still rare during this time, as well as black people being exposed to a new reality. There were many barriers to be broken and Baker used World War Two as a way to advocate for the rights of African American soldiers. Baker understood how efforts, no matter how big or small, could go a long way.<sup>4</sup> She was not the only one to notice the irony of America fighting against racial injustice. Racism was global, and exceptionalism in America shined bright. America overlooked the racism in its own backyard when it sent Black soldiers to fight in World War Two.

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<sup>3</sup>Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture*, 108.

<sup>4</sup>Phyllis Rose. *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. (New York: Random House, 1989), 202.

After the Second World War, black men returned from fighting for the country with a sense of pride that held no merit for white people in America. Tyler Stovall argues that the post-World War I era brought the New Negro, “a term used to indicate the increased racial pride and resistance to discrimination expressed by American blacks in the 1920’s.”<sup>5</sup> About half of the African Americans who fought in the First World War were located in France. Although their living conditions were not great compared to white soldiers, they were called racial slurs by the white officers, and they still faced racism. These black men “laid the foundations for the vibrant African American community that would settle in Paris after the war.” The way they were treated in France after the war was refreshing because there was no segregation and their expectations rose. Some of those pleasant times transferred over upon their return to the Northern states. On February 17, 1919, “hundreds of thousands of whites and blacks cheered as the black soldiers, led by Jim Europe’s band, marched in formation up Fifth Avenue to Harlem...Later that day the veterans attended a celebratory dinner in their honor hosted by the city of New York.”

In contrast, there was no parade thrown on black veterans’ behalf in the South. A Mississippi senator claimed that “French women ruined negro soldiers” and that these soldiers should be handled accordingly.<sup>6</sup> With this attitude came a large number of lynchings. In 1918, white Americans lynched fifty-eight African Americans; the following year seventy-seven were lynched, ten of them veterans.<sup>7</sup> Black people called the summer of 1919 “Red Summer” because of the amount of blood shed. White Americans in the South went out of their way to make it

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<sup>5</sup> Tyler Stovall. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 27.

known that their country was nothing like France. White people resisted the idea of black freedom and black people resisted the oppression they faced.

At the same time as the summer filled with bloodshed an era named The Harlem Renaissance occurred. This era highlighted black talent in art, literature, dance, and music. The welcoming spirit that was present after the war was gone and white people moved out of Harlem and black people moved in. However, white people could not resist the appeal of the speakeasies and Harlem shows. An example of black talent during this time is Louis Armstrong, who could smell the potential success all the way from the South. But at the core of this beautiful black, booming city were the racist realities of America. Harlem was misleading, accepting black culture but not the black race. “Glamorous and seductive by night, Harlem wore an entirely different face by day.”<sup>8</sup> There were places like Harlem all over America. Too often, black celebrities felt special, but not included. People like Louis Armstrong yearned for a place they could showcase their talent without fear of harassment after the show. It was time to leave America.

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<sup>8</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 30-31.

## Chapter II. Is The Grass Greener?

Josephine Baker was the model for black success in Europe, more specifically Paris. Following the First World War, there were a few thousand black people from different backgrounds in France. Coupled with the influx of African Americans who resided in France for various artistic reasons, historian Brett A. Berliner describes this moment as “the French welcomed them and even enshrined Josephine Baker as a symbol of interwar French cultural life.”<sup>9</sup> Baker’s success was in part due to the history of Negro exoticism made by the French. The French fetishized the “other” and placed them on display alongside animals. They had an “exhibitionary complex” as Tony Bennett would argue, and the success of exhibitions at the Parisian zoo proved their desire for the display. In 1877, after the French found more interest in the Nubian caretakers than of the African animals, George Saint-Hilaire took note. From that year until 1883, “George Saint-Hilare put on a dozen exhibitions of the primitive and exotic other. With the exception of two groups of Nubians, the exhibitions were of non-Africans: Eskimos, Lapps, Gauchos, Fuegians, Galibis, Ceylonese, Araucans, Kalmucks, and American Indians were brought to the zoo to the delight of the Parisian populace.” Attendance numbers were high, and showrunners kept the show going. “the indigenous peoples were set up on the great lawn of the zoo where they would live for a few weeks or even months.”<sup>10</sup> The Parisians fell in love with viewing other races doing what was out of their ordinary. In 2011, a museum in Paris took an aim to grapple with the city’s history of human display. A newspaper article gave a brief overview of the reason behind the exhibit “Until just a few generations ago, this is how most white people learned about those with skin of a different shade... Curator Lilian Thuram, a

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<sup>9</sup> Brett Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France*. (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France*, 107-109.

former soccer star and now anti-racism advocate, hopes the exhibit at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris makes people question deep-held beliefs about the "other".<sup>11</sup> Over a century later, the Parisians are still untangling the racism behind their amusement of choice, proving how the "escaping the racism" is not entirely true, even if it appeared to be otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

The "black othering" moment was not unique to France. Nazi Germany was known for racism, a racism not limited to Jews. Many black jazz musicians toured Germany under Hitler's reign. While his ideals are widely known, few know how the musicians and Olympic champions lived under a complex regime. They were honoring America while still facing discrimination, as well as gaining success for their craft. Later celebrated as innovators and breakout stars because of the varied experiences from African Americans in the United States. Maria I. Diedrich argues "In December 1934 Paul Robeson, disgusted at the racial violence he had witnessed during a visit to Germany, publicly renounced his plans to work with Max Reinhardt, and Josephine Baker eventually joined the French Resistance for the same reasons."<sup>13</sup> In contrast, W.E.B. Dubois insisted that he experienced very little racism during his years in Germany. As an American, viewing racism through the lens of American racism is not a precise picture.<sup>14</sup>

White people were not the only faces that performed in black face or as Othello. Ira Aldridge was an African American actor who left the United States for England in 1824 because of the racism he experienced in New York City; he never returned. In England, a comedian made

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<sup>11</sup> "Paris Museum Questions Racism in Human Display." New Zealand Herald. Accessed January, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/europe/paris-exhibit-savage-display>

<sup>13</sup> Mary I. Diedrich, "Black 'Others'-African Americans and Black Germans in the Third Reich" In *Remapping Black Germany: New Perspectives on Afro-German History, Politics, and Culture*, edited by Sara Lennox. (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2016), 138.

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion," Pittsburgh Courier, December 19, 1936.

a skit imitating Aldridge in a very racist way using a minstrel song. Aldridge used that same song in his own minstrel show. By adopting a form of entertainment that used stereotypical dancing and language that portrayed blacks in a negative manner, Aldridge turned racism into a means for his success. Aldridge took a song that was written to set him back and turned it into a positive representation for the black race. His story is revealing because a century later Josephine Baker would take a very similar path to his. Errol Hill, who studied the history of Black theatre, argued that Aldridge was “thanked and honored” after his performances in Europe by prominent European figures.<sup>15</sup> Aldridge was different and talented, but was still excluded from elite events in Europe.

In her early showbiz days, Josephine Baker performed in blackface. Biographer Phyillis Rose pointed out how she was in blackface for a role “created especially for her”<sup>16</sup> She was famous enough for a customized role, but the role was filled with the same racism she tried so hard to escape.

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<sup>15</sup>James V. Hatch and Errol Hill. *A History of African American Theatre*.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 60

**Theatre Royal, Covent-Garden.**  
**COMPLETE SUCCESS!!!**  
 THE NEW SERIO-COMIC LEGENDARY FAIRY TALE  
**The ELFIN SPRITE,**  
**The Grim Grey Woman,**  
 was received on its 24 representation with raptures of laughter and applause. The SPLENDID SCENERY and MACHINERY were beloved throughout with enthusiastic approbation. This HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL NOVELTY will therefore be repeated **Every Evening until further notice.**  
 This present WEDNESDAY, April 10, 1833,  
 will be performed the same as a Variety of  
**O T H E L L O.**  
 The Duke of Venice, Mr. RANFORD,  
 Brabantio, Mr. DEHOARE, Gratiano, Mr. THUNDER,  
 Lodovico, Mr. PAYNE, Montano, Mr. HAINES,  
 Othello, Mr. ALDRIDGE.  
**A NATIVE OF AFRICA.**  
 Known by the appellation of the **AFRICAN ROSCIUS**, who has been received with great applause at the Theatres Royal, *Dublin, Edinburgh, Bath,* and most of the principal provincial Theatres.  
 His First Appearance on this Stage, on Monday, the 10th of April, 1833.  
 Iago, Mr. WAIRDE,  
 Desdemona, Mr. FOLENTI, Antonio, Mr. IRWIN, Julia, Mr. Matthews,  
 Giovanni, Mr. J. COOPER, Lucco, Mr. BRADY, Lorenzo, Mr. Beaulieu,  
 Messenger, Mr. MEANS, Messrs. Mr. Galt, Messrs. Mr. Hunt, Misses Mrs. Stanley,  
 Desdemona, Miss E. TREE,  
 Emilia, Mrs. LOVELL.  
 To which will be added, the new SERIO-COMIC LEGENDARY FAIRY TALE, called  
**Elfin Sprite;**  
**Grim Grey Woman.**  
 AND THE  
**The ELFIN GLEN,**  
 IN THE DRACKENFELDE.  
 The Grim Grey Woman, Mr. ALDRIDGE, and Mrs. HITCHCOCK,  
 The Elfin Glen, Mr. ALDRIDGE, and Mrs. HITCHCOCK,  
**A FERRY across the RHINE,**  
 Sir Joddrell's Chateau in the distance.  
 Messrs. RANFORD, IRWIN, DEHOARE, HAINES, THUNDER, WAIRDE, WAUGHAN, &c.  
**INTERIOR of JULIAN'S COTTAGE.**  
**Grand Tapestry Chamber,**  
 In the CHATEAU of HILDESHIM.  
 Messrs. RANFORD, IRWIN, DEHOARE, HAINES, THUNDER, WAIRDE, WAUGHAN, &c.  
 Messrs. RANFORD, IRWIN, DEHOARE, HAINES, THUNDER, WAIRDE, WAUGHAN, &c.  
 Messrs. RANFORD, IRWIN, DEHOARE, HAINES, THUNDER, WAIRDE, WAUGHAN, &c.



Image1. Ira Aldridge’s first appearance at Covent Gardens in the role of Othello.  
<https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/detail/FOLGERCM1~6~6~20723~101813:-Ira-Aldridge-s-first-appearance->

The exchange of black and white cultures stretched well into the twentieth century, but in a different manner. It was no longer a natural cultural exchange. White people frequented clubs that had black entertainers as their headliners. “Even in the heart of Harlem, the fanciest nightclubs featured black entertainers but did not admit black clients.”<sup>17</sup> Club owners wanted the black talent, but not the black audience. The desire to cast black talent without the desire to welcome a black audience mirrored the conflicting feelings some black celebrities experienced. For some, the road to fame often started in a small black-owned club with an audience that looked similar to them, but the larger audiences in the larger clubs did not look the same.

Regardless of concern, racial issues were not always presented as actual issues. For many black entertainers, their talent brought them wealth. It is understandable why a person of any

<sup>17</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 30



color might assume an actor such as Aldridge was comfortable and content. The glorified status of a famous person seemingly eliminated them from issues the average person faced. They were still placed on an unfair pedestal and this brought criticism. The color of their skin was without a doubt part of the conversation; however the way someone like Baker was brought into the conversation was because of her talent. A few decades after Aldridge, the world would be introduced to Hattie McDaniel, who rose to fame by playing the role of a “mammy” in the film *Gone With the Wind*. The very start of fame for some black entertainers in America meant performing things rooted in racism or pleasing very racist crowds. Many, including the entertainer, overlooked the racist stereotypes for the sake of entertainment and wealth. This was a blow for the fight of injustices in America because the entertainment industry awarded racist beliefs. McDaniel’s setback, however, later won her awards.

Part of the reason Aldridge, McDaniel, and Baker were able to achieve success is because they were a spectacle to the white eye which traced back to the minstrel shows. This could be why even the most talented still experienced some form of racism. Your fame did not always dismiss your blackness. Fame was at its peak when a black artist’s star was shining its brightest, on stage, when they were the spectacle for a white audience.

The presence of African Americans in France made the white French uneasy. Racism in America was infamous while racism in France was subtle. The reason black entertainers were able to achieve success there is because their talent was more important than their perceived racial inferiority. Stovall said that “Although most African American GI’s eagerly anticipated returning home after the end of the war, some had no desire to give up freedoms they had experienced and opted not to go back to the United States. This decision was of course not so easily carried out because the French Government had no desire to play host to demobilized

foreign soldiers of any color.” The American government set up a program for former American soldiers to attend school in France but “Army officials showed less enthusiasm for the prospect of black veterans enrolling in the program, at times trying to speed up the demobilization of black officers before they had time to apply.”<sup>18</sup> While it is true that France became home to many African Americans after the war, the start of this home building was not a smooth one nor was it universal.

French culture changed after the war. Half a million French lives had been lost and they were eager to heal. The presence of African Americans in France brought a new love for African art and culture. The novel *Batouala* by black French author named Rene Maran received the highest French literary honor. Black talent was exposed on a new level and the French fell in love. They were ready to accept African Americans, but only if they fit into the category in which the French were obsessed. African Americans used this obsession to their advantage.

When the experience of a well-known figure is put in writing or aired on the radio to be viewed by the masses, the audience may view the figure’s experience as a staple for everyone that identifies with said person, and as fact. The ability to view them as individuals and not as a group is vital in the same way that racism does not have one meaning. Louis Armstrong criticized Josephine Baker’s statements upon her return to America. He did not “dig” her dissatisfaction with her treatment in America when she compared it to France. Most agree that the experience in America was not pleasant, but to group every writer, musician, or athlete’s time abroad as a stamp of success is to do their stories an injustice. The search of happiness did not stop.

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<sup>18</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 35.

Claude McKay documented his return home in various works. “A wave of thrills flooded the arteries of my being, and I felt as if I had undergone initiation as a member of my tribe. And I was happy. Yes it was a rare sensation again to be just one black among many. It was good to be lost in the shadows of Harlem again.”<sup>19</sup> Though granted the chance to leave America, he was happy to be back. He was happy to blend in again and not “othered.” Sense of community is a separate, and important, feeling that runs parallel with symptoms of discrimination. One does not have to overpower the other and it is clear that being one of few blacks weighed on his mind.

Langston Hughes expressed similar emotions in *The Big Sea*. “I came out onto the platform with two heavy bags and looked around. It was still early morning and people were going to work. Hundreds of colored people! I wanted to shake hands with them, speak to them. I hadn’t seen any colored people for so long—that is, any Negro colored people.”<sup>20</sup> Overwhelmed with joy because of unity, leaving America did not mean leaving behind racial discomfort. In fact, it brought about a new sense of discomfort: unfamiliarity and loneliness. He spoke of experiences with a friend, Jessie Fauset, at her home in Harlem. These times were sacred, and not for the curiosity of whites, a common practice in France. “At Miss Fauset’s, a good time was shared by talking literature and reading poetry aloud and perhaps enjoying some conversation in French. White people were seldom present there unless they were very distinguished white people because Jessie Fauset did not feel like opening her home to mere sightseers, or faddists momentarily in love with Negro life.”<sup>21</sup> France taught Hughes that he was adored by French people amused by his blackness more than him as a person.

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<sup>19</sup> Brenda Smith Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>20</sup> Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Huggins, *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, 97.

This backhanded method of racism created the illusion that being outside of America was better. However, for some, including the fans of someone like Baker, that illusion was enough. Being granted the same opportunity as whites, regardless of the ill feelings secretly felt towards them, was all some African Americans needed to be at peace. A common reason for this departure is opportunity.

Back home, Lena Horne, famous American singer and actress, took strong actions against the racism in the entertainment industry. Lary May noted how when she was on the board for the Screen Actors Guild and went to the soldiers' camps during World War II, she "protested the segregation of black troops and walked out of one performance when officers allowed German prisoners to see her show but forbade the attendance of black soldiers."<sup>22</sup> In an interview with *Ebony*, she said of her experience, "They said at the time I got the job at MGM in 1943 that they were going to prove through me that we're all alike. They made me up and down, they decided the way they thought I should look. They decided how a Negro should look...they tried to make me look as close to white as possible...what they did was name me in all releases as the sepia Hedy Lamarr...Why wasn't she advertised as the white Lena Horne?"<sup>23</sup>

Well, why wasn't she advertised as the white Lena Horne? The answer is Hedy Lamarr represented the white standard of beauty during this time. Everything that Lena Horne, and other black women, did during the mid-twentieth century was compared to white women. Just being Lena was not good enough. It was different than Baker's Parisian fame, yet somehow it was still

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<sup>22</sup> Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 166.

<sup>23</sup> Lena Horne interview, *Ebony* (July 1968), pp. 130-134.

the same. Paris obsessed over how African Baker was and America obsessed over how white Horne could be.

The feelings that Horne had were an example of how the smiling face of a black celebrity did not reflect their true thoughts. The smile also did not reflect their intentions. With the comparisons to white women, Horne was not truly happy nor was she allowed to be herself. Instead, she used her platform for the betterment of the black community. She refused to perform for a segregated crowd, and she refused to continue the racist customs that white Americans created. Horne was a true representation of how the negative experiences she had could be used as a platform.



Image2. Lena Horne <https://www.oscars.org/collection-highlights/lena-horne/?fid=41041>

Miles Davis, a famous jazz musician from St. Louis went to Paris in 1949 for a jazz festival and enjoyed the benefits the seemingly nonexistent racism. “I had never felt that way in my life. It was the freedom of being in France and being treated like a human being, like someone important. Even the band and the music we played sounded better over there.”<sup>24</sup> Davis returned to America, however, because he “didn’t think the music would or could happen for me over there. Plus the musicians who moved over there seemed to me to lose something, an energy, an edge, that living in the States gave them.”<sup>25</sup> Davis could have been referring to black musicians who chose to forget about the racial issues back home. Davis could not push those things to the back of his head. Everyone reacted to living abroad in a different way. He recognized the freedoms he experienced, but he also wanted to experience being black in America with people he could relate to instead of in Paris.

Richard Wright had an experience that many others could not relate to during his travels from America and Paris. His reason for leaving the United States is the most complex yet. A famous novel writer in Chicago, Wright fought for racial equality in America and joined the Communist Party for a few years because it coincided with his progressive beliefs. The racism exhausted Wright and he realized no form of wealth would be a means of acceptance in America. As Stovall explains, “When the Wrights purchased a comfortable home in the heart of Greenwich Village in 1945, they were able to only do so by using a white lawyer who never mentioned the race of his client.” Wright, however, was very vocal about his opinions on racism in America and soon “found himself the subject of investigations by the FBI and other

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<sup>24</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 180.

<sup>25</sup> Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Miles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 218.

government agencies.”<sup>26</sup> Wright had the home in Greenwich, the popular novels, and the money, and he had the will to stand up for his beliefs. This was a recipe for disaster in America. A talent that was black meant another reason for white Americans to push them out of their American home.

Wright dealt with his backlash in a different manner than Baker and Armstrong. He still chose to support the black community in the only way he knew how. When he published *Native Son* in 1940 and *Black Boy* in 1945, he showed that he still supported the advancement of black people, regardless of his experiences in America.



Image3. George Whitman with Richard Wright and Wright's wife Ellen; and Paris Review editors Max Steele and Peter Matthiessen at Shakespeare & Company Bookstore. By Jacques Rochon <http://ushistoryscene.com/article/eat-african-american-lit-paris/>

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<sup>26</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light, 191-192.*

Wright first went to France with his family in 1946 for about a half of a year, and then returned. This return to America was not a pleasant one for him and he spent the last thirteen years of his life in Paris. He lived comfortably in comparison to other black people in Paris. This did not alter his outlook on racism; if anything, it heightened it. He published two novels about race relations in the United States and “American critics, both black and white, attacked the two books as outdated portrayals of racial conflict in their society, arguing that a writer who lived in Paris could no longer claim an intimate knowledge of the situation.”<sup>27</sup> It seemed as if no matter their stance on race relations, or their reason for leaving America, controversy was a common theme. Race was a fragile topic that some wanted to overlook as well as address, and both were tricky.

Money did not erase blackness nor criticism from black people. Richard Wright learned this the hard way. Being praised for your talent is expected to be an enjoyable season. But for many the results of their success were dampened by the color of their skin. His views on racism in America were questioned because he was no longer there. How could he know? Richard Wright and Josephine Baker tried to navigate being of service to African Americans while not physically being there.

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<sup>27</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 193.



### Chapter III. Josephine Baker as a Celebrity

At the height of her career, Josephine Baker strived for equality. She spoke out against many racist incidents, especially at night clubs. Segregation and outright racism against black performers infuriated Baker. In a letter addressed to Mr. Clark she stated “Don’t you know your letters will not intimidate me... Why don’t you use your flashy headlines to play up the Pearl Bailey incident. Pearl Bailey as you know is a famous colored singer and was beaten and kicked unmercifully by four men of the white race because they resented the fact that she was a colored lady working in a night club in New Jersey near New York City.” Later in the letter she pointed out how she was unbothered when she “received many threatening letters” telling her to go back to France.<sup>28</sup>

Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Josephine taught herself how to dance very early in life. Her famous dancing moves were almost perfected by the time she was a teenager. These moves involved her twisting her body in various ways and making faces with her eyes and mouth. In the first decade of the twentieth century, black performers in American clubs faced the pressure of not being black enough. It traced back to what it meant to be a black person and how white people had grown accustomed to seeing white people portray black people. Black entertainers were being themselves instead of exaggerating what it supposedly meant to be black, and for white audiences that was not enough. In 1919, a New York newspaper said that “Here colored folks seem to have set out to show the whites they are just as white as anybody. They may be good, but they’re different- and in their own entertainment, at any rate, they should

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to Mr. Clark, 1-2, Schomburg Center

remain different- distinct- indigenous.”<sup>29</sup> African Americans had to fit a certain narrative in order to gain success, in America and in Paris.

Baker got her start with the Shuffle Along Tour Company before she met producer Caroline Dudley, who had big hopes for black entertainers in Paris because she saw the potential in them. Baker craved the glamour Paris could offer her, unlike in America. As Phyllis Rose’s work shows, not every black person in Paris was a celebrity; they were writers, professors and regular people that stayed in France after the war. It was in Paris that Baker perfected her craft of dancing in the 1920s. Her road to star status in Paris had begun and she became the model for black American success in Paris.

To achieve the star status she longed for, Baker had to make adjustments. With her connections, Dudley took Baker along with the rest of La Revue Negre, which included twenty five black dancers, singers, and jazz artists, to the Theatre des Champs Elysees for their grand debut. Baker’s self-taught dance skills and facial expressions that made her stand out in America were not enough to take her to the next level in Paris. The show’s producer, Jacques Charles, came up with a more provocative routine for Baker. It was a more “‘African’ dance routine, the Danse Sauvage, featuring a scantily clad Baker and a male partner, Joe Alex, gyrating to the rhythms of the jungle, bringing the show in line with French stereotypes of blacks.” The French needed Baker to represent their African vision.<sup>30</sup> Baker was covered in feathers and giving the audience what they wanted, something she learned was valuable in her childhood. This is not to confuse the willingness of Baker with her comfort. She hesitated at the thought of being naked, but she kept performing nonetheless. By making a name for herself in jazz clubs, she became an

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<sup>29</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*, 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 53.

example of success for black Americans and jazz music merging in Paris. She owned the nightlife of the 1920's and it was just the beginning. She went on to tour in Europe and South America before returning to Paris an even larger celebrity than before.<sup>31</sup>

Josephine Baker spoke at the March on Washington in 1963, and she flew in from Paris to do so. There, she talked about her experiences in Paris and how they differed from her time in the United States.



Figure 4. Josephine Baker dancing at the Folies-Bergere. Paris Photography by Walery. <https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/9133/dancer-singer-activist-spy-the-legacy-of-josephine-baker>

“When I was a child and they burned me out of my home, I was frightened and I ran away. I must tell you, ladies and gentlemen, in that country I never feared. It was like a fairyland place...But when I ran away, yes, when I ran

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<sup>31</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, 56.

away to another country, I didn't have to do that. I could go into any restaurant I wanted to..."

Baker acknowledged that her life was a "fairytale" in Paris. She knew that her life there was unusual when compared to her life in America. She knew that she was privileged. She admitted that she did not have to embrace these benefits in the manner that she did, but she wanted to. It was nice to be able to eat lunch in her place of choice. It was nice to not "fear."

"And when I got to New York way back then, I had other blows,,,And I said to myself, My God, I am Josephine, and if they do this to me, what do they do to the other people in America?"

Baker was still conscious of the fact that her experiences were unique as a black person. This meant that while she entertained mostly white audiences, she did not consider herself white.

"And when I screamed loud enough, they started to open that door just a little bit, and we all started to be able to squeeze through it. Not just the colored people, but the others as well, the other minorities too, the Orientals, and the Mexicans, and the Indians, both those here in the United States and those from India...it is an invitation to visit the President of the United States in his home, the White House. I am greatly honored. But I must tell you that a colored woman—or, as you say it here in America, a black woman—is not going there. It is a woman. It is Josephine Baker.<sup>32</sup>

While she did not consider herself white, she did not consider herself a black woman either. Baker represented the desire to advance the black community with pride without losing herself or her beliefs.

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<sup>32</sup> "(1963) Josephine Baker, 'Speech at the March on Washington' last modified Nov 3, 2011. [www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-josephine-baker-speech-march-washington/](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-josephine-baker-speech-march-washington/).

Josephine Baker took pride in herself and her achievements in France. She enjoyed the luxuries that a place other than America gave her. She hated the way she and other people of color were treated in America, and felt no shame about her wonderful treatment in France. Her speech tells the world that she worked very hard to escape the racist experiences she had in America. She acknowledged that relations were better in Paris and she did not want to identify with her country of birth. She excluded herself from being American, whether anyone agreed with her or not. She made the choice to separate herself and that made her happy. What we see here is that happiness came in different forms, depending on the person. There was no right or wrong way to deal with the conflicts that being a black entertainer abroad meant. Her presence allowed other African Americans to have a chance at success. Although she only wanted to be recognized as a woman, she indirectly supported people that were considered black.

Josephine Baker and other black entertainers were ready and willing to escape the obvious racism that was in their so-called home. Initially, they felt no remorse about heading to Paris for a new life. But what about the different forms of subtle racism abroad? What did they think of that? Baker said, “The white imagination sure is something when it comes to blacks.”<sup>33</sup> Baker was aware that she was their fantasized depiction of what it meant to be African, or black. She chose to use the same method as Ira Aldridge. They both turned the racist entertainment into financial advances.

Josephine Baker made it her mission to fight for the underprivileged. In a letter to friends, she wrote “If you or the general should have need of me, for whatever reason, I’ll come back running, not matter where I might find myself. I must go to other countries, to try to being a little

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<sup>33</sup> Marcel Sauvage, *Voyages et aventures de Josephine Baker* (Paris: Editions Marcel Sheur, 1931), 16.

moral support to your brothers less fortunate than you, they need me...I will tell them not to lose hope, not to abandon the struggle for the rights of humanity.”<sup>34</sup>

The fear of communism raged through America, and Baker was not allowed entry into the country because of it. Robin D.G. Kelley argues “by the late 1920s and early 1930s, black nationalism(s)-especially as expressed in culture-had much more in common with American communism than most scholars have admitted.”<sup>35</sup> Mary Dudziak states “On one hand, the United States claimed that democracy was superior to communism as a form of government, particularly in its protection of individual rights and liberties; on the other hand, the nation practiced pervasive race discrimination.”<sup>36</sup>

The woman behind the speeches was far from confrontational, however. Josephine Baker was not indirect or confusing in her speeches. While it is important to take note of how a relationship with Fidel Castro warrants a file from the FBI, her loyalty to humanity was not in question. She strived for humanity to love one another, regardless of race, even if the ancestors of one’s race did horrific acts. Musicians that played jazz music during the early twentieth century were mostly African American. Though Louis Armstrong’s time in Africa was during the height of the Civil Rights movement, his experiences there are significant. Louis Armstrong was sent on a multi-city tour of Africa in 1960. Eisenhower had political motives unbeknownst to Armstrong and his crew. Eisenhower made an attempt to show the world that race relations in America were under control. This state-sponsored trip was the face of jazz music and “the voice of Africa comes to us from thousands of miles away” said a South African. People all over the

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<sup>34</sup> Letter, “Mes Fideles, Amis”, Beinecke Library.

<sup>35</sup> Robin D. G. Kelly. *Race Rebels, Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 105.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Dudziak. “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (September 1994): 543.

world were exposed to black talent and everyone involved benefitted in different ways. The citizens of the country were entertained, the managers made money off the black entertainers, and the black American entertainers themselves gained a fan base. That fan base was the foundation for future checks, shows, parties, and reputation. Everyone seemed to be a winner in this. African American entertainer Armstrong was very vocal about race relations upon his return to America. He pointed out how he was cordial with Bing Crosby, a famous white minstrel show performer, but they were not friends. He said “I don’t socialize with the top dogs of society after a dance or a concert. Even though I’m invited, I don’t go. These same society people may go around the corner and lynch a negro. But while they’re listening to our music, they’re not thinking about trouble.”<sup>37</sup> Just like Baker, it bothered Armstrong that he was famous but was being used. White people overlooked racial issues with ease because people like Armstrong were the exception to the stereotype, or at least they were when it was convenient for them.

What made Josephine Baker so special was the confusion and controversy she caused. Phyllis Rose argues that “The opening of the *Revue Negre* was exactly the kind of Event that its backers had hoped it would be. It angered and irritated people just enough to guarantee that it would be considered significant.”<sup>38</sup> Josephine Baker did not agree with everything she executed. However, she enjoyed the benefits and the star status. She could not return to St. Louis to be terrorized by the racist white people or criticized by her mother for her job choices. What she did not know was that the criticism was not going to end. Her capitalization of “the Charleston” is an example. She was not afraid of backlash, she was focused on her success.<sup>39</sup> When she arrived in

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<sup>37</sup> Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 72.

<sup>38</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 21

<sup>39</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 24

Paris, she was in luck because the Parisians already admired the black female body. The years of parading and placing black bodies on display served in her favor. Carole Sweeney argues “By distracting attention away from the currency of her black body to her comically expressive facial features, Baker was able to both overcome and subvert the role of the sexually overdetermined black woman.”<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note the difference of an exhibit and a pedestal, however. Baker and others were not seen as superior even though they were seen as other worldly. The extraordinary traits they embodied were linked to exoticism, not imperfection and certainly not white. Exclusion and “othering” did not stop when someone even as famous as Baker travelled the globe. Acceptance was not widespread across Europe. The people of Germany and Vienna had unpleasant reactions to Baker’s presence. Her endeavors were not without confrontation, neither were they delightful just because she was abroad. Roman Horak discussed the “nigger boom” fright in Vienna.<sup>41</sup>

In an article detailing backlash from residents in Vienna, Roman Horak stated “If sexuality or rather eroticism has to be equated with bourgeois decadence, the only non-racist encoding of the phenomenon of the black woman Josephine Baker is recourse to puritan squeaky-cleanliness. Fresh, a scallyway – a sexually neutral image is created to combat the conservatives’ discourse of over-sexualisation.”<sup>42</sup> Sweeney also argued some artists “were

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<sup>40</sup> Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 41.

<sup>41</sup> Roman Horak, “‘We Have Become Niggers!’: Josephine Baker as a Threat to Viennese Culture” *Culture Unbound* 5, no. 4 (2013): 517.

<sup>42</sup> Horak, “‘We Have Become Niggers!’: Josephine Baker as a Threat to Viennese Culture” ,522



inspired by Baker's body as a model of a new human plasticity." <sup>43</sup>Baker was the best crafted sex symbol of her time. She was the perfect blend of black female stereotypes, discomfort, and white spaces. She did all this with the help of lovers, managers, the press, and the French Army.

What did Josephine think of herself? She had written a few biographies before the Second World War *Les Memoires de Josephine Baker*(1949), *Voyages et aventures de Josephine Baker*(1931), and *Une Vie de toutes les couleurs*(1935). <sup>44</sup> Baker sacrificed comfort and widespread approval for what she believed in. Her life was a track meet, the blood sweat and tears were the stereotypes she endured to make it to the finish line. Paul Colin constructed Baker's image because he knew the entertainment industry. Along with Caroline Dudley, she had a successful act *Revue Negre* as her first act in Paris. She gained popularity, and was offered other acts. Overwhelmed with excitement, it took many financial failures before she aligned her career choices with her financial ones. <sup>45</sup>

Europeans' fascination with American popular culture had not yet reached its peak whenever Josephine arrived. Max Reinhardt wanted to make her an even bigger star than she was in Paris. He wanted to train her to be an actress in Berlin. Though she had left from their care, Colin and Dudley were a means of support; her largest thus far. Reinhardt was an accepted replacement. <sup>46</sup> Under the mentorship of Reinhardt, she met Harry Kessler. Rose described his take on Baker as "an ancient Egyptian dancing girl come to life again." <sup>47</sup> She danced at private parties in Berlin, and enjoyed the city for what it was. She came very close to accepting an offer from Kessler to stay in Berlin. After Paul Derval, the showrunner for the *Folies-Bergere* which

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<sup>43</sup> Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935*, 48

<sup>44</sup> Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and The Image*, 156

<sup>45</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 82

<sup>46</sup> Rose, *Jazz, Cleopatra*, 84

<sup>47</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 86

Baker was set to headline, dropped important names he knew would spark her interest she decided to return to Paris. Baker learned her from the job offers and what seemed like a tug of war. She soon realized how much money was being put into her, and how to use that to her advantage. Rose argues that “If *Shuffle Along* was Josephine Baker’s college, Folies-Bergere was her graduate school.”<sup>48</sup>

A notable component of her acts was nudity. Her mentors and artistic acquaintances with many accolades assured her that nudity was the only way she would be noticed. “The next day several people drew me aside to explain that I would never be anything without the poster...What would they say in St. Louis? That night I removed all my clothes.”<sup>49</sup> Rose suggests that Baker’s promiscuity was used as a way to shield her reluctance to trust anyone.<sup>50</sup> Chez Josephine became a space because she wanted her own place, not just headlining a place. She did not place limits on her success, and she did not follow the rules. She now knew she needed to mold a narrative that pleased her. Her actions were just that, actions. Throughout her lifetime, everything she did was intentional, even if the outcome did not serve her. She was more than a stereotype or someone being hypersexualized. One could argue that at times she became her stage act. Baker could not be placed in a box, and it was no accident. Even her marriage to Pepito was manufactured for profit. Once proven false, the story caused uproar in the American press.<sup>51</sup> Baker was no stranger to American criticism. Her theatrics often placed her on the bad side of Black Americans. With so much centered around publicity, she wrote a less dramatic memoir with Marcel Sauvage, *Voyages et aventures de Josephine Baker*.

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<sup>48</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 89-90

<sup>49</sup> Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine* (Harpercollins, 1977), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 116.

Preceding her second trip to Berlin, writer Moriz Scheyer said unpleasant remarks in regard to Baker's performances. Roman Horak highlighted the racism of his column in "*We Have Become Nigger: Josephine Baker as a threat to Viennese Culture.*" "Josephine Baker has so far had great success in exploiting the nigger-boom of our jazz age" wrote Scheyer.<sup>52</sup> A show that an entertainer named Angele Herard created. This was the beginning of her realization that not all of Europe was like France.

One thing she could not win over with her personality was her financial troubles. She faced to legal and financial troubles often times because she broke a contract. Her over the top nightclub, Chez Josephine, was funded with money made in scams by a man that was very fond of her. Because of Chez Josephine's opening, she broke a contract with owners of a nightclub. They had even renamed their club to Josephine Baker's Imperial.<sup>53</sup> Throughout her lifetime, the balance in her bank account hardly remained steady. She spent tons on money on lavish animals, jewelry, and outfits.

Baker took a break from entertaining to serve in the French Army. Hitler was upset that Black French soldiers occupied the Rhineland during the First World War, and targeted them through German media. This was the backdrop for the German audience Baker performed for.<sup>54</sup> During the 1920s, Germans noted many things about American culture. It did not benefit Baker in the way it benefited her in France. "The Nazis saw jazz as the collaborative product of two despised groups, blacks and Jews- thus acknowledging the contribution to jazz of Jewish songwriters like Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen, whose melodies black jazz

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<sup>52</sup> Horak, "'We Have Become Niggers!': Josephine Baker as a Threat to Viennese Culture", 517.

<sup>53</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 111.

<sup>54</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 124.

musicians often used as a basis for improvisation. Jazz was banned from German radio in 1935.”

<sup>55</sup> If jazz was banned, it is not a surprise that Baker had a hard time succeeding in Germany.

Nudity was a controversial form of entertainment in Europe, and Baker’s nudity was unique. She knew her crowd and she knew her country.

Baker was unable to predict reactions from every country she performed for in Europe. Hungarians and Austrians did not want black performers, and the students threw ammonia bombs at her audience. <sup>56</sup> She also faced controversy in Denmark, Zagreb, and Argentina. Baker’s encounters with the people in these countries stole her blissful innocence of being outside of America. She wrote another book, this time a fictional one based on her thoughts about racism. *My Blood in Your Veins* is about a black girl growing up with a white boy ten years her senior. The black girl’s mom works for the family of the white guy. Her rejection outside of France felt much like the rejected she faced back home. While she hardly ignored her race in France, the French did. The European tour did not prove the same outcome.

It is important to note that Josephine Baker and La Revue Negre followed other black acts in Europe. Sissle and Blake’s popular *Chocolate Dandies* was imitated by a German and made *Chocolate Kiddies*. The success of *Chocolate Kiddies* European was how Caroline Dudley got the idea for Revue Negre. <sup>57</sup> What followed was a string of racist encounters for Baker.

Despite Europe being a different crown than Paris, some of her encounters in Europe brought delight. The fans had read her memoirs and adored her. The more than twenty four country tour with Pepito was a turning point in her career. She identified as a black French

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<sup>55</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 127.

<sup>56</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and The Image*, 178.

woman. After this tour, Baker's career gained a new outlook and meaning. It seemed as if before the tour she had not narrowed down what made her a star. She would always be a plethora of talent, however her purpose had shifted.<sup>58</sup>

In 1930, Josephine Baker was the star of the Casino de Paris. This is the show that made Chiquita, her leopard, her costar. She was the "it girl" of Paris nightlife. More than a black muse, and more than an American girl. She was Josephine Baker. One of many turning points in her lifetime.

At the same time as her new identity emerged, Paris was celebrating how it colonized several countries. They celebrated this as a merging of cultures, not as the victimization of said country. Rose argues "Comparisons of French and British colonialism almost always makes the point that France offered her colonial peoples fuller assimilations."<sup>59</sup> The same can be said about Baker's ability to be a mega star in Paris and just a headliner in other European countries. However, all colonization is bad colonization. The benefits that may or may not come afterwards are irrelevant if a blending of cultures is not a mutual agreement. The blending of white and black cultures across borders did not happen by accident. Black people were performing for all white crowds; they were being managed by white people that had molded them into an acceptable figure for white crowds.

Criticism from African Americans back home was not uncommon to Josephine Baker. How she identified and who she sided with was sometimes unclear. She was black and she hated America. She was black but black Americans hated her. She was black, American, and left for Paris but she was the only woman to speak at the March on Washington. She still supported the

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<sup>58</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 138-140.

<sup>59</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 148.

advancement of people that looked like her in America. This further proves how she did not fit into one box. Josephine was many things. Even though she considered herself French, and called it her home, neither France nor America would fully claim her success. She performed a song with the lyrics “I have two loves, my country and Paris.” She went on to say “You see, it’s not a song like any other! It permitted me to express all this momentum..”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Article in French, page 25, Beinecke Library.

## Chapter IV. Josephine Baker as an American Activist and French Spy

Returning to America was somewhat of a setback for Josephine Baker. In 1936, with the assistance of Pepito, she returned to perform in *The Ziegfeld Follies*. She was outshined by someone who was already an American star, Fannie Brice. Regardless of how much she practiced, she would never be the star she was in Paris. American audiences did not welcome her in the way Parisian audiences did. The newspaper articles were awful, and they held “resentment for Baker’s French popularity.”<sup>61</sup> A painful reminder of the land she left as a young girl. It was also during this time that Baker resented being a “Black star.” Paris had made her into a star but America’s Jim Crow climate could not be ignored. Lounges, hotels, and restaurants were segregated. This would give cause for people like Louis Armstrong to dislike her, and other black Americans to be confused by her. While Baker never thought racism was nonexistent in the world, Americans forced her to remember. Her purpose as a star was different in the two countries.

In America, Baker’s actions were more intentional. She had to be much more aware of whom she danced with, where she worked, and who she interacted with. She opened *Chez Josephine*, a lounge, and performed there at night. She made it known that racism was a stone in her path in America. When compared to her Parisian journey, America was quite difficult. The exoticism based entertainment industry that already existed in Paris, coupled with the right coaching, molded Baker into a public figure in Paris. The American formula for her success was different.

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<sup>61</sup>Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 169.

Josephine Baker faced barriers in American entertainment as well as her personal life. Her husband, Pepito, died during her trip to New York. She was only thirty years old and she decided to move back to Paris. She wanted to remarry, was dancing nude again, and she was also no longer singing. Baker's career was starting over. Eventually she married Jean Lion, who was younger, rich, and a Jew. The marriage did not last long, but she gained French citizenship. She also struggled to have children, which was not the first time she faced this battle.<sup>62</sup> Josephine Baker's personal life later played a huge impact in her decisions as an activist and as a mother.

The Second World War was just about to start when she divorced Lion. She was part of the very small number of people that resisted the German occupation of France. She was recruited to be part of the French intelligence. She assisted in undercover acts that aided the French about their enemies, the German and Italian troops.<sup>63</sup> She performed for the soldiers, and wholeheartedly supported France the best way she knew how.<sup>64</sup> It seemed as if she fought for her "home" in ways she wished her native home would have fought for her.

Her celebrity status proved useful for connections during the war. "Baker got the idea of setting up an engagement in Brazil, whose ambassador she knew, and through him arranging for transit visas for Spain and Portugal and exit visas for France."<sup>65</sup> Though her celebrity was of great service to her dear country and its allies, she did not benefit financially from the war. She was against performing in France while it was under Nazi control, but eventually changed her mind to perform in an unoccupied zone. She prepared for a performance at the Theater de

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<sup>62</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 176.

<sup>63</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 184-185

<sup>64</sup> Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and The Image*, 218.

<sup>65</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 187.



L'Opera de Marseille bringing back her *La Creole*.<sup>66</sup> After a short period of time, she received orders to leave France. She managed to end her contract for her tour under the reasoning of her ongoing illness. She and her undercover partner, Abtey, continued to pass information by travelling to places such as Algiers, Tangier, and Portugal. She still practiced Jewish religion, and while in North Africa she aided her ex-husband, Jean Lion, to escape Germany's turmoil or else he would be sent to a concentration camp.

Her partner struggled to gain travel visas, but Baker did not. This proved troublesome for their intelligence efforts, and eventually he left for America in 1941. Meanwhile Baker gained a Spanish visa, and returned to their stages to perform for the first time since before she left for America. As she gained information about German troops, she continued to perform.<sup>67</sup> Baker combatted racism as a French citizen born in America.

With the help of American government, Abtey returned to partner with Baker. Soon after, she fell ill, and was hospitalized for nearly two years right outside of Casablanca. She delivered a stillborn. Maurice Chevalier, who entertained the soldiers alongside her but never cared for Baker, started an exaggerated rumor that she was on her death bed. For two more years, until the French liberation on August 25, 1944, she performed in North Africa, Morocco, and France in order to raise money for the Allied soldiers. The French, British, and American soldiers all had Baker to thank for entertainment as well as aid.<sup>68</sup>

A few years later, America faced heightened Civil Rights activism. In recent years, historians have argued that the Civil Rights Movement happened in waves. This was the "second

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<sup>66</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 189.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 193-195.

<sup>68</sup> Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and The Image*, 218.

wave” of the Civil Rights Movement. The activism that happened simultaneously to Baker’s early years in Paris was described as the first wave. She married Jo Bouillion in 1947 and they embarked on a mission to restore her home, Les Milandes, into an over the top phenomenon. She tried to finance the house with more shows in America. She still faced racism and unsuccessful shows. It was during this visit that she spoke at a historically black college, Fisk University and also decided to become more involved with racial efforts in America. <sup>69</sup>

The first of these efforts was at Copa City, a club in Miami. Josephine Baker went from admiring the money Paris provided for her, to turning down money in Miami until they desegregated the crowd. In 1951, she became the first to perform in front of a desegregated crowd in Miami. This was huge milestone for Baker, and she put on a huge show with celebrities in the audience. She went on to perform vaudeville shows in New York, making over \$7,000 a week and a few more thousand a week in Chicago. She was an American star.

Baker’s mission was to ensure that nightclubs in America had people of every skin color. She no longer accepted circumstances that would only convenience her. She demanded the circumstances she wanted, to benefit people that looked like her. Her team was the first in Las Vegas to all stay at the hotel where the show was featured. Because of segregation, teams were usually split up between different hotels. At the same show in Las Vegas, she reserved tables for NAACP people, both black and white, at her shows. She was very strategic with how she worked her contract. <sup>70</sup>

Baker continued to be vocal about race throughout various cities in America. She was a star in Chicago, Hollywood, and Vegas. She turned down acts in Atlanta because of refusal to

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<sup>69</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 209.

<sup>70</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 210-213.

desegregate audiences. She was awarded with her own day, May 20, 1951, from the New York NAACP. She also supported the protests of Willie McGee, who was executed for allegedly raping a white woman, and supported his wife.

The execution of Willie McGee was the same year as the infamous Stork Club incident in New York. In October of 1951, Baker went to meet friends, the Rico's, and ran into Walter Winchell, a well-known journalist. She and her friends were ignored by the waiters, and her food was not served. After too much time passed without her food, she was certain the service was unfair so she left the restaurant and called a black policeman and a lawyer. She told them she was being discriminated against and based on the Civil Rights Act in New York, it was illegal. After the phone calls, she and her friends received service. She did not eat, but left the food to go meet with NAACP leaders to continue with her complaints.<sup>71</sup>

The Stork Club incident spread like wildfire. Winchell received backlash, and declared that he had no idea what happened. As usual, he spoke on his radio show against discrimination, but he was neutral in the Stork Club incident. Walter White, the NAACP leader Baker had met with, was upset at Winchell's statement. He had met with Winchell and they agreed that his statement would condemn the Stork Club for what happened. Winchell did not keep his word. White used his anger to form picket lines in front of the Stork Club, and the protests lasted for days. The outrage did not end there. The incident turned into a battle of Winchell versus Baker. Winchell had many more connections than her, and he used every resource to fight her efforts to smear his name. His friends supported him by digging up negative things about Baker's past. They continued to have a very public battle. Winchell's career never recovered. For Baker, her

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<sup>71</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 214-219.

career in America changed because of the controversy. Shortly after the incident she went to Argentina and her career was about to shift once again.<sup>72</sup>

In one of those speeches in Argentina she said “I hurt, I feel like crying, because I have to leave you. I’m leaving Argentina in two days. You have become my family...If you or the general should need of me, for whatever reason, I’ll come back running, no matter where I might find myself. I must go to other countries, to try to bring a little moral support to your brothers less fortunate than you. They need me.”<sup>73</sup> Baker had a hunger for helping people. She had been helped so much in her career, and she longed for help before she had a career. Her nurturing spirit was so extreme it translated into an obsession with helping and adopting children.

The Rainbow Tribe was her next endeavor. She approached family like a cultural checklist. When she thought of the family she wanted with her husband, she saw a child of every color. She went on several tours which doubled as trips to adopt children. She adopted two from Japan, one from Scandinavia, one Columbian child, and two French children on the first round of adoptions. She started her string of farewell performances and made a speech in Paris similar to the one in Argentina. She then moved her family that remained in America to live with her at Les Milandes.<sup>74</sup> She continued touring and adopting children. Baker rescued two North African children from the Algerian war and went on to get another African child, an Indian child, and two more French children. She gifted her sister with a child and met Jean-Claude Rouzaud in Paris, who would eventually be her most well-known child and the only informal adoption. Baker adopted these children without any knowledge on how to properly care for them. Her husband was overwhelmed with the care of the children and resented his wife for it. Her mother,

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<sup>72</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 220-230.

<sup>73</sup> Letter “Mes Fideles Amis” Beinecke Library.

<sup>74</sup> Farewell Speech in Paris, Beinecke Library.

who still lived with them, thought the Rainbow Tribe was spoiled.<sup>75</sup> Her children adored her. And after her death they claimed “But, it gives us peace of mind to know that this life will end for us in this manner” and “One day, we will all be buried with Mama!” when being interviewed.<sup>76</sup>

She and Jo Boullion grew apart, the finances were strained, and he eventually moved away. Some of their children would later move to Buenos Aires to meet him, and some moved to Argentina. Because she never played a huge role in how Les Milandes functioned, she was unable to handle it without Jo Boullion. Things were falling apart.<sup>77</sup>

In 1963 she was invited to speak at the March on Washington. She did so in her French military uniform. It solidified her views over the years. And people spoke highly of her speech as they did about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s. Jack Jordan, the same man that invited her to speak at the March, helped her perform at Carnegie Hall the same year. This was the start of her final acts in America. She was finally respected and admired by her black community in America.<sup>78</sup>

Where she seemed to fail were her children. They rebelled, and she sent them to stay with her friend Harry Hurford Janes for some summers. Even Jean-Claude made racist comments about being superior to black people. Seeing racism in her child was hard because she made several efforts to combat racism. She was also growing poorer by the day. In 1968, she began performing again to ease some of the financial burden. She even made a speech in 1968, trying to share her story. She declared “I say again, for those concerned, they are in no danger, and as always, their subsistence and their daily lives are well protected. But this financial crisis in

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<sup>75</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 231-238.

<sup>76</sup> Newspaper clipping, Beinecke Library.

<sup>77</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 240-241

<sup>78</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 241-246.

Milandes is an upset.” She went on to say how the world is now watching and that she will not abandon the Milandes Foundation.<sup>79</sup> Les Milandes was no longer hers.

In 1973, Jack Jordan took her under his wing yet again for more performances at Carnegie Hall. She continued to awe the crowd, even in old age. She returned to Paris, and continued to perform. She was worried about her daughter one day and suffered a heart attack. In June of 1973, against her doctor’s orders, she performed again a week later. She continued to perform, while keeping her failing health a secret. Her last shows were in Monte Carlo, then finally in Paris. *Josephine* was a literal farewell show. A few days after the opening act, she had a stroke during her nap and fell into a coma and died.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Declaration dated February 19, 1968. Beinecke Library.

<sup>80</sup> Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 250-251.

## Conclusion

Josephine Baker's life as a performer, spy, and activist was not typical. Some of the ways she broke barriers and molded her family from different backgrounds was questionable. Louis Armstrong did not approve of Josephine Baker's actions in regards to race relations. They both felt very strongly about racial issues, but they used their platform in different ways. Afterwards Louis Armstrong said of Baker in 1952, "But she's going to come over here and stir up the nation, get all them ofays—people that think a lot of us—against us, because you take a lot of narrow minded spades following up that jive she's pulling—you understand?—then she go back with all that loot and everything and we're over here dangling. I don't dig her."<sup>81</sup>

What Armstrong failed to recognize was that Baker's presence still advanced the community. The March On Washington Speech, a decade after he made the statement about her "stirring up the nation," was where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" Speech. It was a monumental moment for the African American community. Her presence in Paris did not dismiss the fact that she loved her community. It was problematic that she did not want to be labeled as a black woman, and it was fact that she helped black women and men.

Racism was so blatant in America that some African American stars felt they had no choice but to leave. The segregation, the church bombings, and the lynching unarguably took a toll on African Americans. Just like Richard Wright, Lena Horne had a white partner and lived in Paris in 1947 as a singer. Upon her return to the United States, her neighbors in Los Angeles tried to get her kicked out of the neighborhood. Her children were unable to swim in the pool in

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<sup>81</sup> Ben Schwartz, "What Louis Armstrong Really Thinks" The New Yorker, Accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-louis-armstrong-really-thinks>

Las Vegas and her workers could not enter through the front doors of her hotel.<sup>82</sup> The internal battle these black celebrities experienced was a unique one. They reaped the benefits of fame while they encountered the setbacks of being black.

Their willingness to try to move back to the United States showed that they wanted better for America, and better for black people in America. It showed that there were struggles in the other countries as well. America was where their family was, their childhood memories, and most of all it was where they were born. If the public assumes that black celebrities were without a doubt happier in other countries, it is an exaggeration. Opportunity, acceptance, and money were things they longed for, no matter the location. It is also an exaggeration to assume that because the French and President Eisenhower “used” them for their own motives, that these black artists did not know they were being used. Many of these decisions can be viewed as the lesser of two evils.

What these black celebrities had in common was their ability to profit from the environment around them. Many of them came from poor households and some were self-taught. There were no dance lessons for Baker. What they were able to do was find a path of success. Many people, of various races, had mixed feelings about the role black people played in the world. Going to France or other places did not solve the problems of African-American entertainers, it just changed their situation. What is clear is that success brought temporary joy to an issue that no jazz club could solve. There was not enough banana skirt dancing to change the African obsession of the French or the racist practices of the club goers in America.

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<sup>82</sup> May, *The Big Tomorrow*, 173.



African American entertainers abroad experienced once in a lifetime memories. These experiences made them notable, and these experiences made them controversial. What is without question though is the way their talent was strengthened or revealed by being abroad. Not just the talent of entertaining, but the gift of thinking in a different manner. Without another country to compare America to, Josephine Baker might not have labeled herself as just a woman. Louis Armstrong and his bandmates might not have realized they were falsely representing race relations in America. Different perspectives often bring progress and change.

Josephine Baker's life is a clear example of how complicated racism is around the globe. She was deeply disturbed by the racism as a child, and wanted to take control of her life. Many things in life are uncontrollable and the color of your skin was one of them. This hurt many successful black celebrities. Baker had "two loves" and she also had many different journeys. Not only was she denied the stage because of her race, she also denied the stage of her presence if it did not meet her desegregation standards. She used her fame as a cover for her French Resistance missions. She took criticism and kept true to her beliefs. At the core of her mission was love and connection regardless of skin color. And while she forced connection upon her Rainbow Tribe, Josephine Baker wanted to prove race did not disqualify someone of love and acceptance. Highs and lows came with leaving America as a black person in search of success. These celebrities learned just how chaotic America really was, and also how the world outside of their small town values them. Their stories are important; whether they are about appreciating the many black faces back home, or about the freedom to be black in Paris. The stories of African American's experiences outside of the United States are an important part of African American History.

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