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“The More You Look, the More You See”

Josephine Baker, Motherhood, Nation, Race and Identity

The title of this paper, “the more you look, the more you see” has been lifted from one of Josephine Baker’s better known numbers, “Don’t Touch My Tomatoes.” Costumed as a Creole produce vendor, Baker would fend off unwanted customers on stage, all the while tossing fruits and vegetables to audience members. Her song proffered a warning to a potential customer who might attempt to “squeeze” her merchandise:

Mister, take advice from me
The more you look, the less you see
But if you must have your way
Twice the price you’ll have to pay.

It is this cautionary note from Baker that resonates most strongly today. As Josephine Baker experiences a resurgence in popularity, critics and scholars would do well to heed her warning that “the more you look the less you see.” Much contemporary criticism around Baker has fallen prey to this reductionary tendency. Her racialized body is central in much of this work, as various critics consider the implications of the reception of her early dancing in Europe, particularly France; the various representations of her body by different artists; and the function of her body as a signifier for a series of cultural moments and movements, including modernism, primitivism, and jazz.¹ Central to these inquiries is Baker’s performance of the “exotic savage” (a construct she exploited in the dance routines that made her famous) and French anxieties around both race and colonialism. However, with the exception of Andrea D. Barnwell, there appears to be little interest in considering Baker as an active agent in the production of her image. Nor does there appear to be much interest in

contemplating Baker's attempts to complicate and develop her own public persona in response to this early European perception of her. Contemporary critics remain as transfixed by the potency of Baker's banana skirt as the audience of her own day. Writes Barnwell:

[C]onfining Baker to the realm of a performer who was solely preoccupied with satisfying colonial fantasies does not acknowledge her self-agency, autonomy, or ability to influence European perceptions of African women. (85)

By extension, confining the study of Josephine Baker's self-production to the study of her performance and reworking of the "comic piccaninny," the "exotic savage," and the "glamorous chanteuse" ignores an equally important public persona she constructed for herself: the "Universal Mother" who presided over a "Rainbow Tribe" of twelve multi-racial, multi-ethnic adopted children. My intention here is not to write the definitive analysis of Josephine Baker and her complex relation to motherhood, but rather to signal some potential directions deserving of exploration if Baker criticism is to continue to evolve.

Baker's rise to fame has been well documented, though each version still bears the marks of her tendency to self-mythologize the events of her life. Born in 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri to an African American mother and an absent but assumed white father, Baker's early life was spent in poverty and subject to racial prejudice (Baker and Chase 16-17). While it is uncertain whether or not she witnessed the three-day East St. Louis race riots of early July 1917, their impact on the city and its inhabitants was inescapable. Martial law was declared as between forty and two hundred blacks were killed, and historic black neighborhoods burned (Bennett 520). Baker, who would have been nine at the time, cites this event as formative in her understanding of racial politics. Married just four years later, by age fourteen she left her husband of a year and joined a group of African American performers at a local theater. A year later Baker found work as a chorus girl in the legendary all-black revue, "Shuffle Along." Through a combination of talent, dedication, self-promotion and mastery of a minstrel tradition that many audiences still applauded, Baker assured her prominence in "Shuffle Along." It was her success as a comic actress in the United States, often in blackface, that brought her to the attention of a producer seeking to mount an all-black show in France. In 1925 Josephine Baker traveled to Paris as one of the featured stars of "La Revue Negre." The sexually and racially charged "La Danse de Sauvage" featured a topless Josephine in a skirt of feathers, and a similarly unclothed Joe Alex. Their performance of an assortment of seemingly spontaneous and certainly sexually explicit movements—the most memorable of which apparently involved Baker's ability to move her bottom—ignited a Parisian fascination with her that was to last for decades.

While Baker exploited this Parisian fame and fascination for her own ends, she also struggled to redefine herself as something more politically and/or socially relevant. This is first evident in her work with the French Resistance during the Second World War when she smuggled information encoded on her sheet music, and passed off an Allied spy as her accompanist. For these risks she received the Croix de Guerre, France's highest honor. Yet Baker rarely mentioned her work in the Resistance, either publicly or privately, instead locating her most significant political activism in her decision to adopt children of different nationalities as a means of proving that ethnic and racial divisions were false distinctions.

Baker claims her idea for the adoptions first occurred to her during a transatlantic crossing on a French "Liberty Ship" after the Second World War. Physically incapable of having children, Baker combined her desire for motherhood and family with a belief that war was unnecessary as individuals of different races, religions, ethnicities and nations could co-exist peacefully. According to Baker:

It would be my own experiment in brotherhood, and I would use a unique formula. I decided to adopt as many children as I could, and to segregate them from the environments that they were in; and not only would I teach them, but I would bring in people to teach them all sorts of things I did not know. As they grew up with each other in close harmony, not knowing anything about what life was really like in the outside world, as they grew up they could go out as emissaries of peace and brotherhood themselves, and pretty soon their children, and even *their* children, could spread the word of brotherhood. I figured that if somebody didn't start all this no one ever would, and I decided then it would be me. I would get children from every race, every creed, every religion. They would be every color of the rainbow. Then it hit me all at once. They would be the Rainbow Children of Josephine Baker. (Papich 135)

Baker originally planned to adopt a little girl (Papich 134). Now, with this grand vision, the imagined girl was abandoned in favor of an army of boys, as Baker believed "it is so much more important for men to get along than women" (Haney 269). That Baker, herself an international symbol and star—and in this incarnation, a "world ambassador" through her assumption of the role of universal mother—did not see women as capable of enacting her vision raises several questions. Was Baker acknowledging the ongoing difficulties of women in gaining access to political arenas? Did she see men as more effective and capable political agents? Given her politicization of motherhood, did she not see potential daughters as capable of continuing that tradition? After all, the African American rhetoric of racial uplift had long emphasized the role of women as important as simultaneous reproducers of children and racial uplift

ideology. Or did she simply prefer boys? Regardless of her reasons, she did eventually adopt two girls (although the second girl was adopted at the urgings of the first, tired of being one sister with ten brothers).

In 1953 Baker initiated her plan. Miki Sawada, the head of a Japanese orphanage for the children of American soldiers and Japanese women, received a letter from her friend. It outlined a course of action, and effectively "ordered" her first child. Wrote Baker:

I would like you to find for me a Japanese baby of pure race, a healthy one, two years old. I want to adopt five little two-year-old boys, a Japanese, a black from South Africa, an Indian from Peru, a Nordic child, and an Israelite; they will live together like brothers. (Baker and Chase 326)

Baker found not one but two children in Sawada's orphanage. They were not "of pure race," as per her original request, but Eurasian babies fathered by American soldiers. It is significant that while Baker encountered the children of African American soldiers, she did not consider adopting them. While doing so would certainly have been philanthropic, given Japanese prejudices against blacks, it is unlikely that they fit Baker's vision of her "Rainbow Tribe." It would be easier, after all, to present mixed white/Asian children as representatively Asian to a white audience, than it would be mixed black/Asian children.

From the very beginning then, it is obvious that Baker's ideal audience for her experiment was most likely a white European, or possibly American, male. This "implied audience" suggests that Baker's own ability to challenge the centrality of discourses that privileged whiteness or masculinity was limited. Clearly Baker engaged in European ethnocentric discourses when she, as Phyllis Rose observes, took "racial children" and used them "for white purposes" (238). Indeed, it is impossible to read Baker's grocery listing of ethnicities to Sawada without noting that it engages in the very process of racial objectification that she might seemingly want to disprove. Ultimately, ample evidence exists that Josephine Baker's Rainbow Tribe experiment was not intended to disprove racial differences, but instead to demonstrate that *despite* their differences, individuals from various backgrounds could co-exist in "worldly brotherhood" (Papich 159). As their mother, it was Baker's duty to facilitate their progress. As the supervisor of the experiment, it was her duty to document it. An eager Josephine shared her research with her unofficial "thirteenth son," a young man she had formed an attachment with, and who eventually adopted her name. According to Jean-Claude Baker, Josephine revealed:

I have kept a file on each child. You will not believe it, but as they grow up, they develop the characteristics and faults of their race. Look at Aiko. Like the Japanese, he'll smile at you and knife you in the back.

And Luis, have you noticed what a beautiful black boy he is? He will drive the girls crazy, and in the end he will fall in love with one who drags him around by the nose. (Baker and Chase 442)

The stereotypes invoked remain recognizable today. It is apparent that Baker interpreted the characters of her children according to a pre-scripted plan that emphasized essentialized differences. To *not* believe in essential differences or racial characters would have in fact rendered her plan redundant.

There was, therefore, a vested interest in the notion of “difference” among the Rainbow Tribe. Baker, not content with the mix of her first five children (representing Japan, Finland, Columbia—Luis was the first of two black children— and France), actively sought a Jewish child. Upon Israel’s denial of her request to adopt a male child (Israel was a new nation anticipating conflict and was reluctant to relinquish a potential future soldier), Josephine simply “manufactured” one. Selecting a child at a foster home near Paris, Josephine changed his name from Alain Jean-Claude to Moise, gave him a yarmulke, and announced he would be fed only kosher food. As her wardrobe mistress observed: “She wanted all races, all religions, and she would give them the religion she wanted on the spot” (Baker and Chase 336). And so, when after the massacre of an Algerian town two children were found hidden behind bushes, Josephine adopting them both, decreed one would be Catholic, the other Muslim. Jeanne (the first girl) became Marianne and Jacques became Brahim (Baker and Chase 339), acquiring names symbolic of the racial/ethnic categories they were intended to represent. Later, when politically strategic, Josephine would claim she had adopted a Turkish child (Baker and Chase 461)— she hadn’t—and that one French son was actually French-Canadian—he wasn’t (Haney 301).

This deliberate manufacturing of difference has several implications. It suggests that Baker felt that a proliferation of difference added credibility to her project by purportedly extending its scope. It also implies that methodology was not her primary concern, nor was the integrity of the “experiment” as Baker titled it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the project of manufacturing difference reveals the curatorial impulse behind the Rainbow Tribe. Implicit in this curatorial impulse is the desire to exhibit. After all, if the Rainbow Tribe experiment was solely for Josephine’s own benefit, then there would be no reason to fabricate a Jewish child. Clearly, the Rainbow Tribe was intended to be a parade of difference, a stunning visual statement that conveyed an implicit ideological statement to a larger audience. And as a performer, Baker recognized the importance of props, visual display, and spectacle. She also most particularly understood the fascination for racial difference on the part of the French public.

Baker’s children then, became subjects for public consumption, their allure ironically enhanced by the very things they were supposed to overcome: their plurality of “differences.” From the initial conception of her idea, Josephine had

decided that her experiment would be located at Les Milandes, a large chateau she had purchased with proceeds from her performing (Papich 135). With her then-husband, bandleader Jo Bouillon, Baker set about transforming the chateau into a suitable environment. A local electrician recalled of the time:

At the beginning, she put billboards along the road saying 9COME SEE LES MILANDES AND ITS RAINBOW TRIBE. The people all around protested, "You don't show little children like monkeys," so she had the billboards taken down. (Baker and Chase 331)

Baker did exhibit her children, however. Between 1954 and 1959, Les Milandes averaged five hundred thousand visitors a summer (Haney 272). Apparently,

[W]hen the youngsters were indoors they could be observed through a picture window. They were washed, reprimanded, fed in full view of anyone willing to pay an extra five francs for the spectacle, and the cameras never stopped. (Baker and Chase 333)

The Baker family also endorsed products, including a French soft drink (Hammond 206). Postcards bearing their images and programs reciting their individual stories could be purchased at the Les Milandes gift shop. Baker even approached Disney, suggesting they make a film about her family (Baker and Chase 345). Recalls her fifth son:

For outsiders we appeared to be little princes, living in a chateau surrounded by governesses and tutors. But for us it was more like a prison. A prison with golden bars for sure. (Hammond 214)

Another child, the third son, remembers "To visit the chateau... the people would come through the big iron gate, and in the courtyard was a chain with a sign that said FORBIDDEN TO PASS ... and Maman would push us out a little, so the visitors could see us." With what seems like resignation, he adds: "We could not understand her spirit of brotherhood" (Baker and Chase 334).

While Baker's display of the children was ostensibly to spread her message of "worldly brotherhood," and provide the financial means of supporting her children, the manifestations of this message, there appears to be a certain shallowness in her actions. Her mixture at Les Milandes of elements of the "high" (her ideals) and the "low" (the cows' names were written in lights) occasionally resulted in the ridiculous, if not carnivalesque. Additionally, in light of her construction and marketing of the identities of her children, Baker's claim in her 1964 "treatise" on "The Ideal of Brotherhood in Les Milandes as Seen by Josephine Baker" suggesting that she was a vessel for divine intervention, reflects a certain self-aggrandizing strain in her mission:

My opinion is that I was blessed to have been chosen by God to be exactly the one bestowed with such a responsibility. I will never have given enough of myself to please God, and have done my duty, in giving a “world symbol of brotherhood” as true and beautiful as that of my children. (Papich 154)

Clearly, Baker’s deliberate construction of her family and her mission reflects an investment in a corresponding construction of her own persona as “mother.”

The concept of Josephine Baker as “mother,” particularly as mother to a large racially diverse group of children has a series of implications of which she was no doubt aware. Firstly, it is unlikely that Baker would have been allowed as a cabaret singer and performer to adopt this many children in her native United States. Baker’s claim that she would have been killed in the U.S. for attempting to carry out her vision of a multi-racial family is perhaps exaggerated, but it stands that as a wealthy Black woman it is unlikely that she would have been legally permitted in her birth country to adopt white children. In the 1950s many whites generally still saw black women as potential “mammies” for white children, not mothers. While Baker’s adoption of Jari, a Finnish child, was ostensibly initiated to disprove Hitler’s thinking by proving that a black woman could effectively raise an Aryan child (Bouillon and Baker 207), it was obviously also a response to the racially charged attitudes of the United States.

The excess and spectacle of Baker’s adoptions also assured attention for her assumption of the role of motherhood, disrupting traditionally limited roles assigned by the public to women in entertainment. Mainstream media was generally unwilling to disrupt the marketable image of a sexual woman with the less commodifiable image of her as mother. Black women found themselves doubly disadvantaged in this respect; as the repositories of culturally racialized desire, and the repositories of white fantasizing about the racial “other.” African American film star Dorothy Dandridge, subject to this representational rut, lamented that “she was not allowed to portray the domestic aspect of her image on-screen” (Rippy 26). That Baker was able to portray motherhood with an excess of agency is at odds with the mainstream American tendency to represent black women as either sexual predators or asexual mammies. Certainly Baker discontinued her habit of taking well-known lovers once she had adopted her children. But it is hard not to read this decision as a moral one within the framework of the 1950s. Stating “Now that I am a symbol of motherhood it would not be fitting for me to take lovers” (Haney 289), Baker did not by extension relinquish her sexuality. Both sexual and maternal, she in fact utilized her sexually and racially charged persona to support her children.

Yet Baker also fought against the glamour of her public image, wanting to be taken seriously as a mother. In an age where stars were photographed with their children for the purposes of showcasing their perfect lives, or in contrived moments of “spontaneity,” some of the photos of Baker are almost shocking.

Sanitized 1950s images of motherhood replete with starched skirts and aprons are dismissed in favor of more realistic scenarios. Baker, like any mother of twelve, has bags under her eyes, and resembles more an exhausted working class woman than an international star. Wrote Baker: "I am not complaining. On the contrary I have a kind of gratefulness to God for having made me suffer morally, physically and spiritually for the ideal that Milandes represents (Papich 155).

But to what degree is this too a performance, a construction on Baker's part? The preservation of Les Milandes from its creditors on more than one occasion depended upon public pleas to the masses for their financial support (Baker was an acknowledged terrible money manager). Central to the success of these public appeals was the image of Josephine Baker as the self-sacrificing, self-effacing mother/martyr, a role her treatise on brotherhood, intended as a fundraising document, invokes. Performing motherhood was as important as performing the image of Josephine, and in some instances they became inseparable. In the 1950s and 1960s she would end each public performance with her number "Dans mon Village" which catalogued and described each of her adopted children (Hammond 209). A "tear-jerker" this number was guaranteed to garner sympathy alternately for her vision, her children whose mother was forced to work to support them (something she emphasized), and herself. Motherhood then, was an integral part of not only her private life, but also the carefully constructed persona she presented to her public audience. Her acknowledgement of motherhood as something commodifiable further suggests a playfulness and savvy not usually attributed to Baker in her later years.

Whether or not Josephine Baker's Rainbow Tribe satisfied her initial vision we will never know. For who will dare to speculate what it was that she really wanted? The contradictions in her self-representation might be read as flaws or alternately, as refusals to conform. However, without a doubt they demonstrate the complexity of a woman whose "body of criticism" has not yet caught up with the opportunities for study that she represents. Josephine Baker deserves to be re-read as an active agent whose carefully crafted and ever evolving image represented her awareness of and engagement with national and international discourses around race, nation, identity and finally, motherhood.

¹The exception to this vein of criticism around "Baker's-body-as text" is Mary L. Dudziak's "Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War," which examines the impact of her outspoken condemnation of United States racism, and her reception in—as well as her ability to enter—the country of her birth (*Journal of American History*, September 1994).

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