Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, nº 16 (2012) Seville, Spain, ISSN 1133-309-X, 125-139

BLACK STATES OF DESIRE: JOSEPHINE BAKER, IDENTITY AND THE SEXUAL BLACK BODY

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Received 29th September 2012
Accepted 28th November 2012

KEY WORDS
identity, sexuality, black body, commodification, agency.

PALABRAS CLAVE
identidad, sexualidad, cuerpo de color, comodificación, agencialidad.

ABSTRACT
Josephine Baker‘s performance of the black female body on the Paris stage in the 1920's and 1930's is one example of the commodification of black sexuality. It had its precedent in the nineteenth century in Saartjie Baartman, known as the "Venus Hottentot", who became a symbol of deviant sexuality.
White men felt lured by the "exotic" and "the other", and Josephine Baker would highlight her backside in her dance performance to arouse male desire, providing her audience with a spectacle of the primitive. As a result, the female body that had been the object of sexual exploitation in the times of slavery transformed itself in the means to entrap and sway the white coloniser's erotic impulse.
Thus, what this article aims to prove is the contribution of Josephine Baker to a new female black identity using a postcolonial and post-positivist approach to her performances on stage and her own life. She gave a new meaning to the black female body through agency and sexuality, transforming black women into speaking subjects.

RESUMEN
La puesta en escena de Josephine Baker del cuerpo de color femenino en los escenarios de París en los años 20 y 30 es un ejemplo de la comodificación de la sexualidad femenina. Tiene su precedente en el siglo XIX en Saartjie Baartman, conocida como la "Venus Hottentot", quien se convirtió en un símbolo de la sexualidad desviada.
Los hombres blancos se sentían hipnotizados por "lo exótico" y "la otredad", y Josephine Baker realzaba su trasero durante su baile para provocar el deseo masculino, proporcionando a su público un espectáculo de lo primitivo. Como resultado, el cuerpo femenino que había sido objeto de explotación sexual en la época de la esclavitud se transformaba en el medio para atrapar y dominar el impulso erótico del colonizador blanco.

De este modo, lo que este artículo trata de probar es la contribución de Josephine Baker a una nueva identidad femenina de color utilizando un enfoque postcolonial y postpositivista en cuanto a sus actuaciones en el escenario y en su propia vida. Ella le dio un nuevo sentido al cuerpo femenino de color a través de la agencialidad y la sexualidad, transformando los cuerpos de las mujeres de color en sujetos con voz.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Josephine Baker's performance of the black female body on the Paris stage in the 1920's and 1930's is one example of the commodification of black sexuality and the marketing and fetishization of the black female body, as Professor Mae Henderson has argued in her scholarly work of recent years.[2] This process had its precedent in the nineteenth century Saartjie Baartman, known as the "Venus Hottentot", who, due to the prodigious size of her back end, became the embodiment of black racialised sexuality and the object of observation and study on the part of the Western scientific world. She became a symbol of deviant sexuality that attracted the male gaze. White men felt lured by the exotic and the "Other."

In the same fashion, Josephine Baker would highlight her backside as well as other parts of her body in her dance performances to arouse the white man's desire and to capture his sexual imagination. However, she also used her control over her body to counterbalance the discourse of power that had made the black female body the object of sexual exploitation and colonization in the times of slavery; she used her sexuality to entrap the white man's look and erotic impulse.

Therefore, Josephine Baker's black body transformed itself in a cultural production, that is, a "text of culture", in Susan Bordo's words, where specific messages can be read (165-184). Her "savage dance" and her "banana dance" of the first years of Paris performance gave her phallic potency and aesthetic power, making a parody of the primitive through her animal movements. She also took control of all the merchandising of her public image, and she used her power as a celebrity to fight American segregation.

Thus, what this paper seeks to examine is the contribution of Josephine Baker to the construction of a new female black identity using a postcolonial and post-positivist approach to her performances on stage and in her own life. She gave a new meaning to the black female body through agency, subverting the subject/object position of the white male observer and the black dominated woman, and inverting the binaries self/other, slave/coloniser, and primitive/civilised. As a consequence, black women's bodies became speaking subjects.

[1] The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Research for the writing of this paper (Research Project FEM2010-18142).
[2] The author wishes to acknowledge that she is indebted to Prof. Mae Henderson for inspiring this paper and illuminating much of the research insight provided by it.

2. JOSEPHINE BAKER: A NEW WOMAN, A NEW DIVA

Josephine Baker was born an artist and a woman of character in St. Louis in 1906 at a time when racism was at its height. Her mother was black, but her father was probably white, so her skin colour was not very dark. This beginning gave her a hybrid physical and cultural identity which prevailed for the rest of her life. She married Billy Baker in Philadelphia in 1921, and made her appearance on stage in *Shuffle Along* to then take part in a famous show that was renamed *The Chocolate Dandies*, which was a success in New York in 1924. By that time, Josephine was living in Harlem, but in 1925 she was offered to travel to Paris and star in an all-black musical revue called *La Revue Nègre*. This was the start of an unstoppable European career which transformed her from artist to diva (McMillen & Roberson 69-70).

She became the representation of American blackness and quintessential "otherness" and constructed herself as postmodern and postcolonial (Glover 2). Her dance and her banana skirt exemplified the multiple significations and interpretations of Postmodernism. Similarly, her experimentation on stage also provided her performances with a halo of postmodernity in a modern era, connected with gender and race. The materialization of all this was her new life in Paris; the theatre transformed into a restaurant after her performance, and she "sat and dined with white people for the first time in her life" (McMillen & Roberson 71). She was adored by men, and a suitor rented her a flat where she kept snakes, monkeys and birds. Animals became a symbol of her eccentric character, and she even walked in Paris with her pet cheetah called "Chiquita", making statements like "people have done me the honour of comparing me to an animal", in clear reference to her animalism on stage (cf. Jefferson 4).

At this time, an Italian Count, Pepito Abatino, was her manager and helped her to learn to sing and have good manners. He became her Pygmalion, but Josephine was not only a new diva, but also a New Woman.[3] The New Woman was a cultural production of the Western world which, in the case of France, acquired special relevance in the inter-war period; this woman represented a new freedom which also meant a threat to sexual divisions and "society as a whole" (Stovall 2). In this sense, Josephine Baker stood as a symbol, not only of primitivism and blackness, but also

[3] The New Woman appeared in Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century and was also a relevant figure in the early twentieth century. It was a concept applied to a new kind of woman who had a series of traits of character and behaviour which made her be categorised as "modern." In the case of England, the New Woman was a social figure and a literary character that began to question the institution of marriage, the role of women as mothers, and also religious values and social norms, claiming the right of women to be independent and have a proper education and access to the labour market. One example of a character like this can be Sue Bridehead, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. (Jordan, 19)

of this new form of femininity. During the Great War, women in many western countries, including France, had occupied many men's jobs, provoking issues of gender dislocation; all these changes led women to live away from their parents and do certain jobs, like clerks, typists or shop assistants, which they had not done before. These new women did not marry and had a social and sexual independence that conformed most of the cultural anxieties about the destruction of traditional female values and the blurring of gender roles. In the case of France, the emergence of the New Woman had also important consequences for women's fashion as:

> […] designer Coco Chanel pioneered the new look in women's clothing: short skirts, collars, short hair and a minimalist waist and bust. Imitating both masculine fashion and Cubist mechanical aesthetics, this new fashion look became the *sine qua non* of the modern young Parissiene. (Stovall 3)

Thus, "la garçonne", "the new bachelor girl" was born, and Josephine Baker stood for this new kind of woman in her appearance and behaviour, not only in life but also on stage: she wore her hair short and "boyishly slimming dresses" (Stovall 7); she was not voluptuous, but exercised her sensuality through dance and the movements of her body, enchanting the white man's gaze. Similarly, she enacted the New Woman in her early films, *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), *Zou Zou* (1934) and *Princess Tam Tam* (1935). New Women never succeeded in love, and this is what happened to her characters in films that performed and reproduced her life as an artist; the aim was to stress her talent as an actress and a singer (Raynaud 2).
The same happened to her in real life: like her characters, she showed a strong will in her work and in her search for happiness, but she was not successful in love. She married a rich Jewish industrialist, Jean Lion, in 1937, but a year later she divorced him because she could not lead a quiet life. With the outbreak of the Second World War, her life suffered a sudden change: Jacques Abtey and Josephine became lovers and she fled away from France in 1941 because she was afraid of the Germans: she spent some time in Casablanca (Morocco) and Spain, and helped the Jews during the war; she even sold her jewels to help the victims of the conflict. She gave love a last opportunity when she married Jo Bouillon in 1947, but this union was not successful either (McMillen & Roberson 74, 78-80).
Holding to the cultural and social stereotype of the New Woman, she could not have her own children, but she defied this constricting convention by adopting children from different nationalities with her last husband. By doing this, she challenged the colonial white supremacy with its purity of breed, promoting global tolerance in her humanistic project at her country house of Les Milandes. They adopted twelve kids of different ethnic backgrounds and religions between 1953 and 1962, which became Baker's famous "rainbow tribe" (Eburne 2). With this, she intended to prove the possibility of the coexistence of different races and cultures. In her words:

> Surely the day will come when colour means nothing more than skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one's soul; when birthplaces have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood. (cf. Jefferson 4)

She educated her children in their native languages and they would be reintroduced in their native countries at twelve; therefore, she wanted to preserve the racial and cultural differences in her tribe.
Josephine Baker's attitude and ideas had been a threat during the interwar years, when the concept of French identity was at stake with the presence in the metropolis of the colonised migrant. With the civilizing failure, France moved from assimilation to a new theory of association, which emphasised the difference between the races. The motherland could not produce enough subjects to preserve the French breed and miscegenation was out of the question, so French women who still abided by the values of purity and domesticity had to be sent to the colonies to domesticate the French colonisers, and avoid the mixing of the races (Stovall 4-6). Thus, apart from getting involved in the fight against the Nazis and the protection of the Jews during the Second World War, she made the battle against segregation in the United States her personal crusade, defending that all men and women are born equal. She denounced the United States for racism and became a French citizen by marriage in 1937, being conferred the Legion of Honour in 1961. Josephine Baker suffered discrimination herself before going to Paris and during her 1951 US tour when she was refused service at the Stork Club; she gave speeches in the United States, Cuba, Latin America and France (Eburne 2). She was also present at the march on Washington in 1963 to pressure the Congress to adopt a bill sent by President John F. Kennedy to offer federal protection and equal rights to African Americans in the United States. She died in debt, after being forced to sell Les Milandes , and having to perform in several tours to keep her tribe, but she was coherent with her principles until the end, remaining the true new woman and new diva of Modernism and postcolonial France (McMillen & Roberson 87-90).

3. STAGING THE OTHER, PERFORMING BLACK

Josephine Baker epitomised "The New Negro" figure of the Harlem Renaissance and the Parisian culture of avant-garde negrophilia –the love for black culture-- (Habel 127). The colonial experience introduced the French to "black culture", understood as African folk art. (Sowinska 2) On one occasion, she said: "It is the intelligence of the body that I have exploited" (cf. Jefferson 2), but she was the legitimate heir of the cultural tradition of the "Venus Hottentot", and of African American music and dance. Similarly, her body was the repository of ancestral memory and the site of resistance to colonization and objectification, vindicating the agency and subjectivity of the black woman.

The most important precedent of the commodification of the black female body and the exhibition of the primitive can be found in the South African Sara/Saartje Baartman, a Khoisan woman known as the Venus Hottentot. In her, we find a combination of two tropes concerning black female sexuality: the Black Venus and the Savage Hottentot. In nineteenth-century England and France, Baartman represented and dramatised the "social anxieties and conflicting emotions that audiences held toward the black female body", provoking feelings of desire and disgust (Hobson 17). The Black Venus carried with her the lure of exotic black sexuality, and the Savage Hottentot carried the meaning of bestiality and uncontrolled sexual instinct. In both cases, they were seen as a threat to the white dominant culture and as a dangerous attraction for the white colonial gaze.

Sara Baartman was a captive separated from her family and forced to labour as a servant for a Boer farmer called Peter Cezar. It seems that Cezar's brother, Hendrik, signed a contract with her to display her body in Europe, so when she was about twenty she travelled to England, where she was first exhibited in London in September 1810. What called Hendrik Cezar's attention was the size of her buttocks, a condition known as "steatopygia", and she shared her protagonism with other freaks that took part in sideshows in Picadilly Circus. Later, the exhibition continued in the English countryside, and she reappeared in Paris in 1814, where she caused sensation (Hobson 35-36, 42). However, in either December 1815 or January 1816, Baartman died, and her body was kept at the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle (Hobson 46). After her death she became the object of scientific study, leaving behind her role of "circus 'freak' and ethnographic spectacle" (Henderson, *About Face* 132). The anatomist George Cuvier dissected and examined her body to highlight the racial and sexual differences between blacks and Europeans. Not only her prominent rear end but also the size of her genitalia, which showed an extra flap of skin covering the labia known as the Hottentot Apron, which became to symbolise deviant black sexuality in the colonial imagination. The dissected parts of her corpse, including her genitalia, her skeleton, and her brain were on display, together with a plaster cast till the end of the twentieth century, when her remains were repatriated as a national symbol to South Africa in 2002.

Similarly, Josephine Baker's dance can be considered a continuation of the African American tradition connected with slavery and diaspora. In this sense, black dance is defined as a cultural hybrid (Kalaidjian 4), which combines the cultural roots of Africa and America, the middle passage, and even the Caribbean. This tradition includes plantation dances, such as the ring dance and juba, the cakewalk, the Charleston, the black bottom and the jitterbug (which travelled from Harlem to Paris). These dances could be seen on the Paris stages (Henderson, *Colonial* 8). Especially important was the influence of jazz and the music hall.

Baker's primitive modernism embodied for many the spirit of jazz. According to T.J. Gordon, "jazz had reached Paris as early as 1917, with the arrival of African

American regiments in France, whose bands, such as Harlem's Hellfighters and Seventy Black Devils, performed throughout the country" (2-3). Jazz had been long associated with the tradition of the music hall, for which artists and intellectuals felt an attraction; music halls constituted a popular alternative to the traditional theatre with their flamboyant staging and settings, their costly costumes and their innovative shows, which even included acrobatics. Paris's most famous music halls were the Folies-Bergère, the Casino de Paris and the Moulin Rouge. On their stages, Parisians could see the performance of the Other and the uncovered female body (Henderson, *Josephine* 118).

The white colonial imaginary felt lured by the notion of primitivism as a way of escaping the rationality of the West and of asserting the modernity and the social and technological advancement of the European continent, in sharp and clear contrast with the childish and uncivilised East. Accordingly, the black dancing body became synonymous with exoticism, primitivism, savagery and otherness, involving a notion of the dangerous that captivated the male dominant look (Henderson, *Josephine* 113). There was a fascination with black butts. Indigenous dance performances were depicted as exotic, wild, uninhibited and indecent, and functioned as indices of lesser developed cultures. The tam-tams or African group dances, the sorcerers, and other entertainment African traditions provoked the coloniser's desire, and the attraction for the unknown and different (Henderson, *Josephine* 113). That was the context in which Josephine Baker used her body and her performances to pursue her agency, and to assert her subjectivity and identity. According to Professor Mae Henderson, this cultural exchange was a combination of the coloniser's need to look, that is, voyeurism, and the colonised's desire to be looked at, that is, exhibitionism (Henderson, *Josephine* 108), but it was this interplay that allowed Baker to subvert the white dominant colonial discourse. In the same fashion, nudity represented barbarity and clothing civilization, but she respected the conventions about the body, and combined the notions of primitive innocence with a modern urban style (Mc Carren 2, 4).

Her savage dance with Joe Alex at the Theatre des Champs-Elysées and her banana dance at the Folies-Bergère are examples of all this: when she performed the savage dance at the end of *The Revue Nègre* in 1925, the stage was set as a nightclub in Harlem, and with the sounds of tam-tams drumming, Josephine Baker appeared adorned only in rings of feather; she then started an erotic dance with a naked hunter which incited the audience's frenzy. Her banana dance, probably the most famous representation of African primitivism, took place in 1927 in a clearly colonial setting, a jungle where the rhythms of the tam-tams could be heard being played by loin-clothed natives, and Josephine Baker appeared wearing just a belt of bananas, becoming the physical personification of colonial fantasy (Gordon 5). Baker's performance as the Harlem dancer mixed the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real in a Lacanian sense, because of the complex layerings of her performative space,

staging the "Eurocentric demand for escapist exoticism" (Kalaidjian 4). According to Alicja Sowinska, the banana skirt could be seen as empowering on both sides of the stage: "Male spectators could safely fantasise about being an African explorer confronted with a native woman", and, similarly, Josephine Baker, "through her gender and race manipulations, could feel a degree of control over an audience" (4). The banana skirt was first made of rubber, then it was transformed into something glittering and pointed, and later into "strategically placed, menacing spikes", invoking male orgasm (Sowinska 1). The fact that she moved her body in her dance, particularly her rear end, often associated with savage female black sexuality, allowed her to play with male desire. She manipulated all these banana-phalluses hanging from her skirt at her own wish, gaining female power through this phallic potency usually attributed to men. Similarly, this representation on stage of male sexuality on a female black body gave Baker aesthetic power.

Baker knew how to use her dance in the first stages of her career to produce a new cultural and social identity for black women, meeting the demands of the metropolis at the same time. In fact, for many critics, dance is a means of challenging essentialist notions of identity and of creating new constructions of the self (Henderson, *Colonial* 3). It is here that a post-positivist notion of identity that gets its meaning from experience and emotions can be applied to her.[4] Accordingly, Baker's agency takes place within a process of search and discovery in which she is able to discern crucial features of her situation and make the most of them. This agency also leads her to an emotional growth that allows her to fight issues of sexism and racism. She commanded the public gaze and could manipulate the fantasies attached to black femininity.

Baker learnt to sing and act to have a tighter control of her performances; her choreographies were created to reinforce European ideas of racial difference. Choreography at the time was a male-dominated profession; in this light, her improvisations must be seen. She feigned to forget the steps to produce her own moves, mimicking and improvising, thus participating in a black vernacular choreographic tradition, and complying with the conventions of black musical revues. She practised what was known as "scene stealing."[5] As a result, she

[4] Following Satya P. Mohanty, the naturalist-realist account of experience can produce "reliable and genuine knowledge", that is, social and cultural identities are theoretically constructed through personal experience and emotions. Thus, emotional growth is central to moral growth and provides the individual with agency. In her words, "Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways. It is in this sense that they are valuable, and their epistemic status should be taken very seriously. In them, and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments, we give texture and form to our collective futures" (43). It is in this light that Josephine Baker's performances should be read and valued.

[5] According to Kraut, Josephine pretended to have forgotten the steps that she had to follow for the dance and created her own steps and performance, defying male power- choreographies were in the hands of men – through her agency and the practice of "scene stealing." (2-4)

questioned the Western belief that blacks were born natural dancers, and drew from the tradition of minstrelsy and burlesque, using parody as a way to interrogate the dominant and hegemonic systems of signification. She recurred to parody to compensate for the erotic character of her dances based on the "tactics and techniques of exaggeration, caricature, pantomime, mimicry, pastiche and parody" (Henderson, *Colonial* 11). In this way, she redefined the black body as the site of ridicule, resistance and empowerment in relation to white male supremacy. Her animal dances like her walking on four legs, her chicken-inspired head movements and so on, were a way of questioning Western ideas about African savagery, while simultaneously reproducing and subverting these stereotypes (Kraut 5). Particularly, her crossing of eyes not only evoked the absurd, but drew attention to the eyes and diverted the audience's look from the buttocks. She was looking two ways at the same time, "refusing the gaze of the spectator, drawing the gaze in and yet disrupting attention and ways of looking" (Brooks 14).

Baker's body became a "text of culture" in Susan Bordo's words[6], as the cultural notions of gender differences which shape proper conventions of appearance, deportment and physical activity were inscribed on her body, but at the same time she questioned these conventions imposed by the dominant white colonial discourse on black women, and proposed a new discourse in which notions of beauty, motherhood and sexuality were re-inscribed on the black female body. Baker's body became then a producer of knowledge as she used its intelligence to represent scientific, philosophic and aesthetic ways of thinking, which were in fact cultural notions of the body that determined models for beauty, health and so on (Bordo 165-184). The mixture of elegance, beauty, eroticism, primitivism and modernism that can be read in her body situated Baker in the middle of "culture" and "nature", between "Europe" and "Africa", as an example of hybridity, blurring the boundaries between white and black. This idea of miscegenation was best exemplified in the colour of her skin. She was a mulatto woman; her energy and beauty were captured by the 45 hand-coloured lithographs entitled *Le Tumulte Noir,* and designed by Paul Colin in 1927. Miscegenation had also the connotations of forbidden pleasure for her French audience, allowing them to fantasise about the sexual lure of their colonial female subjects and of the prohibited.

Current black feminist research is concerned with issues of white male imperialism that determine notions of beauty associated with the white female body, and condemn the black female body to a state of ugliness and deviancy. Their

[6] Susan Bordo introduces the concept of the body as a "text of culture" because different bodies are located in different positions, are represented in different ways depending on cultural norms and values and are given different authority to produce knowledge. One way in which the body becomes a producer of culture is through gender, and bodies are always changing in response to the different social demands; for example, femininity is ideology inscribed on the body and the result of what a culture thinks as feminine. (165-184)

position is to claim the beauty and visibility of blackness and, in the same vein, Josephine Baker addressed systems of power and domination to redefine the black female body as normative and beautiful. Her own body became a site for political resistance and aesthetic transformation, as could be seen in her later years, reasserting her femininity and humanity, and commanding the public gaze (Hobson 4-9).

This attempt at decolonization of the black female body also establishes a connection with ancestral memory, and the importance of the past to redefine black femininity.[7] The cultural trauma linked with the visibility and surveillance of black skin at the auction block at the time of slavery establishes a connection with the spectacle of corporeality that can be seen in Baker's performances. She herself suffered racism in her childhood and youth in America and witnessed the St. Louis Riot of 1917. (Kalaidjian 7) African female captives were seen as both lascivious and inviting to both sexual and colonial conquest, and as strong, fertile bodies with big breasts apt for reproduction and hard work. These characteristics made it possible to emphasise sexual difference, especially concerning race and gender. At the same time, the construction of black women, in terms of otherness and under the sign of the savage and uncivilised, was put forward (Hobson 24-29). Some scholars have seen in the whip of the overseer a phallic symbol of male supremacy and white power, and Josephine Baker, according to dance critic André Levinson, reproduced in her dance this phallic symbol as an act of remembrance of her ancestral past: "Certain of Miss Baker's poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entrained and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture" (cf. Henderson, *Josephine* 122). These words clearly establish the aesthetic power of Josephine Baker to contest the colonial dominant discourse with her dance. Her own traumatic heritage reaching back to the middle passage allowed what Paul Gilroy describes as the Black Atlantic's "transformation of cultural space" (cf. Kalaidjian 5), so that her body became "a repository of corporeal memory and a discursive space marked by a Eurocentric history of primitivist inscription" (Kalaidjian 5). As a consequence, Baker's agency produced new modes of aesthetic and cultural representation, social identity, community and political intervention; simultaneously, she developed a diasporic identity through transgression and cultural critique which embodied the eternal process of migration, not only from Africa to Europe and the Americas, but also the progress of global migration, which has become an issue of extreme importance in our current societies, with black people being always on the move and being victims of sexual

[7] Satya P. Mohanty also talks in her realist post-positivist theory about claiming the ancestral past to define one's identity. She also establishes the task of "rememory" as one "dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labour of trusting oneself, one's judgements, one's companions." Therefore "historical memory" includes collectives in the process of remembering through feeling and knowing. (43-48)

and racist discrimination and exploitation (Henderson, *Colonial* 10). This black diaspora is continuously producing and reproducing a black cultural identity, which is rich, fluid and endlessly changing and transforming the world.

Finally, Josephine Baker became involved in what bell hooks calls "the commodification of otherness" (cf. Hammonds, 178). In other words, she participated in the commodification and fetishization of the black female body. In a Marxian light, commodities can become eroticised objects, and human sexuality can be structured by capitalism; to understand this, we need to have a clearly defined starting-point for the concept of sexuality which, in this light, has to be analysed as a mediated and culturally produced idea based on historical and social processes, so it is always in the making, never finished or complete (Curtis 95-96). In this sense, Baker's ability to manipulate the fantasies attached to black femininity allowed her agency, and her body was an instrument of pleasure and profit in the cultural and economic marketplace. She controlled her image and the marketing of her body for popular consumption (Henderson, *About Face* 133-135). An example of this are some of her marketing enterprises, like her restaurant Chez Josephine or her pomade named Bakerfix. At the same time, she merchandised with the notion of fetish as the objects or things that people desire, which highlights "the contingent nature of the erotic as well as the social and economic structures shaping it" (Curtis 108). Therefore, "Baker's control of her image derived from her ability to appropriate and redirect the fetishistic gaze of the Other", in Professor Mae Henderson's words, and she "renders herself both fetishized object of desire and subject/agent of desire" (Henderson, *About Face* 136). As a result, fetishism gave her empowerment and allowed her to restore subjectivity to black women. Baker was conscious of the double-game she was playing reproducing racial stereotypes and an image of female black savagery to attract her white audience. This consciousness allowed her simultaneously to control the colonial gaze in her own benefit. Through her ambiguous dance she combined action and objectification, resistance and agency, transgressing social norms and the representations and classifications characteristic of patriarchal racism.

However, in later stages of her career, Josephine Baker suffered a transformation leaving savagery behind and becoming a complete artist. She was described as "chocolate", and her costumes elevated her to the status of a sophisticated (white) prima donna in a conventional sense. Simultaneously, they accentuated and "textured" her dark skin, and amplified the brilliancy of her eyes, teeth and hair (Habel 128). In her last years, she got more involved in the fight against discrimination and racial segregation, and her contribution to many humanitarian and political causes made her lose her fortune and work to pay debts and keep her famous tribe of adopted children, till she found death suddenly, becoming a myth for black and white people equally.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper we have been witnesses to the fact that “Blacks in Europe belong both to the African diaspora and to European society, history and culture” (Stovall 2), and Josephine Baker’s skill as a performer allowed her to influence Europeans and assert her power as a black, becoming a star of the music hall. Many black people have felt that she betrayed a bit of their heritage, and many white people have believed her to have become too sophisticated for a black person, appropriating a status for the black community and herself which transgressed the borders between whites and blacks. However, in this paper, I hope to have contributed to a new assessment of her role as a woman who has subverted dominant discourse --mostly in her own benefit--, has produced a new cultural and social black identity, and has claimed a new vision of the black female body as visible, desirable and normative within the context of African-American and European tradition.

Leaving North-America and arriving in Europe at a time when primitivism and colonial anxieties were at their height, she knew how to use her talent and her body to represent the new woman both in art and life. From the innocence and savagery of her first years as a dancer, she metamorphosed herself into a new diva that nonetheless had a humanist side.

Josephine Baker did not betray her ancestral past and traditions. Quite the opposite, she reproduced and “rememoried” them by using her body as a “text of culture”, resorting to African American music and dance to perform black subjectivity. By showing her naked body on stage, she paid tribute to the dark times of slavery, and followed the tradition of ethnographic spectacle that the Venus Hottentot had embodied in the nineteenth century, but subverting the stereotype that black female sexuality was ugly and deviant. In this respect, she used the intelligence of her body to refuse the raced and gendered hierarchies prescribed for her, giving agency to black women. This fact could be seen in her choreographies, where she tried to captivate the white male gaze while at the same time commanding power over that white colonial look. Similarly, her dancing body turned into a site of resistance and identity construction, disrupting hegemonic white discourses about blackness. By doing this, she rejected an essentialist notion of black identity which attributed a state of savagery and ignorance to black people, and adopted a new hybrid, diasporic identity of black women that claimed beauty and intelligence through emotions in a post-positivist sense. In the same fashion, Baker made use of the commodification and fetishization of the black female body to invert the binary position of the coloniser’s look and the colonised’s display in her own interest.

Her legacy has been an impressive one, and her fame and trace have had no precedents, so “her influence can be felt in art, in literature, in the media, in politics, in architecture, and in academia on both sides of the Atlantic up to the present day”

(Glover 2). She has become the representation of American blackness and quintessential "otherness", being postcolonial and postmodern in a colonial and modern age, reinventing her art and her identity in a constant and fluid way and provoking multiple and fragmentary interpretations. La Bakaire has come to symbolise the confluence of music hall artist, avant-garde muse, businesswoman, mother, civil rights activist and secret agent in one exceptional personality where notions of the exotic, the erotic, inclusion and exclusion converge.

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