

Article

Dance That “Suggested Nothing but Itself”: Josephine Baker and Abstraction

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Abstract: This article reconsiders Josephine Baker’s legacy for the field of dance by emphasizing the principles of abstraction that she developed through performance. Although she is considered to be a modernist, Baker is rarely discussed as an abstractionist. Doing so requires a rethinking of the relationship between race and abstraction, a conversation revived by choreographer Miguel Gutierrez in 2018. Audiences in 1920s Paris described how Baker confounded identity categories to produce something new for the stage, but critics and scholars since have continued to define her by those very categories. Baker’s dancing prioritized the expression of kinesthetic energy over representation or narrative, clearly fitting within the purview of abstract dance. In building upon the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, I argue that Baker demonstrates how abstraction is not in opposition to Africanist dance aesthetics, but rather is a constitutive part of it.

Keywords: Josephine Baker; abstraction; Miguel Gutierrez; modernism; primitivism; Paris

1. Introduction: Reframing Josephine Baker, Rethinking Abstraction

In the 1935 French film *Princesse Tam Tam*, Josephine Baker—arguably one of the most famous dancers in the world at the time—plays Alouina, a Tunisian woman taken to Paris by writer Max de Mirecourt. At a large society party, Alouina begins the evening sitting at a table drinking champagne, but the rhythms of a dance called the “Conga,” brought to Paris by Cuban composer Eliseo Grenet (Durkin 2019, p. 133) prove to be an irresistible draw. Alouina throws off her shoes, unwraps her gold dress to reveal a black dress underneath, and jumps onto the stage where she begins to dance. Her movement communicates the exhilaration of being in motion. She kicks, circles her arms, spins, and lands in a wide open-legged position reminiscent of a balletic second position *plié* with her arms above her head, the accent of her pose timed with the exclamation mark of a drumbeat. She shimmies her hips with her hands on her torso as she throws her head back in ecstasy. Two men come onstage to dance with her, but she only tangentially interacts with them before walking forward while shimmying her shoulders.¹ The cultural meanings of the Conga in its original context fade as Baker renders the dance as an abstract expression—a dance about the joy of movement.

In her musing on abstraction, choreographer Liz Lerman asks readers to “acknowledge the beauty of non-narrative, the wonder of making line and shape and color and energy and dynamics all real without including a tint of reality” (Lerman 2011, p. 93). Baker’s long arms make elegant lines, her turns fill the stage with energy, and her sudden knee bends signal dynamic shifts that all together are wondrous. Baker departs from the real world in her performance, as she pays attention neither to the audience nor to her fellow dancers onstage. Yet her Conga is embedded in a movie plot in which her action as a visibly brown-skinned woman is interpreted allegorically as a tale of

¹ Movement analysis comes from my viewing of *Princesse Tam Tam*, dir. Edmond T. Gréville, 1935.

Europe's fascination with the redemptive qualities of primitivist modernism, a narrative applied to Baker's dancing career writ large. Some scholars reframe this primitivist discourse by emphasizing the African diasporic aspects of Baker's aesthetic (Henderson 2017), though as Anthea Kraut reminds us, the line between primitivist and diasporic discourses, which both aim to link African and African American aesthetics, can be blurry (Kraut 2003, p. 440). Still others focus on the parody and irony that Baker deploys as a version of Bertold Brecht's alienation effect, in which Baker brings attention to the constructedness of her performances in order to challenge audiences to think critically about their preconceived conceptions of race and gender (Borshuk 2017; Durkin 2019, pp. 37–38).

Tellingly, these scholars come from fields other than dance—art history, literature, cultural studies, or film studies. Dance scholars with the exception of Burt (1998) routinely ignore Baker (Henderson 2017, p. 163). This exclusion persists despite the fact that scholarship on dance modernism, of which Baker was undoubtedly a part, has expanded considerably since the beginning of the twenty-first century.² One of the consequences of this exclusion has been that Baker scholarship often skips movement analysis to plunge straight into discourse analysis. By examining Baker's movement, both through the descriptions offered by her contemporaries and through viewing film clips, I reveal the principles of abstraction embedded in her performances. Through embodiment, she theorized the body as a producer of kinesthetic energy and emphasized movement invention. Her dancing depended not on the music, but rather helped produce rhythm. Critics at the time noted the abstract aspects of her work, but their observations have not been incorporated into histories of abstraction in dance, pointing to certain limitations in the existing discourse.

Miguel Gutierrez's 2018 viral *Bomb* article, "Does Abstraction Belong to White People?" explores these limitations. In it, Gutierrez argues that abstraction has been impossible for non-white artists in the United States. Because an abstract dance is presumably about time, space, energy, line, color, form, and/or shape—essentially, all the qualities that are not about the humans performing them—dancers in such a work are expected to vacate themselves of their social identities in order to foreground these abstract principles. In a global context of white supremacy, however, such vacating is not possible for dancers of color. Gutierrez writes, "for some people [artists of color] it's not about a 'choice' to make dances [about race and identity]" (Gutierrez 2018). White bodies are uniquely allowed to be "signifiers for a universal experience" and thus abstracted from their social experiences in the world. As Gutierrez states, "Who has the right not to explain themselves?" (Gutierrez 2018).

In his urgent and compelling essay, Gutierrez echoes what other dancers and scholars have been stating for several years (Foster 2002; Manning 2004; Gottschild 2014; Casel 2016; Chaleff 2018).³ Two additional points from this body of scholarship are relevant to thinking about Baker. First, the abstraction of black bodies has, since the start of the European slave trade in the fifteenth century, meant dehumanization (Harper 2015, p. 62). The critics who described Baker as an abstract dancer also described her with dehumanizing language, leading to questions about how dance as a field has overlooked this potential for violence when lauding abstraction. Second, rather than see abstraction as a whites-only club from which artists of color have always been excluded, as Gutierrez does, Gottschild (1996, 2014) argues that avant-garde aesthetics, including abstraction, have often derived from what she calls Africanist sources. "Africanist" denotes "resonances and presences, trends, and phenomena" of African dance in African American, Afro-Caribbean, and other African Diasporic forms (Gotschild 1996, p. xiv). I build upon Gottschild's work to contend that any analysis of Baker's

² See (Henderson and Regester 2017) for an overview of the scholarship on Josephine Baker. Over the past three decades, various scholars have challenged racial divisions in the study of American modern dance (Long 1989; Foulkes 2002; Manning 2004; Gottschild 1996). Just as importantly, several others have pushed for a more global perspective on dance modernism. In contrast to the old model, in which dance modernism was an American and German invention rooted in those nations' nationalistic interests, transnationalism has emerged as a potent concept to help define what made dance modern in the 1920s and 1930s. Several scholars examine the role of specific individuals who traversed geographic and cultural boundaries to innovate new artistic concepts (Clayton 2012; Purkayastha 2014; Reynoso 2014; Fortuna 2016; Wilcox 2019).

³ I am indebted to Rebecca Chaleff for pointing me toward (Foster 2002) and (Casel 2016).

aesthetic must include how she developed principles of abstraction not as something to fuse with an Africanist aesthetic, but rather as something developed *from* her training and experience, which was predominantly in African American theater and dance. In approaching Baker's movement from this perspective, I offer a revision of existing dance histories of abstraction and of Baker's role in the story.

2. Josephine Baker: From Primitivist Modernism to Abstraction

By all art historical accounts, Baker was one of the innovators of modernism in 1920s Paris. She was part of the movement in which artists in various fields drew upon African and African American aesthetics (glossed by white Europeans as "primitive") to break with traditional and classical forms in order to resonate more directly with the experience of modernity. While still linked to ideas of inferiority, primitivism was also held up as a potential savior of so-called Western civilization. According to this line of thought, the ravages of World War I had shattered people's faith in European Enlightenment ideals. People living in Western Europe and the United States were now facing the fast-paced stresses of industrial capitalism, urbanization's alienating structures, and psychological issues stemming from the repression of primal instincts. In contrast, primitive cultures purportedly promoted healthier social relationships, greater spirituality, and a better connection to the earth.⁴

Because "the dancer's own body [wa]s the primary medium of creativity" (Henderson 2003, p. 112), intellectuals lauded dance as the most connected to primitive energies (sex, death) and thus potentially most conducive to the regenerative project of primitivist modernism. As Jayna Brown writes about black chorines in the 1920s and 1930s, "The 'native' dancing girls were key figurations of primitivist rejuvenation" not only for white Europeans and US Americans, but also for black artists and intellectuals throughout the African Diaspora (Brown 2008, pp. 190–91, 230–31). Primitivist modernism was thus "a more multivalent aesthetic and cultural phenomenon" (Sweeney 2004, p. 4) than the previous understanding of primitivism as the debasement of non-white life. For example, in the 1930s and 1940s African American choreographer Katherine Dunham embraced "the primitive" as a force to reclaim black history and memory, as well as to salve modern ills (Das 2017, pp. 3–6; Dunham ca. 1980–89, p. 114). As a dancer who drew upon Africanist aesthetics at a time when audiences in Paris read such aesthetics as refreshingly primitive, Baker was the exemplar *par excellence* of the promise to remake modernity in interwar France.

While not denying that Baker played an integral role in the primitivist modernism movement, I want to focus on her innovations in abstraction. The question of abstraction is different from the question of modernism. In European and US American concert dance, the turn to abstraction is often dated to the post-World War II period, when George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham (in the fields of ballet and modern dance respectively) offered what Gay Morris calls a more "objectivist" perspective on dance. Influenced by the censorship of artists' political activities during the Cold War, to define oneself as an avant-garde choreographer in the 1940s and 1950s meant to reject explicit political or social engagement, instead focusing on "art for art's sake" along the lines of Clement Greenberg's theories that vanguard art always aimed for greater and greater purity from outside forces (Morris 2006, pp. xv–xxiii). By the 1990s, the cultural turn in dance studies scholarship rejected such ideas of purity, seeing race, gender, and other aspects of social identity as inevitably influencing all dance, whether proclaimed as abstract or not. Nevertheless, there remain some who argue for dance analysis that originates from the movement itself rather than what they see as the importation of cultural theory from other fields (Bales and Eliot 2013). This line of thinking echoes the abstraction impulse in dance practice that has come to dominate perceptions of what counts as high art (Lerman 2011, p. 93; Gutierrez 2018). Can one shed the skin of the social to find meaning in form alone?

⁴ There are several excellent texts that cover primitivist modernism and discuss Baker's role as well. See (Torgovnick 1990; Lemke 1998; Blake 1999; Sweeney 2004; Boittin 2010) as only a few of the many. In fact, the preponderance of scholarship on this topic helps explain why discussing Baker as an abstractionist has not really been considered.

Anne Anlin Cheng asks her readers not to shed skin, but rather to examine it more closely. Descriptions of Baker's dancing by critics and biographers remind us of the pull toward the primitive, the exotic, the racialized and colonized Other that inevitably shaped how audiences viewed her. Even testaments to Baker's universalism are often tinged with a romanticization of so-called primitive peoples as closer to some kind of primal oneness. Nevertheless, Cheng asks us to consider what else Baker's skin reveals besides a predetermined indexing of race, an indexing "central to both racist and progressive narratives about the jeopardized black body" (Cheng 2011, p. 12). A close analysis of film clips and writings about Baker from the 1920s confirm Cheng's assertion that Baker does *not* actually fit into the "well-established tradition of colonial black female representation" but instead is a "fracture" in that representational history (Cheng 2011, p. 3). Going further, I suggest that Baker challenged the idea of dance as representation altogether.

3. Baker as an Abstract Dancer

Shrouded in myth, Baker's early years remain somewhat fuzzy, though it is certain that she was born in 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri, to a young black domestic worker, Carrie McDonald, and most likely a white father.⁵ She spent much of her childhood surrounded by ragtime, blues, and jazz music and dance, absorbing informal lessons in rhythm and movement. At 13 or 14, she joined a vaudeville troupe, The Dixie Steppers. Her on-the-job dance training continued as part of the touring cast of the hit musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) and subsequent show *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924). Descriptions of her performances in these shows offer the first sign that she was bringing something new to the stage in terms of abstraction. In addition to her training, she possessed an incredible gift for improvisation and movement invention. Baker's comedic antics at the end of the chorus line distinguished her from the other performers. Her extreme physicality and magnetic performance qualities elicited much commentary. Poet E.E. Cummings, upon seeing her in *The Chocolate Dandies*, described Baker's dancing as beyond human. He wrote, "She resembled some tall, vital, incomparably fluid nightmare which crossed its eyes and warped its limbs in a purely unearthly manner—some vision which opened new avenues of fear, which suggested nothing but itself and which, consequently, *was strictly aesthetic*" (Cummings 1926, p. 55, emphasis mine).

The negative language in the first part of the statement—calling Baker a "nightmare"—is followed by the assertion that Baker's dancing "suggested nothing but itself . . . was strictly aesthetic." The oddly-combined sentence upends understandings of abstraction as white while reminding readers that abstraction has been weaponized as a dehumanizing force against African Americans. In the 1930s and 1940s, black choreographers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus turned to ethnography to educate their audiences about the layers of meaning in Africanist dance (Das 2017; Schwartz and Schwartz 2011). Dunham developed a theory of Form and Function that is now a standard part of training in Dunham Technique in which she argued that the form any dance took should be intimately related to its function (Dunham 1941). While this strategy succeeded in changing audiences' minds about the legitimacy of so-called "Negro dance" as concert dance, the emphasis on functionality had the downside of undercutting an emphasis on artistic creation. The functionalist approach led white dance critics to adopt yet another way to diminish African American choreographers after World War II: that their work was too literal. This critique was levied at Alvin Ailey in particular (DeFrantz 2004, pp. viii, 109). Post-war white critics valorized movement that, to borrow language from Cummings, "suggested nothing but itself" as the choreographic approach with greatest artistic integrity (Morris 2006, pp. xv, xix; Chaleff 2018, p. 72). Thus, Cummings' reading of Baker, while hewing to the racist

⁵ Though some of Baker's autobiographies, most of her biographies, and her official website state that her father was an African American musician named Eddie Carson, her adopted son Jean-Claude's research reveals that Baker was born in a predominantly white hospital and had an official birth record—something that the daughter of an impoverished black mother would not be able to have unless the father were white. Jean-Claude surmises that Baker's father was in fact McDonald's German-born employer. See (Baker 1993, pp. 16–17).

view of Black people as inhuman, also reveals how Baker expressed a non-functional aesthetic of the body as an abstract essence, an aesthetic only legitimized when white artists claimed it after World War II.

This twinned way of seeing Baker—as deeply racialized yet skilled in abstraction—continued in Paris. White society matron Caroline Dudley Reagan saw Baker’s dancing at New York’s Plantation Club in 1925 and hired her as part of a new revue she planned to produce in Paris: *La Revue Nègre*. As the story goes, Rolf Maré and André Daven, the managers of the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées, disliked the initial show that the troupe brought to Paris. They found the spiritual songs “depressing” and disliked the emphasis on tap dance; instead, they wanted more erotic appeal. Therefore, they asked Jacques Charles, a producer at the Moulin Rouge, to re-choreograph the show to fit French visions of primitive Africa, which included more nudity. Nudity was not limited to depictions of blackness, however, as Parisian music halls had begun to feature topless white women more than three decades earlier (Kerley 2017). Maré, Daven, and Charles also shifted the emphasis of the show from the singers to Baker.⁶

Baker had two major entrances in the revue, both of which jarred audiences’ minds. Without film footage we have to rely on discourses produced after the fact, and one of the most vivid descriptions of Baker’s first entrance comes from Phyllis Rose’s 1989 biography *Jazz Cleopatra*. Rose offers no citations and in fact plagiarizes from multiple sources, including Pierre de Régner’s review in the newspaper *Candide*.⁷ Furthermore, bell hooks has criticized Rose for failing to understand the significance and meaning of Black aesthetics, a failure which severely limits Rose’s analysis (Hooks 1992, p. 141). Nevertheless, Rose’s language reveals how critics and biographers interpreted Baker’s movement:

Like a strange creature from a distant world, she walked or rather waddled in, her knees bent and spread apart . . . She looked more like an animal than a human being, a weird cross b/w a kangaroo, a bicyclist, and a machine gun . . . Instead of her moving to the music, the music seemed to come from her body . . . Her movements were all so fast no one had time to decide what was happening. ‘Is it a man? Is it a woman?’ people wondered. Is she awful or marvelous? Black or white?... She epitomized ambiguity, new frontiers. She seemed something more fugitive and extravagant than a dancer—more like ectoplasm.

(Rose 1989, pp. 19–20)

Rose’s language dehumanizes and elevates Baker simultaneously: the young dancer transforms from an alien into a cyborg animal into ectoplasm, non-human forms, but in so doing becomes more than a dancer, something transcendent. Importantly, Baker does not *represent* the music in her body; she *is* the music. In fact, she represents no fixed identity at all, blurring the binaries that govern her contemporary social world: black/white, man/woman, high/low culture. Instead of representation, her movement communicates meaning and the meaning is the movement itself. Baker’s dancing expands possibilities of kinesthetic perception. A decade later, dance critic John Martin would coin the term “metakinesis” to describe this corporeal level of communication. It could only happen, he argued, if the artist underwent a “process of abstraction” that “allowed the dance to communicate to viewers” and give it “universal significance” (Morris 2006, p. 67). Turning into ectoplasm was certainly a process of abstraction, as was Baker’s dissolution of differentiating social categories. Several decades later, dance scholar Susan Foster would argue that dancing bodies could create meaning rather than “be used merely as vehicles or instruments for the expression of something else” (Foster 1996, p. xi). Baker created meaning through her dancing, and thus is it appropriate to think of her as someone who theorized through embodiment. She opened up new ways of seeing the possibilities of human movement and through movement, new ways of seeing the human.

⁶ There are dozens biographies of Josephine Baker that tell versions of this origin story. See for example, (Haney 1981; Rose 1989; Wood 2000).

⁷ Régner calls Baker “extravagant” and “ectoplasm,” see, e.g., (de Régner 1925).

Why, then, did Martin never discuss Baker as an important innovator in metakinesis? When Baker danced, categories dissolved; when people wrote about her dancing, those identity categories, particularly race, reared their heads once again. Descriptions of Baker's second entrance offer a case in point. In the finale of the *Revue Nègre*, called the *danse sauvage*, Baker famously entered by flipping over the back of fellow dancer Joe Alex. She wore a bikini bottom covered in feathers and patent-leather black shoes with bow ties, already confounding the idea of a "savage" with her choice of footwear. After a slow cartwheel off of Alex's back, Baker stood still onstage, "an instant of complete silence." For *New Yorker* reporter Janet Flanner, the stillness seared Baker in her mind as "an unforgettable female ebony statue." Then, according to Flanner, "a scream of salutation spread through the theater. Whatever happened next was unimportant" (qtd in Dalton and Gates 1998, p. 914). While Flanner alludes to the awakening of a primal instinct, which one could term as universal, she sees this primal nature is inevitably tied to Baker's gender ("female") and race ("ebony").

While Flanner states that the dance itself was "unimportant," others went on to attempt to describe it. Baker herself wrote, "Driven by dark forces I didn't recognize, I improvised, crazed by the music, the overheated theater filled to the bursting point, the scorching eye of the spotlights. Even my teeth and eyes burned with fever. Each time I leaped I seemed to touch the sky and when I regained earth it seemed to be mine alone. I felt as intoxicated as when, on the day I arrived in Paris, Douglas had given me a glass of anisette" (Baker and Bouillon 1977, pp. 51–52). Scholars have since questioned Baker's self-analysis, noting her savvy ability to manipulate her own image to satiate audience (or reader) desires. The possession may not have been as totalizing or as improvised as she later recounted, as she exerted more choreographic agency than she let on. Nevertheless, Baker had an undeniable talent for explosive, energetic performances, pushing her body to extremes. She was not expressing something about race, gender, or nationality; she was possessed by dance itself. She was kinesthetic energy embodied.

Of course, what a dancer expresses and what an audience receives are different messages. While the *danse sauvage* was an abstract impulse, Flanner and others viewed the possession through the lens of Baker's race and gender. In the moment, however, they were also confused by both, unsure whether Baker was black or white, man or woman, circling back to the idea of Baker as embodying something conceptually rather than representing something based in reality. When writing about her, race and gender came again to the forefront in ways that conflated dehumanization with blackness. The human body, even when abstracted cannot but reference the social world in a more direct manner than an abstract painting or piece of music, leading Phillip Harper to question whether abstractionist aesthetics can have much utility for African Americans working in art forms that center on "human figuration" (Harper 2015, p. 63).

A comparative example deepens this dilemma. As critics both at the time and later have noted, Baker's *danse sauvage* had distinct echoes of Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet *Le sacre du printemps*, performed on the very same stage twelve years earlier (Rose 1989, p. 22; Dalton and Gates 1998, p. 915). In a famous review of *Le sacre*, Jacques Rivière called Nijinsky's dance a "biological ballet" and wrote that the choreography revealed "something more profound, more secretive, and more hideous" than humanity. "It is the dance that came yet before man," he claimed (Rivière 1975, p. 168). In a similar fashion, Régnier wrote that the *danse sauvage* was "a return to the mores of the first ages" (de Régnier 1925). Daven apparently called Baker "eroticism personified" in the number (Jules-Rosette 2007, p. 61). Eroticism can be understood as the underlying impulse of the will to survive for all living things. Critic André Levinson noted that Baker's arms thrust parallel upward in a phallic symbol while her hips moved rapidly in circles beneath (Levinson 1991, p. 74). With this movement, Baker channeled the power of fertility, both masculine and feminine, at the same time. Abstracted from the human, she was life itself in formation. Of course, in both *Le sacre* and the *danse sauvage*, the performers were human. In asking the audiences to see beyond the human through an artistic medium mapped onto human bodies, the dance risked dehumanizing the dancers. In Baker's case, that dehumanization inevitably echoed a long history of turning people of African descent into commodifiable objects.

Baker's relationship to music also points to an important aspect of abstract dance theory that crashes on the shoals of race. Levinson famously wrote of the *danse sauvage*, "There seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movements, a gushing stream of rhythm. It was she who led the spell-bound drummer and the fascinated saxophonist in the harsh rhythm of the 'blues' . . . The music is born from the dance" (Levinson 1991, p. 74). Echoing Cummings' statement about Baker in *The Chocolate Dandies* and Rose's description of Baker's first entrance in *La Revue Nègre*, Levinson saw Baker's body as producing music, rather than responding to it. At first glance, this crucial difference works in favor of the argument that Baker propelled dance toward a more Greenbergian understanding of abstract expressionism as greater and greater purity within each art form. Rather than be dependent on music, dance could come first.

Curiously, the person who first openly criticized Baker for her synergy with the music was Katherine Dunham. In an effort to distinguish her own artistic efforts and aspirations from those of Baker, Dunham stated in 1930, "Civilization draws a sharp distinction between an uncurbed, purely racial expression, governed solely by rhythm and emotion, and the crystalline symphony of the traditional ballet. Josephine Baker . . . represents the masses whose dancing is more instinctive than formal" (qtd. in Turbyfill 1930, p. 64). Even though energy matters as much as form in Lerman's list of characteristics of abstract dance, in the context of mid-twentieth century European and U.S. American dance, form stood in hierarchical rank above energy. Gottschild has noted, "The Europeanist attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness. Energy is controlled by form. The Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality . . . looseness . . . and indirectness of approach. Here energy dictates and controls the form" (Gotschild 2004, p. 5). Baker's energy produced form. Precisely when African American choreographers and dancers began receiving accolades for their mastery of Europeanist forms in the mid-twentieth century, however, white avant-garde choreographers pivoted to improvisation and the "ordinary," showing how white supremacy has continuously reasserted itself to maintain artistic hierarchies (Chaleff 2018, pp. 71–72). They also asserted a new ethos of separation from the music altogether. Choreographers argued that dance could only reach its highest potential as an art form if it stood completely independently (Banes 1994, pp. 310–26): neither responding to nor producing rhythms intelligible as music. The relationship to music was a weapon white critics began to wield against African American choreographers: that they were *too* close to the music, lowering the artistic status of their choreographic creations.

As an example of how this separation between music and dance was racialized, consider the idolization of Baker's contemporary, George Balanchine, for both his abstraction and his musicality. Decades later, when critics wanted to defend choreographer Mark Morris as still belonging to a high art echelon despite his musicality, they did so by comparing him to Balanchine (Damsholt 2006, p. 6). It is unknown whether Balanchine saw *La Revue Nègre* or Baker's subsequent shows at the Folies-Bergère or Casino de Paris, but he knew her well enough to give her ballet lessons (Banes 1994, p. 58). He could not have avoided hearing about her revolutionary impact on how people understood dance's potential relationship to music as one in which dance did not just express the music (à la Ruth St. Denis' music visualizations) but rather was a co-creative force with it. His years based in Paris (from 1924 until Diaghilev's death in 1929) overlapped almost entirely with the years in which Baker dominated the scene. As Paul Reboux wrote in *Paris Soir* in 1926, one could not discuss dance anymore without mentioning her (Reboux 1926). Reboux specified, "Appreciate the art with which she knows how to bend at an obtuse angle . . . Let's appreciate the charm of this body, with perfect lines . . . these sudden *attitudes* like the grace of a Hindu silhouette or an antique statuette, mixed with whimsical, modern choreography" (ibid.).

Such a description could also apply to many of Balanchine's ballets, in which dancers bend at obtuse angles, stretch legs in perfect lines, and whip into "sudden *attitudes*," a position of the leg lifted in the air and bent at the knee, typically either in front or in back of the body. The frontal position is ubiquitous in depictions of the Hindu god Shiva in his incarnation as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance; both front and back *attitudes* are staples in classical ballet. Balanchine, too, mixed antiquity and modernity.

Sally Banes and Brenda Dixon Gottschild have written about Balanchine's indebtedness to African American aesthetics, particularly jazz sensibilities (Banes 1994, pp. 54–69; Gottschild 1996, pp. 59–79). This influence is often read in Balanchine's specific movement choices—a jutting hip, a syncopated run. One could also argue that Balanchine was influenced by Baker's overall abstract approach to dance as a prioritization of kinesthetic energy.

Despite how seamlessly Baker embodies these theoretical precepts about abstraction, she is not discussed in relation to them. Existing scholarship on Baker's dancing emphasizes either primitivist modernism or the African diasporic traditions that inform her work, which despite Gottschild's attempts to argue encompass abstraction (Gotschild 2014), are often seen as indexing the opposite. Overall, the trend in black dance scholarship is to read the black dancing body as archive. Resisting the silence represented by colonialist, written archives that for centuries claimed that people of African descent had no history, black dance reasserts living memory and tangible connections across time and space (Hardin 2016; Harper 2015, p. 11). It can seem contradictory to say that Baker's movement represents a specific history and yet represents nothing but itself. As Rebecca Chaleff has noted, however, the supposedly abstracted work of white postmodern choreographers, which poses as universal, also rests upon a bodily archive that is only now being acknowledged (Chaleff 2019). Abstraction has histories.

4. Baker and Her Use of Abstraction

Baker continued to incorporate abstraction into her dancing for the rest of the 1920s. After a brief foray to Germany in early 1926, where modern artists in various genres championed her, she returned to Paris to star in *La folie du jour* at the Folies-Bergère. In 1927 she appeared in another Folies-Bergère show, *Un vent du folie*; in 1928, she left for another tour of Europe; in 1930, she returned to France once again to headline in shows at the Casino de Paris. By the early 1930s she began to turn more toward singing, even as she still danced in her stage and screen appearances.

Video footage of the live stage performances do not exist, but consider an excerpt from the 1927 French film *La Revue des revues*, which served to reproduce *Un vent du folie*. In it, twenty-one-year-old Baker commands the floor of a nightclub as patrons sit at tables behind her. A jazz orchestra is set up to her left, from which emerges a violinist. He approaches her on foot, engaging in a call-and-response with Baker's dancing that we can only imagine since the film is silent. Multiple versions of this clip on YouTube add music, most of it anachronistic and none of it matching the spirit or energy of the visual.⁸ Baker dances so rapidly one wonders if the film is sped up, but the other people in the scene gesture at a normal speed. Wearing a loose, graphic print dress with fringe that moves dynamically with her body, Baker places her hands on her waist and circles her hips multiple times, leaning her torso forward slightly and shifting weight from her left to her right, making her legs appear to be made out of rubber. She bends down to slap the floor and her hips in the Black Bottom, then marches in a circle, swinging her arms high. It is not quite the Cakewalk, since she does not lift her feet off the floor, but the prancing motion echoes the dance craze from decades before. She looks at the violinist and starts moving toward him, left hand up, right hand slapping her torso as if she is playing a guitar. She returns to the hip circles, this time rolling her eyes up so that only the whites show and curling her lips. She continues to dance for another two minutes, the violinist following her cues, before the camera fades out.⁹

⁸ See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOdPGZkQaFE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QYqbGJbn7o>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwC97rbe7_E; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H46uf5-Way0> (accessed on 16 October 2019).

⁹ My analysis is taken from viewing the excerpt from *La Revue des Revues* in a clip uploaded to YouTube on 19 October 2009 by morganiistik, titled "Josephine BAKER—1927." I watched with the sound off. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOdPGZkQaFE> (accessed on 14 May 2019).

The scene is embedded in a film with a narrative—the story of an aspiring chorus dancer played by the French actress Hélène Hallier. Other scenes depict famed white ensembles such as the Hoffman Girls and the Tiller Girls doing precision dancing, which marked Baker in “kinetic [and racial] contrast” (Durkin 2019, p. 80). Nevertheless, Baker creates her own meanings in this number that have nothing to do with furthering the plot. She does not interact with the patrons seated behind her. While she is certainly part of a theatrical “scene” of a nightclub, the world created by her movement does not involve them. She weaves layers of black dance history, including the Cakewalk and Black Bottom, into her performance, but the dance is neither a presentation nor a representation of that history explicitly. These forms are a repertoire of gestures to draw upon in experimenting with movement. She and the violinist trade impulses that result in an intimate intertwining of body and sound. As before, Baker produces the music. Lest anyone begin to associate her hip circles with sexual invitation, she contorts her face into a decidedly non-sensual visage, interrupting the imputation of any stable meaning. One could argue that the meaning of her movement is the movement itself—an abstract expression of an avant-garde creator. At the same time, such abstraction is not devoid of politics, as no human body in motion, let alone that of a black woman in 1920s Paris, exists outside of the power dynamics of the real world. In simultaneously drawing upon black vernacular traditions and radically upending any notion of the traditional in her dancing, by invoking the erotic through her hip circles and then undoing it through facial gestures, she led her audience to reconsider how they understood the relationship between race and aesthetics. Her improvisatory reworking of black vernacular forms aimed not at educating patrons about black dance, but at experimentation with movement, refusing to relegate the realm of abstraction to white dancers.

Critics at the time did not view Baker’s abstractionist aesthetic as a high art triumph, as they later would for white artists after World War II. Cummings famously described her performances at the Folies-Bergère thus: she was “A creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman, but somehow both; a mysteriously unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic” (Cummings 1926, p. 116). Once again, his language equally abstracts and dehumanizes. While not calling Baker primitive, he calls her inhuman. She represents the abstraction of some primordial essence, but calling her “unkillable” brings up images of violence. The dehumanization that accompanies abstraction takes on a more traumatic resonance when enacted by an African American woman dancer.

5. Conclusions: Rethinking Abstraction

Might this dehumanizing underbelly lead us to rethink abstraction’s value in dance in general? Since the publication of Ann Daly’s “The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers,” fierce debate has emerged about Balanchine’s treatment of women (Daly 1987). Accusations of sexual harassment at the New York City Ballet in 2017 led scholar James Steichen to comment on how Balanchine’s legacy includes a misogynist atmosphere that objectifies women (Steichen 2018). Few, however, tie this atmosphere to an aesthetic of abstraction. But what happens when you treat bodies as objects of manipulation in the pursuit of otherwise inexpressible ideals? Less clear-cut is the case of someone like Merce Cunningham. With no history of sexual harassment or mistreatment of women—or any of his company members, for that matter—Cunningham’s pure dance ideal has remained unblemished. But as Chaleff and Gutierrez point out, cherishing the idea of movement’s purity reinforces white supremacy. Perhaps dance practitioners will no longer see white dancers as blank slates for abstract ideas, but rather also recognize that their bodies, too, are racialized and sedimented with layers of history and meaning. Abstraction can still be thought of as an aesthetic approach distinct from storytelling, but need not be separated entirely from the human. After all, limbs made of bone, muscle tissue, blood, and skin perform the abstract gestures, and all is made possible by breath. Therefore, it is not irreconcilable to focus on abstract concepts of time, space, energy, and musicality while also acknowledging that a human being with social meaning is conveying those concepts through their particular experience in the world.

Baker's dancing prioritized kinesthetic energy over narrative, instability and rupture over representation, movement about movement. The fact that abstract dance lineages continue to exclude her suggests that those histories need to be rethought. Baker's enduring legacy confirms that her dancing has had an impact, even if its most explicit invocations occur outside the concert dance world. She remains an inspiration to this day for a range of people from celebrities such as Rihanna (Pickens 2014) to opera singer Julia Bullock. Bullock's 2019 tribute to Baker, *Perle Noire: Meditations for Joséphine*, performed on the central staircase in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, was primarily vocal but included some movement. The dance Bullock performed was not the iconic Charleston but rather "angular gestures . . . to the accompaniment of total silence, with only the sound of her increasingly labored breath amplified in space" (da Fonseca-Wollheim 2019). Bullock nods to Baker's experiments in abstraction while also communicating harsh realities about restrictions black women artists have faced and continue to face.

Baker embraced dance as an art form inseparably linked to the power of human beings in motion, and she drew upon that power to propel herself into stardom. Perhaps here we can recuperate something useful about abstraction. Movement impulses come from one's background and experiences. Baker did not fuse Africanist dance with abstraction principles, a dichotomous understanding that reinforces racialized binaries. Instead, her abstractionist aesthetic developed out of her dance training, which was primarily in African American movement idioms that derived in part from West African dance forms. Abstraction and Africanist dance are not oppositional aesthetics, but rather are mutually constituted. It is my hope that Baker's legacy inspires the dance world to shift its perceptions. Abstraction is not, and never has been, only for white people.

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