**Baker, Josephine (b. Freda Josephine McDonald, June 3, 1906, St. Louis, Missouri; d. April 12, 1975, Paris, France)**

**Summary**

At the height of her career in the late 1920s, Josephine Baker was perhaps the most famous dancer in the world. Her performances of ‘the primitive exotic’ shocked and titillated European audiences, who saw in her novelty the promise of a fresh start after the First World War exposed the moral and cultural bankruptcy of European civilization. What African sculpture had done for Pablo Picasso and other visual artists, what James Reese Europe’s ragtime band had done for music, Baker would do for dance—inject a Black aesthetic into modernism. Far from being an instinct-driven ‘savage,’ however, Baker was a skilled performer who consciously shaped and re-shaped her image to suit audience desires. Later in her career, she morphed herself into a ‘Black Venus,’ a combination of sophistication and seduction; still later, she positioned herself as a war hero, and then an anti-racist activist. The late 1920s phase of her career, however, was the most important to modernism, for it awakened the European world to new ways of moving the body that felt modern in their purported primitivism.

**Training, Contribution to Modernism, and Legacy**

Josephine Baker’s aesthetic was rooted in the African-American vaudeville tradition. She was born in St. Louis, an important center of ragtime, blues, and jazz music in the early twentieth century. Despite Baker’s lack of formal dance training, she grew up surrounded by this music and spent hours watching vaudeville shows at the Booker T. Washington Theater. In her early teens, Baker was hired as a dresser for Clara Smith, a star of The Dixie Steppers troupe, and she left town to tour with them as a member of the chorus. Baker was small, skinny, and relatively dark-skinned for a chorus girl, but her comedic antics and frenetic dancing attracted notice. In 1922, she joined Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s musical *Shuffle Along* and won such praise for her dancing that she became ‘the highest paid chorus girl in the world’ for Sissle and Blake’s next show, *The Chocolate Dandies*.

In 1925, Baker moved across the Atlantic when Caroline Dudley Reagan, a wealthy society woman, saw Baker perform at the Plantation Club in New York and insisted that she star in a new revue in Paris. The European capital was in love with ragtime, jazz, the Charleston, and Black aesthetics in general at the time. On October 2, 1925, *La Revue Nègre* debuted at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. The show-stopping number was ‘La Danse Sauvage,’ in which Baker entered the stage, naked save a strategically placed feather, on the back of fellow dancer Joe Alex. After cartwheeling off Alex’s back, she launched into a frenzied dance that simulated copulation that left audiences in shock. One critic described her as ‘eroticism personified.’ Artists Miguel Covarrubias and Paul Colin captured Baker’s colourful, sensual energy in posters for the show. Other modernist artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, and Alexander Calder, asked her to pose for them. Expatriate authors Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald saw her as a muse who epitomized the Jazz Age.

For the next few years, Baker continued to portray a sensual savage who shook, shimmied, and contorted her near-nude body in shows at the Folies Bèrgere, at her own cabaret Chez Joséphine, and on a tour of Europe. In 1927, Baker met Pepito Abatino, who helped her learn to sing, and hired a countess to teach her social codes of deportment. With these new skills, Baker transformed her image, becoming the sophisticated ‘Black Venus’ who seduced audiences not by dancing topless, but by singing love songs while dressed in elegant ball gowns. Baker also appeared in several films during the 1930s, each time portraying a character who combined a purity of heart with a lack of inhibition.

Baker politicized her image when she joined the French resistance at the start of the Second World War, eventually winning the Croix de Guerre medal for her work. After the war ended, she toured to the United States, but faced intense discrimination. The experience galvanized her to give impassioned speeches criticizing America’s segregationist policies wherever she performed around the world. Eventually, as part of her antiracist vision, she adopted twelve children of various races, known as her Rainbow Tribe. Baker continued to perform until four days before her death in April 1975.

Although Baker continuously reinvented herself, her main contribution to modernism occurred during the late 1920s. For Parisians at the time, Black art *was* primitive art *was* modern art. This category included not only African sculpture, but also African-American music and dancing. The idea of the primitive was not just about a new aesthetic vocabulary, but also about a new way of creating art: purportedly spontaneous, instinctive, uncensored, and in touch with irrational, primal forces. Baker’s dancing epitomized these ideas. Through her nightly performances, she seemed to respond instinctively to the music, flinging and shaking her body with abandon. Audiences felt that her dancing injected a fresh energy into decadent European culture, a culture that had led to the horrors of the First World War. She represented the hope that modernity would include a less inhibited, freer approach to movement and the body.

Despite her insistence that she responded instinctually to the music, Baker’s embodiment of the primitive savage was not improvised, but rather choreographed. She trained her body, just like any other performer, to move in a certain way. She deliberately crafted her image to feed audience desires.

Baker’s legacy is complex. For some, she perpetuated negative stereotypes of Black people as hypersexual and savage, and reinforced modernism’s ties to the problematic idea of primitivism. For others, her liberated dancing deepened modernism’s engagement with unconscious desires, and her conscious self-fashioning represented the ideal modern subject—untethered to the past and thus free to reinvent herself. For some scholars, Baker represents not modernism, but postmodernism. Her refusal to be tied down to one identity, whether racial, ethnic, national, or religious, epitomized the postmodern subject. She remains one of the most famous and controversial dancers of the twentieth century.

**Joanna Dee Das**

**Select List of Stage Appearances**

*Shuffle Along* (1922)

*In Bamville / The Chocolate Dandies* (1924)

*La Revue nègre* (1925)

*La Folie du jour* (1926)

*Paris qui remue* (1931)

*La Joie de Paris* (1932)

*La Créole* (1934)

*Ziegfeld’s Follies* (1936)

*En Super Folies* (1937)

*Paris-Londres* (1940)

*Féeries et Folies* (1949)

*Joséphine* (1975)

**Films**

*La Sirène des Tropiques* (1927)

*Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935)

*Zouzou* (1934)

*Fausse Alerte* (1945)