

Wild over La Joséphine

"Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes" by Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1998), Univ. of Chicago, 202 Wieboldt Hall, 1050 E. 59th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.



Until African American dancer Josephine Baker and *La Revue Nègre* came to Paris in 1925, the only blacks that young French artist Paul Colin had ever seen were immigrant workers from Africa and the West Indies. Assigned to do a promotional poster for the troupe, he was astonished and captivated by the 19-year-old Baker's frenetic performance. His striking red, white, and black poster—depicting her, along with a musician and a tap dancer, as "alert, spirited, with it"—launched his career as well as hers, write Dalton and Gates, director of a research project on the image of the black in Western art and a professor of humanities, respectively, at Harvard University.

Baker and her act took Paris by storm, and Colin was a brilliant caricaturist, the authors note. "She loved to dance; he loved to draw her dancing." His vivid, vigorous drawings "captured the spirited movements of that 'wild dance,' the Charleston, newly imported from the States, and the syncopated rhythms of a new art form called jazz."

Many years later, Colin recalled his first glimpse of the dancer: "Dressed in rags, she was part boxing kangaroo, part rubber woman, part female Tarzan. She contorted her limbs and body, crossed her eyes, shim-mied, puffed out her cheeks, and crossed the stage on all fours, her kinetic rear end becoming the mobile center of her outlandish maneuvers. Then, naked but for green feathers about her hips, her skull lacquered black, she provoked both anger and enthusiasm. Her quivering belly and



thighs looked like a call to lubricity, like a magical return to the mores of the first ages."

In cafés and newspapers, Parisians heatedly debated whether Baker's *La Revue Nègre* represented a welcome infusion of new blood and energy into a stodgy, tradition-bound France, or a deplorable sign of the decline and impending fall of Western civilization. The controversy ensured the revue's success.

"If [Baker] resembled some bizarre form of wild animal onstage," write Dalton and Gates, "on the street she was a model of Parisian chic." In the *City of Light*, the authors note, Baker and other black Americans could go about without fear of encountering the Jim Crow racism that existed at home. "Often escorted by Colin, who sketched her in his studio as frequently as possible, Baker was invited to all the best parties in the city. Soon she received an offer from the Folies-Bergère to be the star of their new show, 'La Folie du Jour.' Within a year, there would be Josephine Baker dolls, costumes, perfumes, and even a hairdressing called Bakerfix."

Paris's infatuation with Baker and all things *noir* lasted only a few years. When she went on a year-long European tour in 1928, the dancer was called "degenerate" in Vienna and her performance was banned in Munich. Baker continued her career in Paris, however, and she died there in 1975, a half-century after she and Parisians first discovered each other.

