

SECOND EDITION



SECOND

JOSEPHINE BAKER & THE MODERN SURFACE

SKIN

ANNE ANLIN CHENG

Winner of Honorable Mention from the Modernist Studies Association

Praise for *Second Skin*

“Anne Cheng deftly examines how Josephine Baker became a discursive fetish for Modernism, handled by architects, directors, photographers, writers, and many, many others. By training her gaze not on race but on skin, Cheng shows what Baker revealed about her times rather than what Baker’s times revealed about her. In both the annihilating and rejuvenating senses, this book skins Modernism alive.”

—Kenji Yoshino, author of *Covering:
The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*

“Cheng’s analysis of the relationships between Josephine Baker’s artful self-exposure and Modernist architecture’s insistence on pure surface is marvelously inventive!”

—Coco Fusco, author of *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*

“For a long time now, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* has been the primary text through which many of us have conceptualized race. Anne Cheng’s *Second Skin* offers a compellingly different account of race. Like the story recounted by Fanon, Cheng’s is about seeing and being seen, but hers takes place in the first half of the twentieth century and revolves around a female body whose shining surface repels, rather than instantiates, every attempt to assign it a color, or equip it with a psychic or corporeal interiority.”

—Kaja Silverman, author of *Flesh of My Flesh*

“This brilliant, provocative, eye-opening work provides a powerful account of racial fetishism and its centrality to the development of Modernist style, thus forwarding a stunning new theory of Modernism in its entirety.”

—Sianne Ngai, author of *Ugly Feelings*

“Anne Cheng’s *Second Skin* offers an innovative, surprising, deeply transdisciplinary archaeology of aesthetic Modernism’s relationship to race and its performances. Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Picasso, Paul Valéry, and Freud’s psychoanalysis become partners in this dizzying theoretical and historical analysis, where Cheng reveals how buildings, fashion, photographs, paintings, and dances express as well as construct our shared legacy of racial formations.”

—**André Lepecki**, author of *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*

“In a bravura meditation on the surfaces at the core of Modernism—skin, costume, canvas, screen, ornament, pattern—Anne Anlin Cheng tracks the vicissitudes of visual pleasure in the encounter between Europe and its others. *La Baker* was not simply a lightning rod for exotic stereotypes, Cheng suggests, but instead a ‘dynamic fulcrum’ whose performances captivated because they staged the crosscurrents that define Modernist style, its dangerous intimacies between primitive and civilized, animal and machine, organic and plastic.”

—**Brent Hayes Edwards**, author of *The Practice of Diaspora*

“Opening up an entirely original line of inquiry that connects the architectural surfaces of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier to the shimmering allure of Josephine Baker’s skin, this far-reaching study gives us a unique model of cross-cultural modernity in which psychoanalysis has a major role to play. With wit, verve, and precision, Anne Cheng’s insights ensure that our understanding of early Modernism will never be the same and that our notions of phantasy and identification in art, film, and performance will be radically transformed.”

—**Kobena Mercer**, author of *Welcome to the Jungle*

“Through a series of deft readings of the archival traces of Baker’s early performances . . . Cheng effectively illustrates how Baker wielded skin as kind of sheath, turning disrobing, paradoxically, into an act of concealment and troubling structural binaries like surface/depth, exterior/interior, subject/object, and primitive/modern. . . . [I]n the context of white-dominated modernist culture, Baker’s particular way of manifesting a ‘modern surface’ would seem to pose a historical

question of valuation. Cheng's superb book takes us right to the edge of this crucial question: the question of how, why, and at what costs, the body of an African American woman becomes exchangeable as a commodity within a particular artistic and commercial context—or even becomes, reflexively, a symbol of this form of exchangeability within the money economy.”

—*Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*

“A playful, insanely ambitious text that seeks to rethink standard assumptions about Modernism, race and Josephine Baker. . . . The book performs the admirable service of making Josephine Baker, the world she inhabited, and the skin that inhabited her, seem stranger and more complex than they did before.”

—*cinespect.com*

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*Josephine Baker and the Modern
Surface*

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To George IV, Anlin, and George V

We speak of [the body] to others as of a thing that belongs to us; but for us it is not entirely a thing; and it belongs to us a little less than we belong to it.

—Paul Valéry

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Preface to the Second Edition

How do you escape voyeurism when *being seen* is your way out?

In the last twelve years since the initial publication of *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (2011), specters of Baker continue to erupt in popular culture and capture the public imagination. In the last decade alone, a Prada collection cited Baker's famed banana skirt; Google released an animated doodle of Baker; and contemporary celebrities from Rihanna to Zendaya to Yara Shahidi to Miss France Clémence Botino continued to reenact Baker's feathers and bananas.

One either adores Baker or is embarrassed by her, sometimes both. To this day, in spite of all the sophisticated critiques of essentialism and identity politics, we still seem to require that our racial representatives remain redemptive, virtuous, uncomplicated. People want to canonize the Baker who helped the French Resistance but not so much the half-naked Baker in the *danse sauvage*. And if they do celebrate the latter, the citation always veers dangerously close to re-fetishization.

In 2021, Baker was inducted into the Panthéon, only the sixth woman and the first Black woman to receive such an honor. The news generated as much mockery as it did approbation in the French social media. One caricature that was trending on social media pictured Baker as a giantess climbing bare-bottomed out of the cupola of a miniaturized Panthéon. Whether you read this image as a racist and misogynist statement about Baker sullyng the hallowed halls of the Panthéon or as a sly comment on Baker triumphantly riding the white masculine bastion that is the French mausoleum, it is clear that receptions of Baker continue to reproduce an unproductive, circular discourse of scorn and idealization. Baker remains to this day the most public and vivid example of a Black woman who is at once overexposed and suffering from narrative paucity. We keep telling the same stories about her.

Second Skin tells a different story about Baker. In writing this book, I was driven by my own startling encounter with the distinctiveness of Baker's theatrical strategy and style. Few have attended to the peculiar and strategic ways in which she deployed her body, visibility, movement, and costumes. How is it that no one noticed how her artistic oeuvres defy and, at times, even contradict all the well-known terms about her? Many, for example, allude to how Baker draws from the "African" and the "animal," but few have observed her affinity for the modern, the machine, and the abstract. Many speak of Baker's nakedness, yet few note her proclivity for covers and the covert.

What if, rather than rehearsing how great white modernists saw Baker, we were to ask, instead, how Baker has shaped, altered, and jeopardized some of the most deeply held beliefs and conceptual inventions of modernism itself?

Second Skin remains the first and only sustained monograph on the relationship between the theatricalization of Black skin at the turn of the twentieth century and the development of modern architectural theory. It is also a retelling of the origin stories of the white male masters (Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Pablo Picasso) credited for engineering modernism's conceptual and aesthetic revolutions. Viewing their innovations through the theoretical and reflective lens of Baker's art, and not the other way around, radically changes how we understand a host of foundational modernist preoccupations and their (disavowed) relationship to Blackness: notions such as the *denuded modern surface*, *transparency*, and *abstraction*, as well as a host of related ideas centering around the notion of a newly found, new-century *freedom*.

Rereading *Second Skin*, I continue to feel the urgency behind why I wrote this book: the need to think beyond the stubborn and killing limits of racial representation and what that says about the blind walls of our racial politics, especially dire in our increasingly racially divided world. *Second Skin* treats Baker as cipher, artist, and conceptual thinker. This is an account of how Baker, through intent and chance, shaped and altered the vocabulary of modern aesthetic theory. This entanglement between modern aesthetic theory and racialized gender, in turn, has much to teach us about a network of meanings and values

that undergirds twentieth-century ideas of humanity and its others. Through close readings of her performance method in films, in photographs, and on the stage, I have come to see Baker as complicated and vexed, bold and sly, rebellious and compliant.

Baker was as much as vanishing artist as she was a canny exhibitionist. Her well-rehearsed iconography, often reduced to bare outlines or stranded synecdoches like a banana belt, has long blinded us to the fraught and endlessly engrossing ways in which her body of work activates what I've come to think of as her elaborate *sartorial epidermal schema*. This “skin play” on Baker's part plays a critically formative role in the making of the “clean minimalism” of high modern style. It also holds important lessons for us today for how we understand the terms of racial legibility and embodiment that continue to haunt feminism, race studies, and their embroilment with aesthetic theory. It was in writing this book that I realized that I was working toward a larger meditation on an alternative logic of racial modality, one that is not dependent on the flesh or even the organic, even if it likes to speak in the language of corporeality and desire, an idea that I went on to develop more extensively in the study *Ornamentalism*.

This volume digs deeply, intellectually, and conceptually into Baker as performer and artist without ever forgetting that agency and authorship are fraught and fragile things for an African American woman making her way in a white world in the 1920s and '30s.

How do you escape voyeurism when being seen is your way out? You disappear into the visible.

For Baker, ostentatious display *was* her fugitivity.

This is my story about the mysteries of the visible.

Anne Anlin Cheng
January 2023

Acknowledgments

Writing this book brought together many loves and several origins. I must begin by thanking the haunting of Josephine Baker. I hope this project captures in some measure her mercurial spirit. This book came into focus and was completed here at Princeton, which holds special meanings for me: many years ago, Sam Hunter allowed an undergraduate into his graduate seminar, threw her in the deep end with expectations tempered by generosity, and instilled in her an abiding love for modern art and architecture. It was also here, in a memorable course taught by P. Adams Sitney, that I first experienced the profound pleasures of reading film. In the years since, I have taken many different paths, but working on Baker allowed me to dwell in these passions, for which I am grateful.

Anyone who has undertaken an interdisciplinary project knows how much collaboration it takes. The Townsend Center Strategic Working Group on “When Is Art Research?” at the University of California, Berkeley, and the “Engendering Archive” Working Group at Columbia University provided me with important interlocutors at the beginning and near the end of this project. I am grateful to the wisdom of Amelie Hastie at *Camera Obscura*, Elizabeth Weed at *differences*, Kimberlyn Leary at *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus at *Representations*, who published articles that were working toward this larger project and whose comments helped me think through issues beyond those essays. I thank my editors at Oxford University Press: Shannon McLachlan for her vision and faith in this book; Brendan O’Neill and Tamzen Benfield for being so good at what they do, and Hannah Doyle who has fast become a valued ally. Michelle Coghlan, Jessica Davis, and Tao Leigh Goffe not only gave me invaluable research assistance, but they also honored me with their friendships. This book is indebted to the kindness of strangers as well: to Leo Lensing for sharing his knowledge of Vienna at the turn of

the century and to Farès el-Dahdah for generously sharing his digital recreation of the Josephine Baker House.

Conversations with the following amazing individuals, either about or outside of work, invariably lift the fog or take me to imaginative new places: Gregory Blatman, Daphne Brooks, Eduardo Cadava, Raveevarn Choksombatchai, Beatrice Colomina, Jill Dolan, Diana Fuss, Claudia Johnson, Jeff Nunakawa, Valerie Smith, Michael Wood, and, as ever, Valentina Vavasis. And because a book is also a space of memory, I wish to remember Barbara Johnson, whose work always opened up windows that end up readjusting vision itself; and the late William Nestrick, who gave me support in ways that to this day I suspect I am not even fully aware of.

Several friends read sections of the manuscript and, in some cases, the entire manuscript. I thank them for their generosity and for their exquisitely idiosyncratic minds. Jason Friedman kept me going with our fascination for Baker and with his steadfast friendship. Robert Hass helped me stay close to what touches the heart. Susan Stewart unstintingly shared her insights along with her warmth and good humor. My dear friends Sarah Deyong, Spyridon Papapetros, and Sarah Whiting guided me through the world of architectural theory. I treasure my vision of the lovely Sharon Marcus reading my manuscript in a café in Paris and am thankful for the kind of comments that only she can make. It was Saidiya Hartman who first showed me that I was writing a book about Baker before I was even prepared to acknowledge it to myself. She gave me the courage to undertake this book. Her good counsel, on matters small and large, continues to sustain me in the life of the mind and just plain life.

The course of this project saw the passing of my father, who gave me much of who I am today and who modeled the importance of a life worth living. My mother, who is ten times stronger than she thinks, inspires (even shames) me with her grace and courage. Finally, this book is dedicated to my children, Anlin and George, my most cherished distractions and beloved anchors; and to my husband, George R. Kopf, who always makes me feel at home in my own skin even as his superhuman strength makes it possible—and exhilarating—for me to venture beyond the comfortable. He, very simply, brought meaning.

1

Her Own Skin

Why should modern architects who abhor ornamentation, tattoos, and other erotic markings choose to think about the surfaces of their buildings as “skins”? Why do the first modern bathing suits bear a graphic resemblance to nineteenth-century prison uniforms? What do museum displays have to do with burlesque performances? Is the twentieth-century fascination for transparency a pleasure about seeing *into* or *through* things?

This book turns our attention to the mysteries of the visible and how those mysteries dwell on the surfaces that we think we know all too well. The above, seemingly unrelated questions of style—and really of desire—are all part of what I call modernism’s dream of a second skin. And our entry into this story will be the surprising figure of Josephine Baker, a woman who achieves international fame overnight for wearing her nakedness like a sheath (figure 1.1).

With three memoirs, more than twenty biographies in English and French, and a wealth of images preserved and replicated, Baker’s story appears to be as well excavated as her nudity was widely publicized. One has only to invoke her name (no, even just hint at the barest gestural outline of her figure) and all that she stands for—the racist and sexist history of objectification and of desire that makes up the phenomenon of European primitivism or, conversely, the idealization of Black female agency—immediately materializes. Yet what would it mean to see Baker not as an example of but as a fracture in the representational history of the Black female body? Why is it unimaginable to reflect on the ways in which her performance style—even her body type—might not fit into established tropes such as the Venus Hottentot? Although the history of racialized femininity would seem to insist on a relentless story about the coercions of the visible, we might want to ask, how is it we know we are seeing what we think we are seeing? What are the conditions under which we see?



Fig. 1.1

On or about December, 1910, human character changed.

—Virginia Woolf

The givenness of Baker's race and gender and what those categories mean for a European audience at the turn of the twentieth century has led almost all critics of Baker to position her in a well-established tradition of colonial Black female representation. For a large segment of

feminist critics, Baker indubitably and specifically references the figure of the Venus Hottentot.¹ This critical certitude, however, has unwittingly limited the context in which we can consider Baker. One *sympathetic* critic goes as far as to suggest that there is not much there to be studied: “Looking at Josephine . . . —that endearing but not-precisely-pretty face, the honey-sweet smile, her tangible craving for love and acceptance—it is hard to see what all the fuss was about.”² Thus, with one gesture, Baker is both fully explicated (a phenomenon that is attributable only to the standing history of eroticizing Black women for white male gaze) and dismissed.

With the centennial of her birth in 2006, there was a resurgence of interest in Baker, including a touring museum exhibit and an academic conference at Columbia University and Barnard College in New York City in the same year and a new US postal stamp in 2008. But views of Baker remain tethered to the vexed poles of vilification and veneration. At the Columbia/Barnard conference, for instance, there was almost unanimous agreement, even if with different intonations, that Baker epitomizes the European history of ethnographic representations. And the issue of Baker’s agency invariably becomes mythologized in order to rescue her from the denigrating history that she is seen to unavoidably represent. Similarly, the induction of Baker into the Panthéon two decades later in 2021 focused on her work as a member of the French Resistance, even as the press and social-media responses bifurcated, as they always do, between notes of adulation and disdain. While this history provides an ongoing background for seeing Baker’s career, this book traces an alternative, though equally fervent and enduring, context for understanding Baker’s iconography and impact.

The phenomenon of Baker is also a phenomenon of modernism and the entwined crises of race, style, and subjecthood. Indeed, how would our understanding of the political expectations surrounding the Black female body be altered were we to consider Baker as a dynamic fulcrum through which the very idea of a “modernist style” is wrought? This study does not claim Baker’s modernity as a means of refuting the charges of atavism so frequently leveled at her image. Rather, it takes as a given that modernism and primitivism are intertwined, at times even identical, phenomena.³ To take this imbrication seriously means that