



ANNE ANLIN CHENG

# SECOND

JOSEPHINE BAKER & THE MODERN SURFACE

# SKIN

### **Advance Acclaim 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 Valérie, 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*

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Josephine Baker and the  
Modern Surface

ANNE ANLIN CHENG

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2011

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York  
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in  
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Cheng, Anne Anlin.

Second skin : Josephine Baker & the modern surface / Anne Anlin Cheng.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-538705-6

1. Modernism (Art) 2. Surfaces (Philosophy) 3. Arts, Modern—20th century. 4. Arts  
and society—History—20th century. 5. Baker, Josephine, 1906–1975—Criticism and  
interpretation. I. Baker, Josephine, 1906–1975. II. Title. III. Title: Josephine Baker &  
the modern surface. IV. Title: Josephine Baker and the modern surface.

NX456.5.M64C49 2010

700'.4112—dc22 2010000424

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*To George IV, Anlin, and George V*

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## 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. 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, Beatrice Colomina, Raveevan Choksombatchai, 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.

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. Sarah Deyong, Spyridon Papapetros, and Sarah

Whiting, new friends who fast became dear ones, 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.

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*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

## 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.



On or about December, 1910, human character changed.

—*Virginia Woolf*

With three memoirs, over twenty biographies in English and French alone, 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?

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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 has been 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 United States 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. While that history provides a central background for 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.<sup>3</sup> To take this imbrication seriously means that we must expand the contexts and terms through which we approach a figure like Baker.

From its inception, the Baker myth has always generated more visual and categorical conundrum than accepted accounts can accommodate. On the night of October 2, 1925, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a woman entered the stage on all fours, bottom up, head down, wearing a tattered shirt and cut off pants, a strange doll among bales of cotton and bandanaed "bucks" and "black mammies." With her hair slicked back in a shining armor and her mouth painted in minstrel style, this figure started to dance—and danced like nothing anyone has seen before. With eyes crossed, buttocks quivering, legs going every which way, that slim pulsating body on stage appeared part child, part simian, part puppet on neurotic strings; then she retreated. But she came back, this time, clad in nothing but copper skin, bright pink feathers around her thighs, ankles, and neck, doing a full split while hanging upside down on the well-oiled shoulders of a black giant: one moment, dead weight; the next, pure kinetic eruption.

That woman was, of course, Baker. And the show was taking place off stage as well. Records tell us that the audience both sat back and stood, screamed and clapped, shouted at the performer in adoration and disgust; some rushed the stage while others quit the theater. The next morning, the Parisian papers puzzled over what exactly was seen: “Was she horrible, delicious? Black, white?... Woman, other?... Dancer, fugitive?”<sup>4</sup> And the mystery did not abate. A year later, *Vanity Fair* continued the fascinating puzzle with a meditation by E. E. Cummings, who revived the performer through a series of rhetorical negations: “a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.”<sup>5</sup>

We might take this reception to testify to secret pleasures and their disavowals or chalk it up to the unconscious ambivalence of colonial desire. While these explanations account for the ardor and the contradictions, they cannot quite address the particular terms of this incoherence or why this kind of bewilderment is taking place at this particular time. After almost three centuries of European incursion into the “Dark Continent”; over six decades since the Emancipation Proclamation in the US; and a quarter of a century into the birth of artistic and literary Modernism, which had made much of its attractions for so-called African imports, what we find at this theatrical enactment of two of the most rehearsed sites of European conquest—the plantation and the jungle—is a moment of profound consternation.<sup>6</sup> More intriguingly, it seems worth asking why this consternation, even if disingenuous or exaggerated, should narrate itself specifically as a categorical confusion—that is, over categories of race, gender, and the human that the legacy of imperial history ought to have secured, or at least lent the fantasy of certitude. Thus at the moment *la Baker* was invented on stage we see not the affirmation or the denial of Modernist Primitivism but the failure of its terms to inscribe its own passions.

And, indeed, why Baker? History tells us that chorus girls of every make and model had been strutting up and down the stages of Montmartre for more than a decade by the time she hit the scene in 1925; African American musicians had been arriving in droves since the war; and the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, unlike its more conservative competitor the Paris Opera, had been catering to the taste for the exotic for years.<sup>7</sup> Still, nothing struck Paris like Baker. The avant-garde's appetite for Baker is the stuff of which legends are made: Jean Cocteau and José Miguel Covarrubias designed stage sets and costumes for her; Fernand Léger introduced her to the elite coterie of the surrealists; Le Corbusier wrote a ballet for her; Henri Matisse made a life-size cutout of her that he hung in his bedroom; Alexander Calder made a wire sculpture of her; Alice B. Toklas invented a pudding recipe named after her, just to cite a few. Beyond designating Baker as the muse, few have been able to articulate what it is about Baker that made her *the* object of such intense and extensive Modernist investment.<sup>8</sup> Nor has anyone considered the active interplay (both material and theoretical) between Modernist aesthetic practices and the manifest terms of Baker iconography.

So did those audiences see something different—or were they seeing differently? What interests me about revisiting the intimacy between Modernism and Primitivism is not what it can tell us about how we see racial difference, but about how racial difference teaches us *to see*. This line of inquiry is especially important at a time when techniques of seeing were so rapidly changing, for not only do new visual technologies affect how we see racial difference but, as I will suggest, racial difference itself influences how these technologies are conceived, practiced, and perceived. When we move Baker outside of the well-rehearsed framework of Primitivism and juxtapose her celebrated naked skin (as theater and as fabrication) next to other surfaces and other

techniques of display in the first quarter of the twentieth century, what we find is a radically different account of what constitutes the Baker phenomenon. What follows then is a story of the modern skin and its distractions.

Through the work of Frantz Fanon [especially *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)], we have come to understand race as an “epidermal schema,” as something ineluctably tied to the modality of the visible. Hence, critics like Mary Ann Doane would describe racial difference’s “constant visibility” as “inescapable” and as “a disabling overvisibility,” and Homi Bhabha would call the indisputable nature of this epidermal scheme colonialism’s “open secret,” reminding us that “skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes.”<sup>9</sup> But *is* skin—and its visibility—so available? When we turn to an over-exposed and over-determined figure like Baker, are we in fact seeing what we think we are seeing? What might be some other “schemas” through which skin acquires its legibility? By situating Baker in relation to various modes of Modernist display—the stage, photography, film, and architecture—we will trace alternative stories about racialized skin, narratives that compel a reconceptualization of the notions of racialized corporeality, as well as of idealized, Modernist facades. It is on the surface of this most organic, sensual, and corporeal of icons that we will find the most unexpected and intense residue of modern synthetics and the imagination that accompanied them.

From the very beginning Baker’s “own skin” offers a highly peculiar business. Although her nakedness has been understood to be a key to her theatrical success and the material evidence of her racial embodiment, it is in fact a remarkably layered construct. In popular cultural memory, her skin is often discursively associated with, at times even rhetorically replaced by, other corporeal habits: banana skins, feathers, drapery. In her films, during the very moments of literal and

symbolic exposure, she is also often curiously and immediately covered over by everything from dirt to coal to flour. Arguably one of the most visually remembered entertainers of the twentieth century, Baker frequently appeared in photographs, posters, lithographs, caricatures, and on postcards partially or wholly nude, but her nakedness never stands alone and instead frequently exercises an eccentric communion with other epidermises, both natural and inorganic. In short, with Baker, *being unveiled often also means being covered over*.

I want to turn our attention not to what Baker's visibility hides but how it is that we have failed to see certain things on its surface. Before we can broach Baker's skin as a discursive construct and a corporeal agent, we have to grasp the sediment of signification that "human skin" has accrued by the dawn of the twentieth century. The very substance and contours of the human body were undergoing renovations, a process precipitated by the Industrial Revolution and intensified by the age of mechanical reproduction. Medical advancement, visual technological innovations such as film and photography, industrial-philosophical discourses such as Taylorism, among other developments, converge to forge a fantasy about a modern, renewed, and disciplined body. At the same time, through discourses such as psychoanalysis, the boundary of the human body is simultaneously multiplied and restricted; the mind/body split gets both literalized and distorted. (Readers of Sigmund Freud will know that his revolutionary discovery of "psychical reality" and the importance of fantasy life itself entails a vexed history of struggle with the tenacious pull of biologism and "fact.")<sup>10</sup> It may not be too much of an overstatement to say that the material and metaphysical boundary of the human body—and, by implication, what constitutes the human—forms one of the central philosophical concerns of the twentieth century.

Perhaps this is why Modernism is so obsessed with "skin," its perfection and reproduction in a wide range of discursive and practical spheres and in a startling array of materials. In

one of the most whimsical but striking images of Modernism, Elie Nadelman's sculpture *Man in the Open Air* (c. 1915, bronze), we find precisely this dream of perfection.

Our gentleman in the open air is luckily impervious to all atmospheres. He is hermetically sealed in a flawless skin



Is, with that skin, that hair, and those things that pass for lips. Is, with his way of...acting so completely different, from a totally different world.

—Thomas Glave

that pours down from his bowler hat through his lithe figure down to his toes sinking comfortably into the metallic ground: body, vestment, environment as one. Even the tree branch going through his fingers is not enough to pierce his insouciance but is assimilated instead as an elegant extension of the body. This sculpture offers a comment about masculinity, dandyism perhaps, in the fray of modernity. But it also signals the Modernist immersion in the primacy of surface as the perfect corollary to and replacement of human skin. (Did the skin absorb the bronze or did the alloy absorb the skin?)

The philosophic preoccupation with surface serves as a cornerstone for a host of Modernist innovations in a variety of disciplines and forms: in literature, think of Virginia Woolf's description of life as "a semi-transparent envelope" and Oscar Wilde's claim that "only superficial people pay no attention to appearances"; in art, the trajectory from Cézanne's planar surfaces to Cubism to Andy Warhol's quip, "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface"; in architecture, the move from the Modernist celebration of blank walls to the "surface talk" that still dominates architectural debates today; in medicine, the new focus on epidermal functions and its semiotics; in science, the accelerated development of scopic technology and the birth of what Hugh Kenner calls "transparent technology."<sup>11</sup> Even in psychoanalysis there is Freud's reputed methodological shift from what might be called "excavating archaeology" to so-called "surface analysis" or, in the context of conceptualizing the nature of the ego and its ontology, his evocative description of the ego as a "projection of the surface" and, later, Jean Laplanche's depiction of the ego as a "sack of skin."<sup>12</sup> There is, of course, also Didier Anzieu's provocative *The Skin Ego (Moi-peau)*. The trope of skin/surface thus occupies a central place in the making of modern aesthetic and philosophic theory.