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# To Stockholm, with Love: The Critical Reception of Josephine Baker, 1927–35

Ylva Habel

## Introduction

The Swedish people demonstrate a longstanding fascination with the exotic even if as a nation their imperialistic ambition has been relatively limited when compared with many other European countries. As a 12-year-old, the minor regent Karl XII kept a 'blackamoor' page in 1694. This seems to have set off a veritable craze for keeping black boys as pages or jesters among the Royal family and members of the court, a trend that lasted well over two centuries.<sup>1</sup> One of the most well-documented instances of a black presence on Swedish soil was F.A.L.G.A. Couchi (1750?–1822), who was taken as a boy from the Caribbean island of Saint Croix and given as a present to Queen Lovisa Ulrika in 1760. He became the object of a Rousseau-like experiment in free upbringing by the doting Queen and her entourage, and quickly received the nickname 'Badin' for his unruly behaviour.<sup>2</sup> His life and adventures in and around the Swedish Royal Family were chronicled by M.J. Crusenstolpe in the six-volume, *The Blackamoor, or The House of Holstein-Gottorp in Sweden* (1840–44), where Badin appears at the margins of the narrative as a demonic and scheming court jester.<sup>3</sup>

Edvard Matz claims that many of the letters, memoirs and diaries of the eighteenth century testify to an outspoken interest in 'blackamoors' and 'Negroes', especially in Stockholm. They were brought to the capital by transatlantic trading companies such as the East India Company, and became well-documented local sights.<sup>4</sup> According to various accounts and portrait paintings of these young blacks, they were frequently dressed in oriental, colourful costumes, and sported by their masters as exclusive possessions.<sup>5</sup> Frequently, they were both the objects

of, and providers of entertainment; one of Badin's responsibilities, for example, was to handle *laterna magica* shows for the Queen's guests.<sup>6</sup>

In an oft quoted passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes his presence on French soil as hypervisualised. He imagined himself being doubled, even tripled by the way he was constantly made to appear as an exception among the white Parisian majority.<sup>7</sup> To draw an anachronistic parallel, a similar hypervisibility may have framed these exceptional blacks' daily experience, yet their spectacularised existence in Stockholm also entailed various degrees of independence and integration into the social fabric of the city. They were, for example, baptized and in some cases married into Swedish families. Badin married twice, and enjoyed the protection of the Royal Family until his death in 1822. During the following hundred years, more diasporic blacks came to Stockholm but, since they were few in number, their presence remained exceptional and repeatedly visualised, first in portraits and later in photographs and films.<sup>8</sup>

This essay takes the instance of Fanonian 'overpresence' as the point of departure for a discussion of white fascination with blackness as epitomised by the revue star Josephine Baker who was celebrated by Stockholm audiences in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In an essay on the cultural construction and deconstruction of Baker's star image, Charlene Regester claims that the European audiences

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**Fig. 1.** Still from  
*La Sirène des  
Tropiques*  
(1927).  
[Courtesy  
Svenska  
Filminstitutet,  
Stockholm.]



of the inter-war period craved black cultural expression, which was regarded as excitingly Other and reinvigorating: 'Literary figures, musicians, dancers, and singers – as long as they were African American and talented, they appealed to the European. Their "American-ness" coupled with their blackness created a cultural fusion that was unique and irresistible to a European populace eager to fill a cultural void.'<sup>9</sup> The cultural interest in Sweden certainly had an investment in this craving for blackness as a revitalizing force.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Stockholm's late urbanization and the migration of workers to the city entailed a cultural climate in which modernity, both as vision and practice, was constantly re-articulated.<sup>10</sup> As I will demonstrate, Baker's presence in Stockholm brought an added dynamic to this context. What makes Stockholm interesting as a site of reception is that it was a comparatively small capital, both in size and population. Large-scale events, therefore, had a disproportionately large impact in the media. When 'La' Baker first came to Stockholm in July 1928, her visit was so widely covered by the press that it was almost impossible to ignore the event.

My engagement with the 'local' is necessarily relative since discussion of what may be defined as local revolves on distinctions between regional and national, and the continental and global. Guiliانا Bruno, Annette Kuhn, Jan Olsson, Lauren Rabinovitz and Shelley Stamp have demonstrated that a double focus on the global and the local is a fruitful strategy for characterising the specificity of a given cultural context.<sup>11</sup> Such a strategy also helps elucidate in what ways globally dominant media discourses may be reinterpreted or appropriated by locally defined practices and audiences at a given historical moment.

Mediated through the continental and glamorous connotations of Paris, the reception accorded Baker in Stockholm brought a range of textual and iconic representations of her blackness into play. Photographs and images of Baker together with a cornucopia of press reviews and programmes, including drawings and caricatures, most of them produced in the 1920s and 1930s, help reconstruct the discourse that attended her reception in Stockholm. By juxtaposing the commentary that accompanied Baker's performances on stage and in films with other types of imagery that circulated in Stock-

holm, we can reconstruct the context of reception for Baker and establish to what degree it accords with her more general reception in the 1920s and early 1930s.

### '...She is her own little culture'

When Josephine Baker arrived in Stockholm in the summer of 1928 as a star of the touring revue, *Wien – Wien – Josephine*, her fame preceded her arrival by at least a year. Swedish newspapers regularly passed on tidbits of information about her adventures in different countries, as well as reports in the international press concerning her alleged star qualities. If she epitomised 'The New Negro' figure in the Harlem Renaissance and the Parisian culture of avant-garde negrophilia, her long awaited appearance in Stockholm seems to have been more associated with a vaguely defined notion of 'cosmopolitan' glamour.<sup>12</sup>

Baker's first film, *La Sirène des Tropiques* (*Siren of the Tropics*, 1927, Fig. 1), had its unexpected world premiere in Stockholm in early December 1927, creating, according to the Imperial Film Theatre's newspaper advertisement, 'Josephine Baker Fever in Town'.<sup>13</sup> If the premiere of this film was unexpected for critics and audiences, her screen presence seems to have been much anticipated in many quarters. 'With a commendable swiftness', critic Tor Burn observed:

Imperial... has delivered a brand new film programme, 'Siren of the Tropics', whose brilliant star is the world-famous mulatta, Josephine Baker, the Parisians' adored cabaret idol *par préférence*. Here, she needs no further introduction either; audiences know her well through the weekly and daily press.<sup>14</sup>

Burn goes on to commend Baker for her sensuous charm and grotesque humour; indeed, her Papitou is the only enjoyable character in *La Sirène des Tropiques*, otherwise a poorly shot and poorly directed 'framework for a primitive genius'.<sup>15</sup> On this point, the other critics agreed. One anonymous writer noted that, contrary to American film narratives where she would have been cast as a marginal slave figure, Baker played the leading part in this film. Her talent and radiant presence alone made the film worth seeing.<sup>16</sup>

What is striking in the reviews of the film is the critics' almost unanimous pleasure in seeing Baker on screen, and their delight in her graceful dance

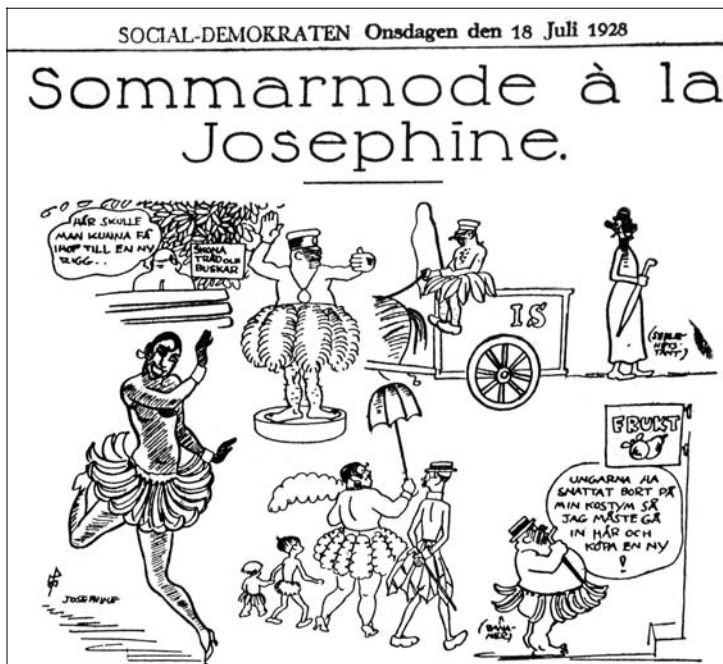
movements and comical contortions. The advertisement in the newspapers for the film's premiere accordingly emphasised her screen presence, claiming that she appeared 'just as in reality'.<sup>17</sup> Critics called her 'agile like a cat' or a lizard, an adorable creature with a face of India rubber. The premiere was packed and many people failed to gain admission.<sup>18</sup> Running from December 1927 to mid-July 1928, *La Sirène des Tropiques* was screened for an exceptionally long period of time. The film functioned as a long prelude or even foreplay to the real encounter between artist and audience in the revue *Wien – Wien – Josephine*. As the premiere of the revue at the Oscarsteatern approached, the film was still being screened in at least three inner city film theatres.<sup>19</sup>

A few weeks before the opening night, the newspapers fueled public interest by informing readers of Baker's tour which had created scandals throughout Europe. Articles give details of the stink bombs that had been thrown at her in Budapest, student protests against her in Vienna, and precautions the Danish police had taken against the anticipated indecent nature of her performance in Denmark.<sup>20</sup> The question was: would scandal also be inevitable in Stockholm? A cartoon in *Social-Demokraten* illustrated how the banana-clad and Charleston-dancing Josephine might affect future fashion in Stockholm, showing a population of men, women and children with leaves, bananas or feathers around their waists (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup>

Some time later, the diva arrived in the capital. The critic, Daniel Fallström, described the significance of the event by drawing attention to the celebrities who attended the premiere:

Apparently all of Stockholm had taken their cars or boats from their summer-houses to attend this premiere, which has been anticipated with vivid interest. There [at Oscars-teatern] you could spot Prince Wilhelm, tanned and fit; and from your seat in the stalls you could nod at Stockholm celebrities.<sup>22</sup>

Having seen Baker and having been charmed by her performance, Fallström later claimed that the fear that Baker was 'the most serious danger to European culture' could now be put to rest. Instead, he found her to be an innocent girl, displaying her natural talents in a generous and humorous manner, all the while amusing herself as much as her audience. Even when her movements 'transgressed the bounds of the aesthetic towards the unaesthetic',



**Fig. 2.** Cartoon, 'Summer Fashion à la Josephine', *Social-Demokraten*, 18 July 1928.

one had to forgive her as she was so 'childishly adorable'.<sup>23</sup> The reviewer in *Social-Demokraten* had seen more libidinous responses from Fällström and the Prince: 'Fallström appeared to languish and Prince Wilhelm licked his lips'.<sup>24</sup>

The reviewer for *Dagens Nyheter* saw in Baker a female Huckleberry Finn whose mischievous tricks on members of the audience charmed all those present. 'She's got it. What is the use of trying to dissect the tricks of this half-caste on stage? It does not matter from which corner of the world she comes, or what skin-colour she has. You could speak of Negro culture, but that does not capture what makes Josephine. She is her own little culture ...'.<sup>25</sup> The review is a significant example of the way Stockholm critics were ambivalent in addressing questions of race. The statement that her skin colour was of no importance was not unusual, and appeared as a form of reservation against racialised discourse on blackness. In a way, the individualizing claim that Josephine was 'her own little culture' simultaneously evoked and displaced the ascribed significance of her skin colour.

In *Stockholms Dagblad*, the reviewer adopted an enthusiastic if somewhat distanced approach to the artist, writing that she had brought the house down, especially in the Jungle number where she performed her famous 'African' dance and climbed the stage trees clad only in a banana skirt. Yet, the

reviewer found the entertaining qualities of her Otherness were short-lived: even if she was quite charming, her eccentric and exotic *esprit* soon palled. The critic hoped, therefore, that Baker would only stay a few weeks and refrain from opening a permanent bar in Stockholm, as she had done in Paris with *Chez Joséphine*. 'If culture cannot be saved altogether, let it at least breath freely for a while. Excuse me, Countess!'<sup>26</sup>

Across the board, critics demonstrated a marked fascination with Baker's body and skin colour. The agility of her body was compared with that of animals, while the colour of her skin was almost invariably likened to chocolate. Adoration for her was expressed through fragmentation, as when *Social-Demokraten* claimed that 'Her eyes and teeth competed for the beauty prize'.<sup>27</sup> A Fanonian reading of the impressions her body made on reviewers – a pair of gazelle legs, rolling saucer eyes and a white smile – demonstrate how the white gaze exerted the power to 'chatter' the black corporeal schema (here in a more literal than psychoanalytic sense) and piece it together according to a 'racial, epidermal schema'.<sup>28</sup> But as is well known, this fragmentation was also an important feature of Baker's pranks in which she would exploit all prevalent black stereotypes to the full, squinting her big eyes or arching her back to make her backside protrude in a comically 'African' manner. In a biography of Baker, Phyllis Rose claims that the artist's self-stereotyping pranks were a form of defence which spoke of a basic insecurity of appearance and self-presentation.<sup>29</sup>

There is an interesting gender aspect to the doubleness of Baker's star image, one that is not limited to this local context. Phyllis Rose draws attention to the fact that in the early stages of her career, Baker would often make her most stereotypical faces in glamorous costume: 'The cross-eyed, goofy, stereotypically blackface grin would become a kind of signature, even when – most effectively when – she was glamorously dressed, so that it seemed a parodic comment on her own beauty, on conventions of beauty, on the culture that had made her famous'.<sup>30</sup> Although Baker was celebrated for her beauty, it was clear that her looks did not correspond to Western norms. Her costumes, densely strewn with strass or sequins, must have filled contradictory, semiotic functions for the construction of Baker as a desirable feminine icon. As much as they elevated her to the status of a sophisticated (white) prima donna in a conventional sense, they simultaneously

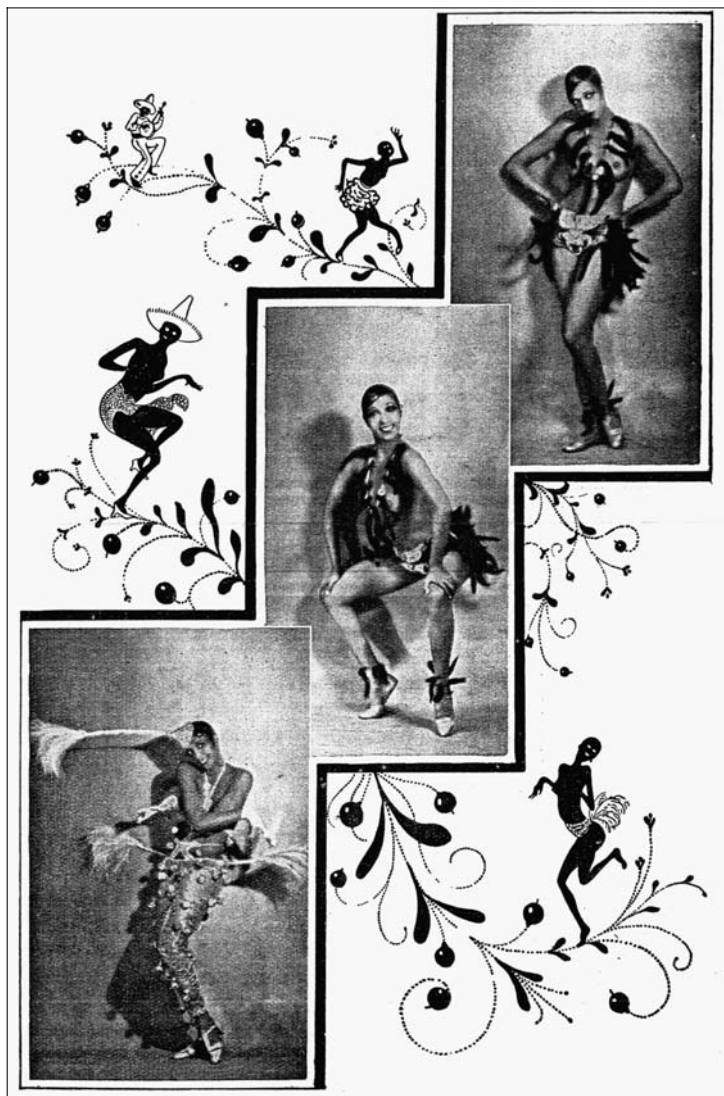




accentuated and 'textured' her dark skin, as well as amplifying the brilliancy of her eyes, teeth and hair. As Rose claims, the goofy pranks can be regarded as non-verbalized comments on her construction as a star, but first and foremost, Baker's stepping in and out of character translate as a way of drawing attention to the possibility/impossibility of passing into the realm of ideal white femininity.

As might be expected, the fascination with Josephine's blackness surfaced in all kinds of image-based representations in the newspapers and publicity material that circulated in Stockholm. Many of the photos and drawings of her make her appear as various configurations along a Negroid/primitive – Parisian glamour axis.<sup>31</sup> The mix of the two iconic discourses is most clearly illustrated in the Oscars-teatern revue programme where a triplet of glamorous photographs of Baker in costume are framed by comically-drawn, libidinous and Negroid caricatures that barely resemble her (Fig. 3). A figurative schizophrenia characterises her appearance in the programme, as if she embodies beauty and the beast all at once in several juxtaposed versions.

The degree to which Baker's looks and agile body were considered not only beautiful, but spectacular in Europe is demonstrated by the diversity of photographs, postcards, artworks, posters and caricatures that depicted her.<sup>32</sup> In Paris, Baker was indeed her own culture, not in the diminutive and primordial sense imagined by the critic 'Åb', but in sensational manner: in her chateau, Les Milandes, she later had a wax museum built, the Jorama, depicting the various stages of her life.<sup>33</sup>



Baker's varied appeal was exploited by herself as well as by others as part of her reception in Stockholm. During the same year in which *La Sirène des Tropiques* was released, she published an interview-based autobiography, *Les mémoires de Josephine Baker*, co-written with Marcel Sauvage and richly illustrated by the artist Paul Colin. The images from the book were among those that circulated in the Swedish press at the time of her arrival in Stockholm.<sup>34</sup> With her husband, Marquis Pepito di Abiati, she had launched several Baker-endorsed products such as the popular hair-straightening wax, Baker-Fix.<sup>35</sup> The same day as her opening night at Oscars-teatern, a Josephine-doll was advertised in the daily press. The doll was 60 cm high, bare-

**Fig. 3 (above).**

Josephine in costume, photographic montage from Oscars-teatern programme for *Wein – Wein – Josephine* (1928).

**Fig. 4 (top left).** Stomatol advertisement, *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 24 July 1928.

cheded, clad in the well-known banana skirt, and could be bought in the toy department at NK (Nordiska Kompaniet, Stockholm's major department store). The advertisement for the doll was also addressed to adults: 'This funny doll is particularly amusing as an adornment sitting on the sofa, or as a car mascot.'<sup>36</sup> In the same year, Stomatol Toothpaste produced an animated commercial short (Fig. 4) in which Josephine Baker sung about white-toothed happiness (acquired through using the product) while wiggling her banana skirt before crawling off stage on all fours with her backside high in the air.<sup>37</sup>

A characteristic feature of Baker's representation to which allusion was made in the reviews was the cultural-sexual ambivalence ascribed to her glamorously but scantily clad figure.<sup>38</sup> By this time, she had been a celebrated avant-garde icon for some time in Paris; her blackness as well as that of other African-American artists, was *le dernier cri*.<sup>39</sup> Having seen the premiere of *La revue nègre* in 1925, dance critic André Levinson wrote:

Certain of Miss Baker's poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entwined and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture. The plastic sense of a race of sculptors came to life and the frenzy of African eros swept over the audience. It was no longer a grotesque dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that haunted Baudelaire.<sup>40</sup>

In Stockholm, critics did not pick up on the avant-garde significance of her blackness. Even if her skin colour did not pass unnoticed, the central question in the reaction of the press the week after the premiere at Oscarsteatern in July 1928 was her semi-nudity. Since the turn of the century, debates concerning nudity and nakedness had been controversial issues in discourses on aesthetics, health and sexuality, and by the 1920s, the interest in (or disdain for) German *Körperkultur* had given the issue new energy.<sup>41</sup> Baker's semi-nudity was frequently couched in this discourse, although given a racial slant. A heated debate over her performance, initiated by the daily paper *Stockholms Dagblad*, took place shortly after the premiere of the revue. Readers were asked: 'Is Josephine a Danger to Culture? What Stockholmers Say'.<sup>42</sup> An unidentified clipping, which includes a letter from a 'Friend of Sound Entertainment', reads:

What do we Swedes have to do with this loudly advertised half-Negro prima donna, who cartwheels and squints her eyes to make a poor person's head spin. Don't we have enough leg-shows and flirtation in [Ernst] Rolf's and Karl Gerhard's revues, which should make it unnecessary to import the phenomenon in its most provocative form, and on top of that, with a Negress as high priestess residing over the whole thing? ... is there no longer any prohibition in Sweden against showing a woman's entire torso?<sup>43</sup>

Another reader, sympathising with this view, wrote:

Mr. Editor! My thanks to 'Friend of Sound Entertainment'. The Negro dance, Negro music and Negro humour that currently dominate, not only constitute dangers to our culture, but serve to testify that it has already been derailed. This is evident to any person who is not yet a degenerate. If we adjust our tastes to those of the lower races, it will be the downfall of our culture.<sup>44</sup>

A reader signing himself as 'Unbiased Theologian', countered such an alarmist response by answering 'Friend' in the following manner:

If we admire a tree, an animal, a lake, we call this joy of nature. Why should our delight over the encounter with this deeply natural human being be interpreted as a sign of the depravation of our times?

An individual artist cannot appeal to everyone at once. But those who have the capacity to live in the present and to love its art forms, and in the best cases, its deep sense of decorum, should be glad to have known Josephine Baker, the international stage revue's most loveable child of nature.<sup>45</sup>

Another reader positive to Baker's show claimed that a Lutheran and backward-looking mentality inhibited the Swedish audiences from enjoying entertainment that was 'continental' and high-spirited:

Swedes, I hope, are not all missionaries, non-conformist Christians or temperance-dance advocates. Surely, there must also be people who have the capacity to view beautiful

women and filled goblets without crossing themselves or having a fit? Is it so incredibly dangerous to see an agile, well-built and healthy human body that we should need to cry out for help and call the police?<sup>46</sup>

The image of 'the continental' was evoked by yet another Baker-lover, 'Friend of Sound Thinking', who gave vent to his annoyance at the adversaries' talk of the degenerating effects of modern culture:

Yet again the pathologically critical and ultra-conservative Swedish petty bourgeoisie has found a welcome object for its more or less ridiculous outpourings, now as always addressed to a phenomenon belonging to the realm of modern entertainment. 'The cultural danger' this time is the dark-skinned prima donna who is a guest in our beautiful capital at the moment, bringing with her a breeze of the continent with its exclusive theatre world. A visit to the Oscarsteatern should be enough to convince the most fanatic opponent of 'Negro culture, leg-shows and flirtation' that these phenomena appeal to the discriminating Stockholm public. What sound-thinking person with a sense of the aesthetic – yes, and maybe even the grotesque – qualities of choreographic art could be offended by the stirring and graceful dances performed by this dark-skinned child of nature? And when they are executed by an agile and well-shaped representative of *das ewige Weibliche*, no matter if she is of another race or temperament than ours, modern man surrenders unconditionally.<sup>47</sup>

While defenders of moral standards claimed that Baker was a danger to Swedish culture as well as sexual mores, her defenders saw in her an innocent child whose 'animal' agility and 'naturalness' were free of erotic innuendo. If the former views demonstrated an openly racist slant, they often directed their attention towards the question of nakedness rather than race. Regardless of the views expressed, the articles are interspersed with caricatures of a dancing, topless Baker, or a photo of her in semi-close-up in a topless costume; in the press, she dances on and cannot be contained.

As stated in the introduction, Stockholm was (and still is) a relatively small capital. To a large extent, coverage of the media events could hardly

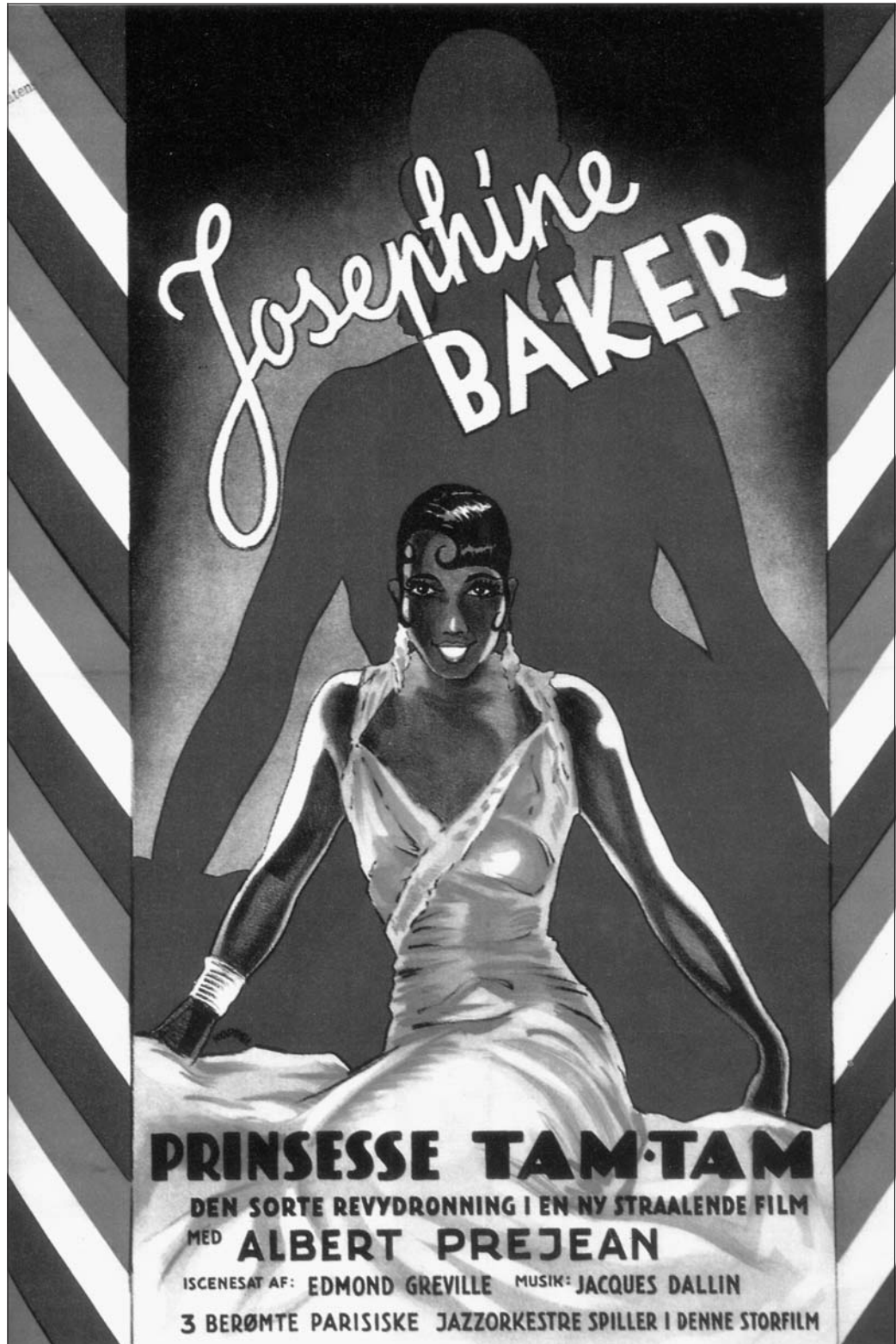
pass unnoticed by city-dwellers who went to the movies and regularly read the daily and weekly press in the 1920s and 1930s. Consequently, the significance of media events was readily grasped in a number of ways. A retrospective hypothesis is that the condensed local dynamic could make the representations of contemporary issues quite intense, particularly when articulated by Baker's performance and cultural status. In this respect, Baker's performance implies a relatively intimate affair in a small capital city. On the other hand, if a city can be said to harbour a collective psychology, the manner in which some Stockholmers responded indicates an inferiority complex with symptoms that were expressed in response to, or outright rejection, of the signs of a distinctly urban culture that occasionally offered an 'authentic' modern and cosmopolitan form of entertainment.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of whether Baker's presence was celebrated or berated in the letter pages of *Stockholms Dagblad*, popular response ascribed Baker the power to infuse the local with an element of the 'continental', perhaps even the global. For some people, Baker epitomised a healthy and expansive local culture; for others, however, her presence implied the threat of cultural poisoning and the lowering of established values.

### From enfant sauvage to chocolate diva

Six decades of stage and film criticism relating to Josephine Baker's reception in Stockholm reveal a gradual readjustment of address. What is striking is the never-ending negotiation concerning her artistic capacities and looks (Fig. 5). In the initial phase, i.e. the period when Baker first came to Stockholm in 1928, the critics' interest revolved around whether her stardom and her potential for creating scandal should be acknowledged or not. Even if she was more often praised than not, her artistic qualities were ascribed more to nature and spontaneity than to any particular skill (although the balance would shift towards the latter in her later career). The recurrent, indirect question in the 1920s was: can Baker be acknowledged as a star and, if so, what constitutes her stardom? In the entertainment magazine *Scenen*, the headline of a review read: 'What and who is the brown Josephine? A sensational diva – an impresario product – a stock-certificate – the woman in Europe!'<sup>49</sup> How and according to what cultural paradigm should her high-spirited singing and danc-



**Fig. 5.**  
Josephine's new  
image, 'without  
bananas'. Danish  
poster for  
*Prinsesse  
Tam-Tam* (1935).  
[Carson  
Collection.]



ing be valued? In trying to answer this question, most critics were on thin ice since their familiarity with Parisian and African-American stage-based cultural output must have been limited.

When Josephine returned with stage revues in 1932 and 1933, several critics commented on her artistic quality by recapitulating their first impression of her performance in 1928. All agreed that she had undergone a transformation that had led her away from her former spirited 'savagery'. Depending on the significance they ascribed to this change, they related her talent to a mix of artistic development and race. 'Sminx' in *Stockholms Dagblad* wrote:

The advance publicity certainly did not lie: Josephine Baker has evolved incredibly since she was here last. Then she was a little dark-skinned savage who swung in lianas with bananas around her waist, stuck out her backside, rolled her eyes and squinted them so that her eyes reached the root of the nose. Well, she can still perform those tricks, but they are only glimpsed now and then, as a reminder of her former self. Now she is, first and foremost, a serious ballad-singer, fascinating, vibrant with life and intensity. She is wonderfully free of affectation. The crudely primitive has gone, but she is still a captivating child of nature. She sings her songs as if she sang them spontaneously, for the first time ... The little African with the delicate voice will surely draw many packed houses at the Chinateatern during her stay here.<sup>50</sup>

In this review, as in most other reviews at the time, child metaphors abound together with allusions to the degree to which Baker had either left behind or had kept her savagery.<sup>51</sup> *Dagens Nyheter* noted that her 'backside still retains those inimitable facial expressions' as when she was here last.<sup>52</sup> As earlier, 'chocolate' is a constant analogy in descriptions of her:

The chocolate-brown prima donna from Casino de Paris cannot complain about the way she has been received by our so-called chilly country on her return visit. The China auditorium was packed from floor to ceiling, and cheers rose in an even and inspiring crescendo from the diva's entrance to her last farewell wave with a long brown arm through the curtains. ... [She] has not changed as

drastically as the advance publicity had promised. She still retains the same proportion of gamin temperament, but does not lavish it on the audience as ferociously ... Josephine's strong and primordial temperament, furthermore, allows her to perform as a tragedienne to good effect. That, combined with her childish playfulness, her modern, reckless artistry and the musicality peculiar to her race, all make it abundantly clear why she has such a sure grasp of her audience.<sup>53</sup>

Such responses are typical of the positive reception Baker was accorded by some reviewers. For critics who were not so enthusiastic, Baker's stardom was not simply questioned, it could be pulled to pieces at times. In *Scenen*, a columnist contradicted a very enthusiastic review by 'Catherine' in the same issue. The columnist hardly paid any attention to Baker's performance, but gave an acrid account of her way to 'success'. The article offered an entire micro-biography in a mocking tone:

Philadelphia is her first stop. She is employed at the Standard-Theatre as a 'Nigger Girl'. The pay is 10 dollars per week ... After a few months she pops up in New York. No agent, no theatre wants her. Everybody laughs at her, saying that she looks like a 'monkey'. Finally, a jingle-jangle theatre-owner takes pity on her, and lets her play in a grotesque number.

But not even here can she endure for long; it is always the same. Then Josephine gets this splendid idea: she will dance naked, or half-naked, only clad in a girdle. Now her success is incredible. Her beautiful body is an attraction and after a year, she earns 250 dollars a week. In 1925, a good manager took her to Paris ...

She dances the 'banana-dance' and sings, 'Yes, sir, that's my baby' ... the next day all of Paris sings the tune and the theatre is sold out for several weeks in advance. Josephine now earns a 1000 dollars a week ...

The rest of Europe starts to take an interest in her ... the metropolitan cities offer huge fees ... a Negress is on her way to gaining world fame, and many think it remarkable ...

She comes to Berlin ... they commend her well-performed songs in the revue, her agile

body, but the big success does not come. In Munich, she is not even allowed to perform.

But Josephine has big plans ...<sup>54</sup>

'H.S.' goes on to account for the ways in which Baker succeeded in creating scandal but utterly failed to make artistic progress. Considerable space was devoted to her marriage to Marquis Pepito di Abiati which the reviewer regarded as a crafty career move when success did not come her way as quickly as she had expected. Only towards the end of the review did 'H.S.' mention her recent show:

And now a new Josephine conquers the world with new numbers but without bananas. Recently, you could see this in Stockholm. The audience would not leave, and when she finally threw flowers to the enraptured audience from her dressing room, they practically fought over them.

Because the poor little Negress from Saint Louis is now a great artist and a rich wife.<sup>55</sup>

Arthur Johnson, another critic who was sceptical about Baker's talent, wrote about her in *Filmjournalen*, recalling his memory of her new-found stardom in Stockholm 1928 as a backdrop for evaluating her artistic progress. The tone is characterised by chilly banter:

Well, here she is again, the Swiss chocolate-coloured Negro child! She who climbed like a monkey in the jungle of the Oscarsteatern a couple of years ago, and became just as famous for the string of perky bananas encircling her waist, has now grown famous for her new-born, tiny soubrette voice. In those days [her performance] was nothing less than pure Nigger joy, displaying the savage's unwillingness to wear clothes, paired with the woman's joy in showing our Lord's Creation at its best.

If you didn't know that a Darkie is a child ruled by primitive impulses and a naive spontaneity, you can find that out here and now. At our latitude, such a happy invocation of being has never been seen before. The arms and legs of the 23-year-old beauty whirled incessantly, as if in a celebratory hymn to life. When she stood on her head with her bottom in the air, her spiritual side came to its fullest expression.<sup>56</sup>

Johnson initially praises Baker as the dainty, chocolate 'she-animal' whose well-shaped body he had seen generously displayed at the Folies-Bergères in Paris. But since then, he claims, Paris has quickly grown tired of Baker. She has, nevertheless, responded to this mortification with intelligence and artistic flexibility, and has succeeded in making a comeback by refining and reconstructing her artistic persona with more lavish costume and a distinctly French singing technique. He goes on to refer to a friend he met in the vestibule of the Chinateatern after her première, who spoke delightedly of her as a new, coloured Sarah Bernhardt. Johnson, finding the comparison somewhat amusing, observes:

I cannot imagine a more exorbitant homage to the beauty's newly fledged chansonette skills ... I can assure him that Sarah will never have to turn under her simple stone slab ... for the sake of a Negress.

The joy of imitation runs in the blood of the savage, and even if it doesn't take much thoughtlessness to forget that the art of acting is mere monkey tricks refined through the millennia, one must not mistake primitive drives with knowledge. It would be going too far, in celebrating the equatorial region, if you anticipate that in the fullness of time Josephine will be able to handle more than the spirited lines of a chamber-maid.

In truth, with a good ear and an even keener eye, she has learned to imitate the characteristically French chansonette style which, in and by itself, can be found everywhere. This said, there is no need to mention Mistinguett, which would be resorting to more violence than necessary. Well, that is the Casino de Paris-Josephine of 1932, who has grown more mimically aware in the upper region as well, *c'est tout*.<sup>57</sup>

The reviewer ends by paying a condescending tribute to one of her typical comic stage postures on all fours: 'In all circumstances, here is the fitting and beautiful Swedish homage: the backside crowns the Glory!' <sup>58</sup> The irreverent mix of praise, eroticized fascination and racialised disdain running through Johnson's article is interesting since it illustrates how far he thinks Baker can evolve without overstepping the limits of her race's alleged capacities. Among all

the 'calculated' turns of her career that 'H.S.' and Johnson claim to expose, her ambition to 'imitate' and master the white chanson tradition was found to be the most provocative. This was a boundary she should not try to cross.<sup>59</sup> As Regester has observed, Baker's new voice created a watershed in the evaluation of her talents. Despite the positions taken for or against her vocal technique, Baker's voice was considered an appropriation of white cultural expression, whereby she attempted or actually succeeded in transcending her ethnicity.<sup>60</sup>

Critics negrophilically enamoured of Baker and those not so fascinated by her adopt a similar vocabulary on many occasions. I would claim that their rhetoric was premised on an inverted logic of agency. In the laudatory reviews discussed above, a significant factor in Baker's success related to her specific racial traits. She had learnt to manage an inherited gift leavened with appropriate Western restraint, partly by refining it, partly by reducing her former 'African' recklessness to a successfully attractive mix. This made Baker appear as a slightly passive administrator of her talent. Critics such as Johnson and 'H.S.', on the other hand, inadvertently award Baker a surprising degree of agency and intelligence, even when putting her down. She is described as business-minded, smart, and either cynically or naively capable of exploiting her (natural) attributes and limited talents to the full. Public relations is a specifically sensitive spot for the critics; they despise the crass commercialism that was reported on her star build-up. In drawing undeserved attention to herself, 'H.S.' accused Baker of appearing seriously dishonourable.

In due course, Stockholm critics would claim a certain amount of knowledge about the scope and cultural significance of Baker's talents. To some extent, their response from 1932 onwards shows an underlying desire for her to stay primitive and child-like. Others saw the very change as an evidence of Baker's evolution. Yet, the shared premise was that her race was a limitation to artistic perfection, a tendency which Charlene Regester likewise traces in the white American reception of Baker.<sup>61</sup> Drawing attention to the two critical camps may not add to our received knowledge concerning the interrelation of the primitive and the modern, a dynamic in which Baker was located, but, it is interesting to note the unanimous remarks concerning her performance and star persona that arose from both enthusiastic and critical parties.

### The monstrous Josephine: the critical adjustment from stage to screen

A few years later, the juxtaposition of Baker's stage and screen persona makes yet another interesting phenomenon surface in the critics' views of her; on this occasion, even more distinct with regard to her looks. That her fame rested in the late 1920s as much on her grimaces and body movement as on her beauty and scanty costumes is clearly visible in the columns and the images that circulated of Baker. At this point she was nearly always regarded as adorable, regardless of how much she transgressed the norms of femininity with regard to luxury revues. She was constantly referred to as the chocolate- or *café-con-leche*-coloured beauty, and during her life, her body (later increasingly corseted) never stopped intriguing Swedish critics as an attraction in itself. In discussing Baker's appeal as a universal ethnic Other in the Parisian music hall, Fatimah Tobing Rony exemplifies how critics, commenting on her energetic performance and appearance, saw her femininity as both desirable and monstrous, neither entirely human nor animal. She is described as frightening and enticing, an unstoppable natural force.<sup>62</sup> For Stockholm critics, this dramatic interpretation is totally absent; her 'savagery' or 'grotesqueries' are mostly perceived in comical terms.

When the film *Zou Zou* came to Stockholm in January 1935, however, something interesting happened: the moment critics had the opportunity to compare her, by now, familiar stage presence with her screen persona. After seeing the film, they suddenly discovered that she was 'ugly' which, however, did not seem to have lessened her charm. 'Eveo' wrote: 'She plays a part and she does it in an excellent way. Her ugly and agile face can express both feeling and psychological motivation. She is talented, Mademoiselle Baker'.<sup>63</sup> An uncredited writer in *Vecko-Journalen* claims that 'one really likes this coloured woman with the ridiculous little face and the beautifully modeled legs',<sup>64</sup> while a reviewer in *Social-Demokraten* discovered that she 'plays on' her body, her voice, her 'rolling eyes' and her 'temperament', 'alternately sad, ugly and without make-up, alternately fair and happy'.<sup>65</sup>

Part of the explanation for Baker's perceived 'ugliness' on screen may be because critics did not respond well to the colour change she underwent between her appearance on stage and on screen. 'Jerome' found that Baker certainly had evolved, but



that her skin colour was not flattered by the transition to celluloid. Furthermore, despite her vivacious temperament, he claimed that she lacked the acting ability to bring out amorous feelings for her male counterpart, Jean Gabin.<sup>66</sup> In a similar way, the critic writing for *Dagens Nyheter* connected Baker's temperament and expression with her bodily appearance – 'the lankiness of her body (with the comically accentuated backside)' – and went on to express regret that celluloid did not do her colour justice to the same extent as it does her acting spirit.<sup>67</sup> The reviewer in *Aftonbladet* maintained that excepting her songs, the star did not come out well on film, and added that this was hardly due to a lack of acting talent.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, it seems as if critics found the most intriguing aspect of Baker's screen persona to be her virtual presence; she appeared 'just as in life' before their very eyes. This counts for *Zou Zou* as well. In a way, the critics' inclination to draw direct links between the actual presence of Baker on stage and her screen presence shows that the fascination with her body was not an insignificant element. Moreover, this way of responding to the medium brings associations close to those of a much earlier period in the history of film when initial encounters with the 'liveness' of the moving images were, at least in one well-known case, perceived as an uncanny simulacrum.<sup>69</sup> In a similar manner, the loss of Baker's desirable bronze colour in film may have translated as a loss of her organic life and of beauty.

Apart from the loss of fidelity in Baker's perceived skin tones, what may have sparked the change of opinion regarding Baker's looks? A cross-reading of the reviews of the stage revue and of the film, *Zou Zou* indicates that medium specificity as well as the distance from which the spectator sat relative to the stage or screen may have played a

significant role in how Baker's image was perceived. In the transition from the relatively long distance that separated critics and the stage artist in the revue to their facing a black and white close-up of Zou Zou in the film, some transformation had been effected: she had suddenly grown in scale, had become someone else. In short, it would appear that Baker's image had been transformed from one that was exciting, charming and endearingly funny to one that was, potentially, monstrous.

## Conclusion

If Stockholm was a small and peripheral centre of entertainment in the 1920s and 1930s, its audiences shared a common European fascination with blackness. As demonstrated in the reception discourse surrounding Josephine Baker's early film and stage career, the Stockholm critics' interest in her blackness was paired with a more general desire for things continental. Moreover, her presence imported a new sense of international energy which initially upset traditional cultural values.

In the critical reception accorded Baker's stage and film work there is, as we might anticipate, a fascination with Baker's face and body. I would suggest, however, that this response to her performances arose from their fixation with her black presence rather than her capacity to satisfy an appetite for the exotic. Given that her early popularity can be characterised as a transatlantic and decidedly modern/primitivist phenomenon, the critics' endorsement of the phenomenon attests to the discourse in which they understood her performance and her blackness. If the Stockholm reception of Josephine Baker did not depart significantly from other European responses to her stage and screen persona, Stockholmers in the 1920s and 1930s certainly had their own 'take' on her.

## Notes

1. Lars Wikström, 'Fredrik Adolf Ludvig Gustaf Albrecht Badin-Couschi. Ett sällsamt levnadsöde', in *Släkt och Hävd. Genealogiska studier tillägnade Börje Furtenback den 28 april 1971. Tidskrift utgiven av Genealogiska föreningen, riksförening för släktforskning*, 1 (1971): 272–273.
2. *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon*, entry for Badin (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1920), 544–545.
3. Edvard Matz, 'Ett experiment i fri uppfostran', in Magnus Bergsten (ed.), *Idéer och äventyr. En antologi om svenskt 1700-tal* (Lund: Historiska Media, 1999), 110.
4. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
5. *Främlingen – Dröm eller hot*, exhibition catalogue (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1996). See painting of John Panzio Toxon by Augusta Åkerlöf, 116; and

- Neger med papegojor ock markattor*, David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl, 136. See also a pastel of Badin by Gustaf Lundberg reproduced in Wikström, 'Fredrik Adolf Ludvig Gustaf Albrecht Badin-Couschi', 292.
6. Wikström, 'Fredrik Adolf Ludvig Albrecht', 280.
  7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1957]), 112.
  8. See, for instance, Oscar Björck's *Akademistude* (1878), a painting of the man nicknamed 'The Negro Pettersson', (aka Pierre-Louis or Jean-Louis Pettersson) in *Främlingen – Dröm eller hot*, 114. Pettersson was hired by Konstakademien (Royal Academy of Art) as a model, and probably also posed for photographic studies. He was also painted by Karin Bergsöo Larsson. *Ibid.*, 114.
  9. Charlene Regester, 'The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star – Josephine Baker Racialised, Sexualised, and Politicized in the African-American Press, the Mainstream Press, and FBI Files', in *Popular Music and Society* (Spring 2000), 1 [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2822/is\\_1\\_24/ai\\_73712454/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2822/is_1_24/ai_73712454/print)
  10. Ylva Habel, *Modern Media, Modern Audiences: Mass Media and Social Engineering in the 1930s Swedish Welfare State* (Stockholm: Aura förlag, 2002), 9.
  11. Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Shelley Stamp, *Moviestruck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Jan Olsson, 'Pressing Inroads: Metaspectators and the Nickelodeon Culture', in John Fullerton (ed.), *Screen Culture: History and Textuality* (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2004), 113–135.
  12. Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
  13. 'Josephine Baker, "Fresterskan från Tropikerna" kommer i sin första film i dag!', *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 3 December 1927; 'Josephine Baker-feber i stan', *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 December 1927. On New Year's Eve 1927, the film was the main attraction in the New Year's Eve programme at the Orion Theatre, *Social-Demokraten*, 31 December 1927.
  14. Tor Burn, 'Imperial –Premiär', *Stockholms Dagblad*, 4 December 1927. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Swedish are by the author.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. 'Bakers första Film', *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 4 December 1927.
  17. *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 3 December 1927.
  18. 'Imperial: Fresterskan från Tropikerna', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4 December 1927, 'Lördagspremiär på Imperial', *Social-Demokraten*, 4 December 1927. The reviewer 'M' in *Social-Demokraten* adds that the 'half-caste's' love interest is inevitably depicted as unhappy.
  19. The inner city cinemas were Metropolhörn, Imperial (the cinema in which the film was premiered) and Påfågeln. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 17 July 1928.
  20. 'Baker-Scandal in Budapest', newspaper clip, 4 April 1928, Musikmuseet; 'Copenhagen', *Dagens Nyheter*, 20 June 1928.
  21. *Social-Demokraten*, 18 July 1928. *Arbetaren*, 18 July 1928, also published an ode to 'The Black Jazz Queen' written by 'Pillman'.
  22. Daniel Fallström, 20 July 1928, anon. newspaper clip from the Music Museum, Stockholm.
  23. *Ibid.* This view was also shared by 'K.F-m' in *Arbetaren*, 20 July 1928.
  24. 'Svarte Rudolph', 'Josephine Bakers sommarseans', *Social-Demokraten*, 20 July 1928.
  25. 'Åb', 'Josephine på Oscarsteatern', *Dagens Nyheter*, 20 July 1928.
  26. 'Ted', 'Josephine Baker gjorde succès i bara bananer!', *Stockholms Dagblad*, 20 July 1928.
  27. *Social-Demokraten*, 20 July 1928.
  28. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
  29. Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday Publishing Group, 1989), 4, 15. Rose claims that the goofy 'nigger grin' became Baker's signature, a stereotype with a vengeance, and a way of looking back at objectifying gazes (while at the same time fencing them off).
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. For a discussion on this doubleness, see Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 94–116; on the aesthetics of the Parisian primitivist avant-garde, see 117–130.
  32. See, for example, Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 94–96, 106, 115–116, 118, 123, 126–127, 129; Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 114–119, Lynn Haney, *Naked at the Feast: The Biography of Josephine Baker* (London: Robson Books, 2002 [1995]), 63–73, 86, 100f, 117, 123, 146, 150, 163, 166, 175.
  33. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 266. Rose claims that Baker also adapted the tableaux aesthetics of the wax museum in her stage shows.
  34. Josephine Baker and Marcel Sauvage, *Les mémoires de Josephine Baker. Receuillis et adaptés par Marcel Sauvage. Avec 30 dessins inédits de Paul Colin* (Paris: KRA Éditeur, 1927).

35. Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 121.
36. 'Josephine Baker i NK i dag!', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 19 July 1928. The doll featured in the engagement portrait of Baker and Abiato, see Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 96.
37. Sandells reklamarkiv/Sandell's commercial short archives, part 1, Tevearkivet, Stockholm.
38. For a discussion of the sexualisation of Baker's body, see Regester, 'The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star', net pages 6–10, 15–17.
39. Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 18, 109.
40. Levinson cited in *Ibid.*, 118. For a discussion of the fetishisation of Baker as a universal ethnic spectacle, see Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 199–203.
41. Viktor Rydberg, 'Om nakenhet och klädselsätt (med anledning av striden om Oscar Björcks frismålningar i Operakällaren, 1895)', in *Viktor Rydberg. Samlade skrifter. Singoalla, uppsatser, barndomsminnen, tal, m.m.* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1943), 261–284. Olof [Karsten] Schmeling, *Mot baddräktskulturen* (Valdemarsvik: O. Schmelings Accidens-Tryckeri, 1928). Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910–1935* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998). For American views on Baker's nudity, see Regester, 'The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star', net pages 6–8.
42. 'Är Josephine en kulturfara? Vad stockholmarna säga', *Stockholms Dagblad*, 22 July 1928.
43. *Stockholms Dagblad*, 23 July 1928.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. 'Arg notarie', *ibid.*
47. 'Den krasskonservativa svenska småborgaren är ute och spökar', *Stockholms Dagblad*, 24 July 1928.
48. Habel, *Modern Media, Modern Audiences*, 115–117.
49. 'Vad och vem är den bruna Josephine? Sensationernas diva – en impressarioprodukt – ett börsapper – kvinnan i Europa!', *Scenen*, 13–14 (1928): 408.
50. 'Afrika gör Succés på China', *Stockholms Dagblad*, 16 July 1932.
51. 'Primadonnan Joséphine', *Scenen* 14 (1932): 400, *Arbetaren*, 16 July 1932.
52. 'Åberg', *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 July 1932.
53. 'Josephine-succé på China', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 16 July 1932.
54. 'H.S.', 'Joséphines romantiska karriär' *Scenen* 14 (1932), 388.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Arthur Johnson, 'Svartkonst. Revyprat med Arthur Johnson', *Filmjournalen* 32 (1932): 23.
57. *Ibid.*, 28, 30.
58. *Ibid.*, 30.
59. For discussion of the European and American reception of Baker's singing talent, see Regester, 'The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star', net pages 2–3.
60. *Ibid.*, 13. See also Kathryn Kalinak, 'Disciplining Josephine Baker: Gender, Race and the Limits of Disciplinary', in James Buhler, Caryl Flynn, David Neumeyer (eds.), *Music and Cinema* (Hannover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 316–335.
61. Regester, 'The Construction of an Image and the Deconstruction of a Star', net pages 16–18.
62. Rony, *The Third Eye*, 199. See also Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 138.
63. 'Eveo', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 13 January 1935.
64. *Vecko-Journalen* 4 (1935).
65. *Social-Demokraten*, 13 January 1935.
66. 'Jerome', 'Josephine Baker', *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 January 1935.
67. *Ibid.*
68. 'Filmson', '"Zou-Zou" på Riviera', *Aftonbladet*, 13 January 1935.
69. See Yuri Tsivian's discussion of Maxim Gorky's visit to the 'Kingdom of Shadows' in Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 5–7.