Performing race and gender: the exoticization of Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong

STASZAK, Jean-François

Abstract

Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong are two exceptions to white hegemony in early show business. They became the first Afro-American and Chinese-American stars in the 1920s, and reached international stardom in spite of their ethnicity but also because of it. Their careers and success were based on their exoticization. Baker and Wong’s exoticism has much to do with ethnicity, but also with sex and gender. Their exotic dances on stage or on screen can be considered to be forms of erotic shows. This article shows how sex, gender and race are entangled in their movies and burlesque shows. It also discusses the ways in which the agency and the audience of the performer should be taken into account and analyzes how these performances were both rooted in Western imaginative geographies as well as connected to symbolic and material spaces.

Reference


DOI : 10.1080/0966369X.2014.885885

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:76426

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
Performing race and gender:
the exoticization of Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong.

Abstract: Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong are two exceptions to white hegemony in early show business. They became the first Afro-American and Chinese-American stars in the 1920s, and reached international stardom in spite of their ethnicity but also because of it. Their careers and success were based on their exoticization. Baker and Wong’s exoticism has much to do with ethnicity, but also with sex and gender. Their exotic dances on stage or on screen can be considered to be forms of erotic shows. This article shows how sex, gender and race are entangled in their movies and burlesque shows. It also discusses the ways in which the agency and the audience of the performer should be taken into account and analyzes how these performances were both rooted in Western imaginative geographies as well as connected to symbolic and material spaces.

Performance, agency and political economy

Theorists of intersectionality have shown how gender domination is enmeshed with other forms of domination (Collins 2000, Crenshaw 1991), calling geographers to explore the ‘entwined spaces of ‘race’, sex and gender’ (Saad and Carter 2005, 49) – an exploration pursued during recent years, but not without certain anxieties (Brown 2012). In queer theory, sexuality and gender are socially constructed but they are also naturalized norms that people are ‘coerced’ to fit into. Butler (1990) suggests a reading of these experiences in terms of performance and performativity. But the agency and the historical and geographical embeddedness of the performer, conceived of as a rather ‘abstracted subject’ by Butler, remains a question for geographers (Nelson 1999).

What exactly is the agency of a person performing a gender and racial role when both are strictly coded and stigmatized? And how do performers deal with the ‘imaginative geographies’ (Gregory 1995) codifying the roles they perform and the actual geographies of the (social) stage where they perform? One of the issues addressed in this article is the articulation of the different symbolic and material spaces where the performance takes place. I try here to respond to the ‘lack of empirical work looking at intersection in practice’ and the urge to ‘understand intersectionality as a situated accomplishment’ (Valentine 2007, 14). More specifically, I intend to answer the call to analyze ‘the historical and geographical embeddedness of human subjects who ‘perform’ a wide variety of identities in relation to various spaces’ (Nelson 1999, 351), and to follow social geographers in their attempts to show ‘how intersectionalities are bound up in spatialities’ (Peake 2010, 65).

In order to answer these questions, I analyze the performances of two actresses and exotic dancers: Josephine Baker (1906-1975) and Anna May Wong (1905-1961). They performed race and gender
both on the stage/screen and in the spaces in which they live, according to the sometimes contradictory identities of their person, of their persona, and of the characters they had to embody. Their career and success were based on their ability to incarnate and sometimes to transgress race and gender stereotypes. The differences and the similarities between Wong and Baker’s lives and careers exemplify how performance, performativity and agency are situated. They vary according to specific contexts and audiences, and change from one time and one place to another. I suggest that Baker and Wong’s agencies resulted from their ability to master and play with both the imaginative geographies encoding their identities and performances and the actual economic and political geographies of the show business in Europe and the USA.

The classical opposition between the analysis of the political economy of show business and the cultural study of its products (Hesmondhalgh 2007) does not help to understand how a performance is embedded in a specific space and socio-economic context, nor how ‘the actor is [to be] seen simultaneously as an activity and object of production and as practice of consumption’ (Polan 2002, 186). I suggest considering Baker and Wong’s performances both as texts to be questioned from a cultural point of view and as commodities to be analyzed from a socio-economic point of view. Acknowledging Baker and Wong’s agencies leads to question the rhetoric of their shows, and to draw on the hypothesis that they could be – to a certain extent – the authors of their own texts. Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity helps to see how Baker and Wong may have been at the same time the subject and the object of their performances, and how they played on (and with) identities and ideologies. Political economies of race and cultural production are nevertheless essential to explain how their shows and identities were performed and were responded to differently, according to the specific intersections of gender and ethnicity in Europe and in the USA.

Yet, performing on the stage of a real theater and in everyday life are not the same things. In her foundational paper, Butler may have thought metaphorically of gender performance as an ‘act’, ‘rehearsed’ and following a ‘script’ on a ‘scene’, but she also made it clear that on the social scene, ‘the act is not contrasted with the real, but constitutes a reality’ (1988, 526-527, emphasis in original). She later elaborates on this difference, theorizing the distinction between performance, accomplished by a pre-existing subject (for instance on the stage), and performativity, which establishes the subject in social life (Butler 1990).

Baker and Wong’s performances, were undoubtedly exceptions, but it is argued that these exceptions confirm and help to explain the ‘rules’. First, while gender and racial performances by ‘ordinary’ women usually remain hidden in the obscurity of everyday life, those of Wong and Baker - fully exposed and sometimes discussed by the stars themselves - are easy to access. Second, the image of the ‘colored woman’ they both reflect and diffuse is coherent with the society of their time, because
their movies and shows were mainstream cultural products. Third, considering the case of two ‘colored’ women who nevertheless had exceptional success gives us a way to listen to the usually silenced voices of the victims of white patriarchal hegemony, and without reducing them to the status of victims. Valentine (2007, 14) notes that ‘work on intersectionality collapses back to a focus on the experiences of nonprivileged groups rather than on how privileged or powerful identities are ‘done’ and ‘undone’’. Baker and Wong offer the opportunity not only to consider the intersectionality of two somewhat privileged women, but also (or rather) show how intersectionality may help to understand the blurring of the line between privileged and non-privileged people.

This article first presents Baker and Wong’s career in America and Europe in relation to the local political economies of race and show business. I then analyze the two processes of their exoticization: racialization and eroticization. The queerness of their sometime transgressive performances leads me to question their agency along with the audiences’ response to both their ironic moves and political commitments.

**Wong and Baker’s early transatlantic careers**

Wong and Baker were the first, main or even only African-American and Chinese-American stars in the early 20th Century. A French women's magazine which dedicated two papers to the ‘colored stars’, began by asserting that ‘movies seem to belong to one single race: the white race’ and quoted immediately Baker and Wong as the two female exceptions (*Les Dimanches de la femme*, 12/25/1932 and 1/29/1933).

Baker was born in Saint Louis, in 1906, and Wong in Los Angeles, in 1905. Wong’s parents were both Chinese-Americans, born in California. Baker’s mother was African-American, but her father’s identity remains unknown. Wong and Baker started their careers in the USA, but came to stardom in Europe. Baker became a star by dancing in the (in)famous Parisian *Revue Nègre* (1925); Wong by accepting the leading role in the Anglo-German movie *Song* (1928, Eichberg). Both performers were in Berlin in 1928 (fig. 4) and in Paris in 1932-1933, where Wong attended Baker’s show3.

In 1924, Baker was on the verge of becoming a successful burlesque dancer, performing in New York vaudeville shows, but mostly for Black patrons. At this time, anti-miscegenation laws forbade interracial marriage in the US and the depiction of interracial couples on screen. Nor of course was there interest in showing a black couple to white audiences. As most movies were about a romance, there were no leading roles for black actors or actresses in Hollywood until the end of the 1950s (Cripps 1993). Baker did not become a star in the USA. Though she appeared as a leading lady in four French films (Staszak, in press), she was never cast in an American movie. Baker often
complained about Hollywood’s reluctance to cast black performers: ‘In France I have been a star […] I don’t see why I should do less here [in the USA]’ (Los Angeles Daily, 6/20/1952).

Wong was more advanced in her career when she decided to go to Europe. She was facing a different situation to Baker. Indeed many movies in the late 1910s and 1920s were about a romance between a white man and an Asian woman. Such ‘miscegenation’, although disallowed, (Koshy 2004), was not as taboo as the mixing of whites and blacks, as it was not perceived as such a social and political threat. However, to make such movies acceptable in Hollywood, the Chinese woman often had to be played in yellowface by a European actress (Courtney 2004, Moon 2005). This practice was an American theatrical tradition whereby ‘colored’ characters were stereotypically played by white actors with heavy make-up. Furthermore, the romance had to fail, and the Chinese woman had to die at the end – ‘so that the white girl with the yellow hair may get the man’, said Wong (Los Angeles Examiner, 11/23/1929).

Even if Wong met success in The Toll of the Sea (Franklin, 1922) or The Thief of Bagdad (Walsh, 1924), she was very disappointed with the roles Hollywood had to offer a Chinese-American actress. Wong was often offered supporting roles to confer a more ‘authentic’ Chinese touch to the movie. Or, when the role was more important, it was a stereotyped character: a childish doll, like Madame Butterfly, or a Dragon Lady, like the daughter of Fu Man Chu (fig. 1). Frustrated with her career, Wong decided to move to Europe in 1927. In Berlin and London, she became the main star of several movies in which she played leading ladies (always involved in an interracial romance) and less stereotyped (but nevertheless exoticized) characters. She later explained quite lucidly the problem: ‘I love working in American films, but I realize more and more that because of the psychology of many American persons, particularly those in small towns, a Chinese actress has not a chance to play leading parts. People don’t like to see a love story in which a white man and a Chinese woman are the principals’ (Sunday Morning Star, 9/17/1939).
Figure 1. Advertising material for Anna May Wong (and Warner Oland, in yellowface) in the Daughter of the Dragon (L. Corrigan, 1931). Wong is drawn in a pose and an ‘Oriental’ outfit from a previous movie (Piccadilly, E.A. Dupont, 1927).

Furthermore, Baker and Wong’s star status did not protect them from racial discrimination in their everyday life in North America. Wong was unable to marry a white man (like one of her fellow actors), was arrested by immigration officers in a Canadian railway station⁴ and had trouble finding a
place to live in Los Angeles in 1946 due to racial restrictions\textsuperscript{5}. When Baker came back to the USA in the 1930s and 1950s, she was repeatedly refused access to hotels and restaurants, which only accepted white patrons.

If Wong and Baker had to flee from the US to eventually meet success in Berlin, London or Paris, it was not because they escaped racism but rather because the political economies of ethnic minorities and show business were quite different in Europe. They came to an ethnically homogeneous society where there was at that time no African or Asian community, and where racial issues were much more abstract. ‘Negrophilia’ in Paris made ‘Black’ music and ‘Black’ dances very fashionable (Archer-Straw 2000), but this did not mean that there was less racial prejudice in Europe. In Europe, Baker and Wong simply did not threaten any social or political order. On the contrary, their ‘status as entertainers and visitors helped to contain anxieties’ (Leong 2006, 15). Being much more successful in Paris and London than in their home country, Baker and Wong unintentionally allowed the French and British audiences to focus on racism in the USA, while drawing attention away from European colonial societies. Besides, Wong and Baker’s performances made sense in the USA according to the constraining contexts and traditions of yellowface and blackface burlesque. In Europe, the audience recoded their shows ‘at the intersection of ethnographic, music hall and modernist cultures’ (Henderson 2003, 119), and respected them as authentic or avant-garde artistic performances. Wong and Baker were given a new (but nevertheless racialized) political status and cultural meaning which eventually boosted their career.

Wong may have said that she ‘found absolutely no race prejudice in Europe’ (Motion Pictures, Oct. 1931), and Baker may have thought in 1924 that ‘it is normal to be Black in Paris’ (Baker and Bouillon 1976, 56). It is unlikely, however, that non-White people living in France or French Empire shared their privileged experiences and agreed with their optimistic statements. The Chicago Defender (1/5/1952) suggested that Baker ‘is thinking only about herself. She should stop and consider what France is doing to some 45,000,000 Negroes in its colonies’. Wong more realistically specified: ‘once you are a success, color means nothing’ (The New Movie Magazine, July 1932).

Did Wong and Baker have any idea that their European stardom and repeated statements celebrating the absence of prejudice in France or England could be instrumentalized to dissimulating or legitimizing colonial and racial oppression? Baker never criticized French Colonization, but she fought for Civil Rights in the USA and against Apartheid in South Africa. Her persistent silence, repeatedly criticized by the Afro-American press, perhaps suggests that she knew there was a political line she could not cross without putting her European career at risk.
Staging race

Wong and Baker reached stardom in spite of their ethnicity but as well as because of it. Wong never played a white character. Her ethnicity (real or staged) was systematically the main feature of her characters, and of the plot. Baker, on the stage or on the screen, wasn’t just any dancer or actress. She was, especially before the 1930s, a Black dancer, performing so-called African, Black, ‘savage’ or indeed any kind of exotic dances.

The exoticization of Wong and Baker relies on the denial of their American identity. ‘Go back to Africa!’ protesters shouted at Baker’s show in Finland⁶, even if they were well aware of her American citizenship. Wong was called a Chinese and journalists were surprised to meet a woman dressed like any American woman and who was fluent in English. The same denial is illustrated by the doors of the Grand Sveavägen movie theatre in Stockholm, opened in 1933. They figure a female star for each continent: Swedish actress Greta Garbo stands for Europe, Hollywood star Joan Crawford for America, Wong for Asia and Baker for Africa. Associating Baker with Africa and Wong with Asia suggested that a non-White person could not be American, and offered a means of finding representatives of the African and Asian continents when there were no African or Asian stars. Geography serves here as a (false) proof of the universal dimension of cinema, present on and addressing each continent, and as a (true) instrument of racialization. The Hollywood and La Brea Gateway gazebo, erected in Los Angeles in 1994 and presented as a tribute to Hollywood’s multi-ethnicity, plays on the same trick, with its eroticized and racialized caryatid statues of Dorothy Dandridge, Dolores Del Rio, Mae West and, again, Anna May Wong. Celebrating these four stars exonerates Hollywood from its (past?) racism while their statues nevertheless perpetuate sexist and racist stereotypes (Staszak 2011).

Yet Wong’s and Baker’s ethnicity was staged very differently, according to two othering figures specific to Western colonial ideology: the savage and the barbarian (Staszak 2009). On the Grand Sveavägen’s doors, Baker wears no shoes and dances half-naked among tropical plants. She smiles and her body language seems spontaneous and almost childish. Wong stands in front of a Chinese pagoda; her body is a little more covered with an extravagant oriental outfit; she seems more serious, her gestures more contrived and her dance more codified.

Supposedly African, Baker was staged as a ‘savage’, especially before the 1930s. She wore almost no clothes. Journalists reviewing her shows often compared Baker to a plant or an animal, with which she would have a special connection (fig. 2). She was considered part of nature and not displaying any culture or learning. Her dance was not seen as sophisticated or codified but as free and childish. Baker was well aware of the prejudice she had to face: ‘People think I come from the jungle. The primitive instinct, isn’t it? The madness of the flesh, the tumult of the senses, the delirious
animality… What people didn’t write! White imagination is quite something when it comes to Black people’ (Baker and Sauvage 1949, 71).

Figure 2. Josephine Baker and Chiquita. Source: Studio Piaz (Paris, c.1930–1932). Offered to Baker by the director of the Casino de Paris, the pet cheetah appeared with her in the revue Paris qui remue (1930). Chiquita was a male animal but wore a typically female exotic name and a diamond necklace. In the picture, Baker is ‘dressed’ just like Chiquita; both sit on the same level and seem to communicate through eye contact; both are said to come from the same tropical savage place.

Wong being Asian and, more specifically, Chinese, was not considered a ‘savage’ but a ‘barbarian’. Orientals were seen as falsely civilized. Wong often posed in Chinese scenes with luxurious Asian costumes and long red nails, surrounded by Chinese artifacts (fig. 3). Her behavior was presented as following strange rules. As a Madame Butterfly or a Chinese doll, she was too passive and obedient.
As a Dragon Lady, she was too dominant and sadistic. In both cases, she was too sophisticated – whereas Baker was not sophisticated enough.

Figure 3. Studio photograph of Anna May Wong. Source: E.R. Richee (Paramount Pictures, c. 1924). This exoticizing portrait was shot for the promotion of Peter Pan (H. Brenan, 1924), a movie in which Wong plays the part of Tiger Lily, an ‘Indian Princess.’ Tellingly, the legend on the back of the photograph explains that Wong is presented ‘as she appears in the delicate costume of her own people.’

Baker’s performances changed at the end of the 1920s, Wong’s at the end of the 1930s. For both of them, it had to do with aging: the danse sauvage or the Madame Butterfly characters were less appropriate for a woman in her thirties. For a while, Wong played Dragon ladies and then turned to more positive (if no less stereotyped) characters (Daughter of Shanghai, 1937; King of Chinatown,
1939). The invasion of Manchuria (1931) and the attack of Pearl Harbour (1941) changed or rather polarized the image of Asian people in the USA. Japan became the supervillain and China a victim and potential ally. Hollywood produced war propaganda movies that gave Wong the opportunity to play heroic figures of Chinese women fighting the Japanese invader (Bombs over Burma, 1942; The Lady from Chungking, 1942).

The change in Baker’s performances was due to her own choices rather than the political context. After 1928, Baker understood that she had to bring something new to the audience, which was getting tired of her danse sauvage. But Baker’s decision was also based on her reluctance to capitalize on the Black Venus myth. She wanted – and succeeded - to be acknowledged as an artist, and not only a Black artist. From the time of the Casino de Paris’ revue (1930-1931), she recorded her first songs in French and began to wear sophisticated gowns on stage. Her shows didn’t refer to her race anymore: ‘she is whitening before our very eyes’, wrote a journalist reviewing her performance (Le Journal, 10/9/1930). This may explain the audience’s negative response to her performance in New York (1936). According to Maude Russel (1897-2001), who performed with Baker in Shuffle Along (1921), ‘at that time, nobody wanted to see a colored girl being twirled around with four white boys and dressed up like a queen. All those people were saying: ‘She’s black, trying to be white, why don’t she go on and be her original self like she was in Shuffle Along, when she was stickin’ her fanny out and looking ugly?’ Baker received French citizenship in 1937. In her last movie Fausse alerte (The French Way, Baroncelli, 1940), she plays the role of a Parisian Cabaret director and performer, ‘a role from which any and all racial lines and identifications were completely erased’ (New York Amsterdam News, 8/13/1952) – an inconceivable casting in Hollywood until the 1980s (Staszak in press).

How did Wong and Baker define their racial identity? Wong never pretended to escape from her community, and confessed to be ‘growing more Chinese each passing year’ (Los Angeles Time, 9/9/1934). She was very proud of her ancestry, and embraced her Chinese origins. She spoke for the Chinese-American community and in defense of China when it was invaded by Japan.

Baker was less consistent, especially before the 1940s. In her biographies and interviews, she claimed in several instances to have a Spanish father, yet there is no evidence or testimony to ground this assertion. She liked to wear white make-up and to be lit in a way that made her look paler, and was ‘obsessed with […] skin-lightening products’ (Jules-Rosette 2007, 145). After 1928, she had no more special connection with ‘her’ community in France or in the USA. Baker, through ‘her effort to become white’, seemed to be on the verge of ‘crossing the line’ of racial passing (Afro-American, 8/20/1927).
Nevertheless, Baker didn’t avoid racial issues in her early interviews. Racism and the taboo of miscegenation are the central themes of the novel she co-authored in 1931 (Mon Sang dans tes veines, My Blood in your veins), whose plot takes place in the USA. Before the 1940s, Baker’s antiracism went no further than her abstract, sentimental and rather depoliticized statements. But during the Second World War, she worked undercover for the French Resistance and supported the cause of General de Gaulle against the Germans. Nazi (and Vichy government’s) racism and anti-semitism (she was married until 1942 to a Jewish Frenchman whose religion she had embraced) made her more aware of racial issues and more conscious of her own belonging and responsibilities. In the 1950s, she refused to play for a segregated audience in the USA and became a Civil Rights activist. She spoke at the March on Washington in 1963, next to Martin Luther King (Dubziak 1994, Regester 2000). She adopted 12 multi-ethnic orphans that she used to call her ‘rainbow tribe’, which apparently ‘was not a family at all but a social and quasi-religious utopian movement’ (Jules-Rosette 2007, 185).

If these two women were subalterns because of their race, they could undoubtedly speak. And Wong understood how crucial it was: ‘I was 17 when a truck-driver yelled ‘Hey, Chink, out-of-the-way!’ I blazed back at him. It was then that my life began’ (Los Angeles Time, 9/9/1934).

Eroticizing the Exotic

The exoticization of Wong and Baker operates not only through their racialization but also through their eroticization. The two processes are indeed entangled, as shown by a cover of a German magazine (fig. 4) figuring both stars. Wong’s skin and even her dress are painted in a vivid yellow. Baker’s body is dark black, contrasting with her white torn shirt. Both of them are half-naked. They contrast with the supposedly German man standing in the background. White, male and dressed in a very formal suit, he is the spectator of their exotic and erotic show. The Grand Sveavägen’s doors provide the same evidence of the intersection of race and gender. Whereas the two white stars are fully dressed, Wong’s legs and belly and Baker’s breast are exposed.
Baker’s nudity, since her first appearance on stage and till the end of the 1930s, was part of her persona and of her success. Baker’s films were generally more prudish than her shows. *La Sirène des tropiques* (*Siren of the Tropics*) (Etievant and Nalpas, 1927) though, is an exception. Baker plays the
role a native of the French West Indies. In a memorable scene, she is a stowaway on board a ship sailing to France. She finds a bathtub in a cabin, takes all her clothes off and enjoys a bath. If the film was not censored, it was because the actress was Black, but probably also because the scene doesn’t have an explicit erotic dimension. It has more to do with the burlesque tradition of the vaudeville show, and she acts so naturally and playfully in the bath scene that it makes it almost childish and exuberant, (purposely?) exonerating the audience for its voyeuristic gaze.

Wong’s nudity is not rare but more partial. Quite often, she wears a fancy dress or an exotic costume, which doesn’t cover all of her body, leaving her legs, belly, arms and shoulders exposed. Her body was shown for the first time on screen in The Thief of Bagdad (Walsh, 1924), featuring the first male star of the time: Douglas Fairbanks (1883-1939). Her role lasted a few minutes, but she made a great impression, because of the eroticism of the scene. Both Wong and Fairbanks are half naked, and he sadistically points a knife into the back of the very helpless Mongol slave she played.

Wong performed her first erotic and exotic dance in an Anglo-German movie: Piccadilly (Dupont, 1929). Most of the story of the film takes place in a London cabaret. Valentine Wilmot, the manager of the club, needs to hire a new female performer for his show. In the scullery of the cabaret, he notices Shosho (played by Wong), dancing on a table to entertain her fellow dishwashers. Gilmot hires her to be his new star and eventually falls in love with her.

In the scene of the kitchen dance, the erotic intersection of race, gender and class is very obvious. Gilmot stands at the door, unnoticed. His gaze is intrusive and penetrating. When Shosho’s eyes finally turn to the door, she panics, stops dancing and jumps from the table on which she was performing her show. Gilmot (and Shosho) knows he will have her whenever he wants, because Shosho is a woman, because she is Chinese and because she is poor. As such, she is erotic prey. Her performance on the stage of the cabaret is quite different. Shosho is dancing for wealthy European clients. The musicians are Chinese. Wong’s dance owes much more to Asian traditions, even if its authenticity is questionable. Her costume looks Oriental, Chinese or Thai, and she is half-naked (fig. 1). The eroticism of the show is justified by and relies on Shosho’s, deliberately staged exoticization.

In many of their movies, Baker and Wong played the role of a showgirl who at some point in the story had to perform an exotic dance. In these scenes, the film is edited by way of shots and reverse shots, showing alternatively the near-naked body of the performer and the mesmerized faces of the (mainly white male) audience. The relevance of these mandatory scenes, which form the climax of the movie, relies on the eroticization of the female exotic body, first by providing an intradiegetic justification for its exhibition, second by enhancing the mimetic desire of the extradiegetic spectator.
 Queering race and gender

Both Wong and Baker were flappers. They bobbed their hair, wore short skirts, smoked cigarettes, and drove cars. Just like Louise Brooks (1906-1985), they were independent women challenging Western patriarchy. But unlike Brooks, Baker and Wong were not seen as ‘normal’ women because this norm was constructed as white. Black feminists have shown how normative white feminity resulted in the defeminization of ‘colored’ women, stereotyped as bad mothers or having an insatiable sexuality. Accordingly, Baker and Wong never played the role of a mother⁹, and their sexuality was often portrayed as out of control.

In Princesse Tam Tam (Gréville, 1935), Baker plays the role of Aouïna, a Tunisian girl, who comes to Paris. In a most revealing scene, she is having dinner in a cabaret. Her jealous rival, a European woman is planning to make a fool of her. This white woman assumes that an exotic girl’s sensuality is so powerful that she cannot master her own desires. So she makes Aouïna drink while watching the conga dance. She hopes that Aouïna’s real uncontrolled nature will break out. She won’t be disappointed, except that the audience will love Aouïna’s show: she takes her shoes and her dress off and jumps on the stage to perform an erotic and exotic dance.

Baker’s over-sexualization and erotic power over her male partners challenge her gender identity. In a review of the Revue Nègre (1925), journalist Pierre de Reigner confesses to be much confused. He asks: ‘Is it a man? Is it a woman?’, ‘Is she black, is she white?’ (Baker and Sauvage 1927, 20-23). It isn’t even entirely clear whether she is a human being: he compares Baker to a baby giraffe, a snake, a kangaroo, a banana. In his own words, she could just as well be a saxophone or an ectoplasm. In the journalist and the audience’s minds, Baker blurs the lines between Blacks and Whites, men and women, human beings and animals, living creatures and inanimate objects.

Nevertheless, she remains very exciting. Baker’s dance not only confuses her identity: it challenges the audience. Who, finally, are these white males, supposedly heterosexuals, who are overcome with lust for a person whose gender they can’t even identify? Baker being not recognizable as a woman or even as a human being because she is not white, the scandal of the Revue Nègre is not only in her performance but as well in the audience’s enthusiastic response: her success challenges and threatens gender and sexual norms.

The same ambiguity characterizes a scene of Piccadilly, when Shosho brings Wilmot to Limehouse, the former London Chinatown, to show him the oriental costume she has chosen for her exotic and erotic performance. Shosho refuses to try it on and asks Jim, her Chinese partners and one of her musicians, to put it on - so Wilmot can test the appealing effect of the outfit. Jim looks rather bored with the situation, but Wilmot looks more embarrassed. Pretending the exotic costume can fit a male
Chinese as well as a female one, Shosho is assuming that Wilmot’s (and the audience’s?) desire for her has more to do with her ethnicity than with her gender.

The exoticization of Wong and Baker challenges the heterosexuality of white male spectators. Accordingly, Baker and Wong’s heterosexuality was questioned. There is a persistent rumor that Wong had an affair with Marlene Dietrich (Hodges 2004, 86 sq.). According to Jean-Claude Baker (Baker and Chase 2001), Josephine had several lady lovers’ and several of her male lovers and even her two last husbands were homosexual. He has been the first (and the only person so far) to write about Baker’s bisexuality or lesbianism, but her popularity among gays, especially at the end of her career, is unquestioned (eg. Rose 1990), even by Baker herself, who said of the gay community: ‘they are my children’ (Baker and Chase 2001, 410).

My interest is less in Baker or Wong’s actual sex lives than in their queer image in the LGBTQ community (Baker and Chase 2001, Hodges 2004, Rose 1989), for which their queerness mainly relies on their ability and willingness to transgress gender, social and racial norms. But what transgressions are we talking about? On screen or on stage, they did not break Western stereotypes about Black or Asian women. On the contrary, their roles and interpretations were perfect illustrations or even caricatures of these stigmatizing stereotypes. I suggest that this caricatured dimension is the answer to my question.

Baker’s banana dance did not try to be realistic. Her ‘dress’ and her moves referred less to her Afro-American identity or sexuality than to a European fantasy about it. Baker was a black dancer in blackface. She went so far in incarnating racial and gender stereotypes that, according to Jean-Claude Baker, ‘onstage she looked like a drag queen. A badly made-up drag queen—glitter over her makeup, too much mascara, extravagant gowns that exaggerated the feminine, extravagant gesture […] Later, here in the U.S., it would be called ‘vogueing’’. French poet Jean Cocteau once said to Baker: ‘you are the opposite of Barbette [an American female impersonator who met tremendous success in Europe in the late 1920s]. He hides everything, you show everything’ (Baker and Bouillon 1976, 92). Barbette’s performance was all about concealing the secrets of his female impersonation while Baker’s was about showing them off. She admiringly acknowledged Barbette as her ‘rival’. Baker was ‘a female impersonator who happened to be a woman’ (Rose 1989, 253).

Baker mastered the entire repertoire, beginning her career playing the role of a man in blackface in the Broadway revue Chocolate Dandies (1924) and in La Folie du Jour (Folies Bergère, 1926). In La Joie de Vivre (Casino de Paris, 1932), she was a bandleader, wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. In her final show (Bobino, 1975), she drove a Harley-Davidson in a male motorcycle outfit. And to begin with, didn’t the erected bananas of her famous skirt (Folies Bergère, 1926) play on some phallic ambiguity (Rose 1989)?
Baker loved cross-dressing and drag shows. She went several times to Madame Arthur and Chez Michou, famous Parisian cabarets where male artists were impersonating female stars – including Baker herself (Baker and Chase 2001). Baker was pleading to be imitated (Baker and Bouillon 1976, 74), and called the famous French transsexual Coccinelle (1931-2006) ‘my daughter’ (Baker and Chase 2001, 432). ‘I like transvestites very much! This is real theater! And they are the ones giving the best imitation of me!’ (Baker and Bouillon 1976, 310), Baker said, acknowledging the special connection between her performance and cross-dressing. According to Lynne Carter (1924-1985), a famous American female impersonator, Baker gave him three taxicabs full of Balenciaga and Dior gowns, tutored him in phonetic French and ‘coached him in polishing his versions of her routines’ (Gay News, 12/15/1978).

Why was Baker such an obvious and consenting target? Maybe Baker was more aware of the masquerade of her own performance because she had not only to deal with gender but also with race, leading her to a reflexive and critical understanding of the parodist nature of her shows. It is also that racial and gender cross-dressings were essential to the cultural and scenic rhetorics of minstrelsy, a tradition still very relevant to Black performers in the 1920s, mastered and appropriated by Baker (Garber 1992).

As for Wong, she did not simply try to be or to look like an authentic Chinese woman on screen. Mastering and playing on Western stereotypes, she was overacting Chinese otherness. Her performance was based on a self-exoticization which could be called ‘yellow yellowface’ and ‘could potentially demystify the stereotype’ (Wang 2007, 325). Wong’s expertise on Oriental stereotypes and performances was used by Hollywood producers, who hired her to coach white actresses playing ‘Chinese’ roles in yellowface (Leibfried and Lane 2004, 90). And she played on gender stereotypes as well. Just as Baker, she loved wearing a tuxedo. According to Margaret Cho, a contemporary American comedian and stand-up performer who herself challenges gender, sex, and race norms and stereotypes, Wong ‘is a tremendous gay icon, worshipped by drag Queens’.

**Baker and Wong’s audiences and agencies**

Parodist performances may have a subversive dimension, but not when Dustin Hoffman, playing Tootsie (S. Pollack, 1982), reinforces gender and sexual dichotomies (Butler 1993, 126). Do Wong and Baker’s performances ‘displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself’ (Butler 1990, 148)? Or are they ‘functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness and […] actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task’ (Butler 1993, 126)?

---

Ambivalent answers can be found in Baker and Wong’s statements about their own performances: Wong was rather embarrassed and unhappy with the roles she had to play, complaining that she ‘had not been true to [her] people’ (Citizen News, 5/2/1958), while Baker never made such statements. But their shows and movies being open texts, their interpretation relies on the audience’s involvement. Theoretical discussions on performance/performativity and agency may be biased by focusing on the performer and neglecting the audience.

The Chinese-American community and the Chinese government protested repeatedly against Wong’s movies. Wong regarded the critics as legitimate, and apologized, saying she ‘had to take what is offered’ (Hollywood, jan. 1938). Indeed, her successful incarnation of the Dragon Lady may have helped to deepen and spread this stigmatizing and long-lasting stereotype (Staszak 2011), as suggested by the famous Terry and the Pirates American comic strip (Caniff, 1934-1946), whose notable Dragon Lady character was much inspired by Wong’s performances. ‘Forgetting Anna May Wong’ (Nguyen Tu, 2004) remains a contemporary issue.

Not being a major star, Wong had little say in the movies she was featuring in, other than to refuse a role if she thought it was too denigrating to the Chinese community—as she did for The Bitter Tea of General Yen (Capra, 1933)—or by using her costumes as ‘a pattern of resistance to the hegemonic system that so often abused her’ (Metzger 2006, 11). Her agency was more obvious in her theater performances, unfortunately less documented. The press can still give us an idea of her more personal performances there and of the audiences’ response. On July 20, 1939, she was performing in Sydney. Her show included a sketch entitled At the Barricade, which ‘dealt with the situation in Tientsin’ (a port in North China where the Japanese army blockaded the foreign concessions on June 14, 1939, causing a major international incident) (Sydney Morning Herald, 7/21/1939). The sketch, clearly Wong’s decision, shows how quick she was to pick up an opportunity to plead for England and China: the Japanese blockade was an answer to the British refusal to hand over four Chinese nationalists accused of having murdered a Japanese official. The Australian journalist did not like it: ‘it was unexceptionable propaganda’, and he even entitled his review of her show: A Propagandist Sketch.

Wong’s sketch proves her political awareness and commitment, but the journalist’s response reflects the reluctance of the (white) audience to consider her as more than an exotic entertainer, and to let a ‘Chinese’ actress cross the line between show business and politics. Leong (2006, 22) is right in celebrating ‘Wong’s ability to develop a role for herself by negotiating the international politics of the global film industry and to construct a public identity out of the entangled web of national, racial, political, and cultural identities’, but the audience’s response to her accomplishments in this regard may actually have been limited.
Baker’s performances did not at first have much specific echo within the African-American community, and the problem was less in her danse sauvage during the 1920s than with her performances after the 1930s. She was suspected of mimicking white stars, mingling with white people and hence betraying her racial identity (Regester 2000; Rose, 1989, 172). In Europe, her performances between 1925 and 1929 may have been seen as reinforcing the exoticization and eroticization of black women. But from the 1930s on, she proved that an Afro-American artist could successfully (except in the USA) perform non-racialized roles, blurring racial lines on the stage. Her much respected status after the 1940s rather exemplified the empowerment of Black women.

Baker was indeed more successful in displacing social norms and escaping racialized roles. First, because Baker chose to lead her career in and from Europe, when Wong decided to go back to the USA at the beginning of the 1930s. European audiences – especially in Berlin, London and Paris - were more attracted by and receptive to the (ironic dimension of) (self)exoticizing and eroticizing performances of an American ‘colored’ woman in the 1920s, and more appreciative of Baker’s attempt to de-exoticize her persona in the 1930s.

Second, Baker more than Wong used the transgressive power of irony. Wong’s performances were much more serious than Baker’s. Dying at the end of the movie and embodying the figure of the hieratic impassible Asian, Wong was never cast in a comedy and had very few opportunities to use her wit and dry humor. Asians were rarely comic characters in American or European performing arts. Since the minstrel shows, it was much more common to make fun of Black characters, and Baker perpetuated this tradition. When she was dancing in New York in 1924, she was the last girl of the chorus line, traditionally expected to make the audience laugh. Her exuberant body language, her hilarious smile and sparkling eyes, the jokes she made in her shows and movies suggested not to take her at face value. Baker was less mocking of African dance or culture than deriding her audience’s stereotypes. French-German poet Yvan Goll, reviewing La Revue Nègre in 1926, understood the show as a ‘parody’, noticing that the performers ‘are genuine actors’, ‘laugh continuously’ and ‘make fun of themselves’\textsuperscript{12}. A journalist of the New York Amsterdam News (5/28/1936), defending Baker against ‘bitter criticisms from Harlem’, explained that ‘she is attempting to break down the stereotype of the Negro, in and out of the theatre’.

Indeed, the primitive, savage woman Baker incarnated on stage could not be taken seriously because she was conspicuously contradicted by Baker's much celebrated persona. As an American flapper, Baker was considered a hyper-modern by European audiences (Henderson 2003). Baker not only knew how to drive a car but could also fly a plane. She was purposely playing on that contradiction: ‘Since on stage I have to be savage, I do my best to become civilized in real life’ (Baker and Bouillon 1976, 73).
The comic and transgressive dimensions of Baker’s early performances allowed her to play on and go behind stereotypes. She made the audience laugh with and (hence) at racial stereotypes. Wong’s statements were unacceptable because they were assumed and taken as political; Baker’s could more easily reach their target because they were an intricate but discrete part of her hilarious performance. Who would suspect Baker of propaganda?

Third, Baker’s authorship is stronger than Wong’s. As an actress, Wong was following a script written by someone else. Her performance had little flexibility, and lacked agency. Baker was more of a dancer than an actress, and was expected to add her own bodily touch to the lines written by a choreographer. Furthermore, as a comic and Black dancer, she was encouraged not to keep the step, and to apparently improvise a ‘free’ dance of her own, uncontrolled and uncodified. ‘Baker’s rhetorical disavowal of control over her body allowed her to seize a share of the author-function with her body’ (Kraut 2008). Baker’s performance was very much in her persistent and recognizable personal signatures (crossed-eyes, funky chicken, etc.), which precisely added the comic touch that forbade taking her ‘primitive’ dance at face value. Baker’s agency and transgressions paradoxically rely on the Western stereotype of the irresponsibility and irrepressibility of the Black dancer. Whereas Wong was not expected to speak her own words, Baker could dance her own steps.

Conclusion

The extent to which the audience appreciated the parodist dimension Baker and Wong gave to their performances remains difficult to evaluate, especially when the audience’s response may have varied according to gender and racial identities (Regester 2000), and in time and place (Bergfelder 2004, Habel 2005). But there is no doubt that Wong and Baker’s performances had a huge impact on racial imaginaries, especially in Europe. Most Europeans had no direct experience of race before the 1950s. Many of them did not actually see a real ‘colored’ person before attending ethnographic/exotic shows or viewing colonial movies. There were very few Asian or Black performers, and Wong and Baker’s images were massively duplicated. They were the best-known Chinese-American and African-American women in popular culture worldwide during the 1930s. European imagination about ‘colored’ women was mostly made out of their performances. If Baker and Wong may have had an important role in (re)producing racial and sexist stereotypes, they also had the possibility of challenging them, depending on their agency and on the audience’s (sometimes reluctant) response to their transgressions. The issue of the performer’s irony and of the audience’s willingness to laugh with her and not at her turns out to be key.

My question about Baker and Wong’s agency in performing race and gender cannot be easily answered. First, the answer varies according to the audience. Hence, the performer’s agency relies in
her ability to move from one place to another, in order to find an audience fitting her expectations. Second, Baker and Wong’s gender roles differed because of their ethnicity. Both were exoticized and eroticized, but in different ways. Baker’s intersection of race and gender left her a space for freedom and transgression, through dance and irony. Wong’s performances were more serious and constrained. Third, going back to Butler’s opposition between performance and performativity, we should wonder which Baker and Wong we are talking about: the person as she appears in her private life or the persona whom she exhibits in her public life, the star in the so-called real life or the fictional characters she played on stage and on screen?

The idea that there is a ‘real’ or more authentic Baker or Wong, who preexists and informs her social or stage performances is naive, because, even far from the cameras and in their private lives, they nevertheless had to perform their race and gender. In a sense, Baker and Wong were hyperreal simulacra (Baudrillard 1994): copies for which there was no original. There is no Baker or Wong who is not a ‘colored woman’, no place where she is not socialized as such. The intersection of race and gender is where the person, the persona and the character all take place. Wong and Baker’s agencies were about performing these three roles differently, sometimes contradictorily. It gave them the freedom to move between three intersections (or maybe six considering two locations: Europe and the USA), instead of being locked in one. And, confronting their audience with the evidence of their numerous identities, it also gave Baker and Wong the possibility of denying their audiences taking any one of them for granted, and of challenging stereotyping. Queering their racial and gender identities happened for Baker and Wong through their ironic moves between the different intersections where they (were) performed.

Acknowledgements

I am in debt with Juliet Fall, Claire Hancock and Dan Hoffman for their most precious comments on previous versions of this text, and with the anonymous referees for their valuable suggestions.

Notes on contributor

Jean-François Staszak received his PhD in Geography at the Sorbonne University. After serving as an Associate Professor in the Universities of Amiens (Northern France) and Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris), he became a full Professor at the Geography department of the University of Geneva (Switzerland), where he has lived and taught since 2004. His early research focused on the history and epistemology of Geography, and then with economic and cultural Geography. His most recent work addresses geographical imaginaries in the fields of art and tourism, analyzing the geographical othering process.
and especially the eroticization of the Exotic. His understanding of the articulation of geographical representations, practices and realities owes much to deconstructionist theories and to postcolonial and gender studies.

Notes

1 Baker and Wong were repeatedly labeled as ‘exotic’ by US and French press since the 1920s.

2 Most of the information about Wong is found in Chan (2007), Hodges (2004), Leibfried and Lane (2003), Leong (2005), and numerous interviews. Baker co-authored four autobiographies (1927, 1935, 1949, 1976). Two interesting books have been co-written by her last husband and her self-proclaimed adopted son (Baker et Bouillon 1976; Baker and Chase 2001). This information is complemented and corrected by recent academic studies on Baker (Rose 1990, Jules Rosette 2007, Lahn-Gonzales 2004). I found most of the additional sources I quote in Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), Cinémathèque française (Paris), New York Public Library for Performing Arts, Margaret Herrick Library (Los Angeles) and UCLA libraries.

3 The Casino de Paris’ program for La Joie de Vivre (1932-1933), starring Baker, is among Wong’s theater ephemera collection (New York Public Library for Performing Arts).

4 Unidentified clipping, 3/29/1932, Margaret Herrick Library.

5 Telegram sent by Wong to Hedda Hopper in 1946 (Margaret Herrick Library).


7 Quoted in Baker and Chase 2001, 205.

8 Racial passing is the process through which a (black) person tries to be regarded as a member of an ethnic group which is not her/his, causing (white) racial panic.

9 Except Wong in The Toll of the Sea, but just like Madame Butterfly, she abandons her child to the White wife of her American ‘husband’, before committing suicide.

10 In an interview in The Gay and Lesbian Review (September-October 2006). The cover of the issue is dedicated to Baker.

11 In her blog, (http://www.margaretcho.com/content/2004/12/). Interestingly, she compares Wong to Baker. Nguyen Tu (2004, 18) identifies Wong as a ‘lesbian icon’.

12 Quoted in Henderson 2003, 124.

References


