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Uncanny Performances In Colonial Narratives: Josephine Baker In *Princess Tam Tam**

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In the opening scene of the 1935 film, *Princess Tam Tam*, (Edmond T. Greville, dir.), a writer, Max de Mirecourt, fights with his status-conscious wife, Lucie, over his failure to produce work and his lack of involvement with the Parisian social set. After a particularly loud tirade from his wife who calls him "Failure! Cretin!", Max yells to his friend Coton, "Let's go among the savages. The real savages! Yes, to Africa!" The camera then zooms in on the wallpaper of Max's apartment, which shows a man in white desert garb, standing beneath a palm tree. The film dissolves to a real palm tree somewhere in "Africa," the viewer is to assume, as there is no textual explanation. From here the camera scans across an enormous field of large, rounded, prickly cacti. Suddenly, the camera stops on Josephine Baker's face which is framed by the cacti; it moves in for a close-up as she flashes a brilliant smile at a herd of sheep.

The film's opening scenes establish a number of important issues that are barely submerged throughout the fantasy narrative of Max and Alwina (Baker's character). First, the references to "Africa," "savages," and palm trees demonstrate the film's use of metonymy to establish racial difference, specifically "blackness," a process that continues throughout the film as all types of non-"white" ethnicity are collapsed into a generalized "African" or "Arab" or "Oriental." Second, the narrative conflates the "problem" of women, such as Lucie and Alwina, with "savages" and with the underlying problem of masculine impotence and work – Max's writer's block and his disinterested wife. Finally, the film repeatedly shows the black female performer, Alwina, within an uncanny frame, in this case, the prickly field of cacti that metaphorically suggest a threatening geography, a virtual *vagina dentata*.

In his article "White," Richard Dyer argues that in Hollywood cinema "whiteness" constructs itself as the unseen or the invisible. "The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness" (46). In narratives that work out colonial fantasies, such as *Princess Tam Tam*, (a French production, but one which copies Hollywood conventions) the white voyeur

* I wish to thank Michael Arnzen for his helpful editorial advice, and also Maureen Turim, Caryl Flinn, Scott Nygren and Mark Reid for their generous critiques. The George Eastman House holds the cited films of Josephine Baker. I also wish to thank the Eastman House for the frame enlargements from *Princess Tam Tam*

makes no secret of his desire to witness racial difference. His fantasy is not only the “civilizing” of the uncontrollable “native,” but also the desire to watch difference making a spectacle of itself, often through ritualized performances. Underlying these performances one finds traces of the ambivalence that surrounds the white colonial gaze; an ambivalence, I will argue, that functions much like the Freudian uncanny (*unheimlich*) and reminds the colonist/spectator that he is in another country, and not-at-home.¹

This essay will be involved primarily with the question of the racial stereotype, with its inherent ambivalence and instability, and with the signifying processes that generate racial difference in relation to the body and performance. In *Princess Tam Tam* the uncanny experience of Baker’s dance numbers reveals the instability of not only the stereotype of the African-American performer, but also the illusory nature of white, masculine, colonial identity. I am interested in how frequently the racial and sexual signifiers in Baker’s dance performances set up a situation that is coded as unfamiliar, “primitive,” dreamlike, and taboo – markers, according to Freud, of the alienating psychological experience that he termed “uncanny” (226).

Because Freud’s description of the uncanny has so much to do with the dissolution of categories, my description of racial difference also focuses on this issue of boundaries. In the context of *Princess Tam Tam*, the important emphasis is on the boundaries that society (in this case, the world of the film) establishes, rather than the “essence” of race. In the colonial setting, the threat of a loss of boundaries between races, usually suggested by the potential for an interracial relationship, generates both anxiety and fantasy. The driving narrative of the film is an extended fantasy sequence in which Max writes a novel that includes a Pygmalion-like transformation of Alwina from “native” servant into exotic Princess. The union between Max and Alwina is suggested, but never consummated. By far the highlight of the film, however, are the musical dance numbers that Baker performs. These numbers establish a space where boundaries are removed and fantasy predominates, usually through several transformations of identity positions involving ethnicity.

According to Werner Sollers, signs of ethnicity are established through a “spatial metaphoric pool” that is historically determined (241), a process that helps to explain how, for instance, the opening scene of *Princess Tam Tam* could so easily move from “savages” to palm trees to Josephine Baker’s face. Part of this essay’s project is to analyze how Baker’s racial difference is represented by reference to a “spatial metaphoric pool” that has sprung a few leaks. I am not trying to use Baker’s figure in order to create yet another, “unthinking celebration [...] of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good’,” as Sara Suleri so aptly defines one problem of

¹ My understanding of Freud’s uncanny concept is indebted to Mary Ann Doane’s work on the “woman’s film” of the 1940s, in which she draws out the comparison between the German *heimlich* and home. I am applying the experience of the *unheimlich*, or not-at-home, to the obviously different context of the colonial narrative.

postcolonial studies (758-9). The attempt to represent racial difference through Baker's performance in *Princess Tam Tam* reveals leaks, gaps, and moments of insecurity in the construction of "whiteness" as much as "blackness" or "performer" or "female." I am more interested in the visual process which connects signifiers of race, sex, and performance through a metaphoric sliding – a fluid condensation of meaning, which the musical numbers in *Princess Tam Tam* seem to accomplish effortlessly.

White Gazes, Black Parts

Malek Alloula says in *The Colonial Harem* that "colonialism is the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze" (131). The gaze at the black female, for example, is often built on certain received ideas in white culture, many of which are contradictory in nature – excessive sexuality or the lack of it, submissiveness and/or aggressiveness, and performance ability. These "received ideas" or stereotypes demand an examination of the visual history of the black female – an iconography that is at work in film history, art history, anthropology, medical history, and popular culture.

What constitutes the gaze at the performing black body, and how is this relationship naturalized? Theater and film both offer spaces where a visible field creates the possibility for a spectacle of the body, particularly the female body. Film theory has pointed out how the point of view of the camera often creates moments of identification for the viewer. In other words, the viewer tends to assume the sympathies and perspectives that the camera creates. Often the perspective of the camera is coded as a masculine point of view, typically a white masculine point of view. In *Princess Tam Tam*, the gaze or camera perspective is white, masculine, and, I wish to argue, ambivalently "colonial." Baker's performing body is the most frequent subject of this colonial gaze, which can be both oppressive and unsympathetic (the viewer does not identify with the camera/character's position), and deceptively sympathetic (the viewer identifies positively with a more "benign" colonialism).

One scene in the film sets up Baker as the object of a number of different types of ideologically loaded gazes – some erotic, some supportive, and others, I would describe as colonial. During a fantasy sequence in Paris, Alwina asks Dar, Max's servant, to take her to a nightclub "where people are having fun." They go to a smaller club that is racially integrated. Soon Alwina starts to sing and dance. During her performance the camera takes close-up shots of the faces watching her. The first close-ups are variously "friendly." The expression on a white male's face shows his pleasure and his erotic gaze. A close-up of a female who appears to be in blackface makeup seems more nostalgic. Dar's expression is pleased, though slightly worried. A friend of Lucie de Mirecourt who comes into the bar looks decidedly unfriendly and condescending – the gaze of the colonial oppressor. She sees Alwina's performance as an expression of her "primitiveness," and as an opportunity for embarrassing Alwina in the

future. All of these gazes participate in the complicated layering effect of this scene's representation of Alwina's dance performance and the relationship between her racial difference and the reactions of her spectators.

Frantz Fanon has written about the effects of body consciousness on the psyche of the "person of color" in the colonial context, although he assumes only the male perspective:

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.... A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world – definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (110-11)

The effects of this difference, a difference imposed from without, are visible not just because of skin color, but because of a whole history of cultural products that objectify and dehumanize the body. This body consciousness, then, is based on what Fanon calls the "historico-racial schema" built "by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories." The effects of this body consciousness leads to a "certain uncertainty," a stereotypical knowledge that is undermined by an ambivalence with regards to the presentation of the bodily self. Body consciousness for the textually constructed person of color parallels much recent feminist writing about the relationship between women and their bodies, with some significant differences. The differences reside, using Fanon's methodology, in the particulars of the schema, in the myths, stories, and histories that have been applied to women. We could also speak of an historico-sexual schema (as many feminists have done).

In order to find examples of what I will call the "historico-racial-sexual schema" for *Princess Tam Tam*, one obvious place to start is with metaphoric allusions to the colonies themselves. Colonial metaphors, whether made by artist, scientist or explorer, often feminize geographic locale. It is not merely coincidental, as Mary Ann Doane points out, that Freud describes the field of female sexuality as a "Dark Continent" (209). Biological literature is another site that hides some of the more offensive examples of the desire of the colonial gaze to witness the embodiment of racial difference. As Sander Gilman's research has revealed, scientists of the nineteenth century drew obscenely detailed studies of anatomical differences, especially female genitalia, in order to justify their theories of backwardness. Gilman describes how Sarah Bartmann, one of several "Hottentot Venuses" exhibited to European audiences during the early nineteenth century, was violently separated into parts after her death. The medical profession "studied" her genitalia as a means of

“explaining” Bartmann’s sexuality and, ultimately, her inferiority. These literal and metaphoric autopsies, argues Gilman, never occurred within a vacuum. The “scandal” of Sarah Bartmann’s body was not just over her nudity or the measure of her bodily difference. She arrived in London at a time when the abolition of slavery was also hotly debated (213). Bartmann’s story does not just represent the horror of uncontained medical curiosity; it represents the horror of a crisis of empire. The black body becomes the fragmented site of a fetishistic economy – an economy that organizes the colonial imagination, an economy that makes the nation possible.

Artists also participated in fetishizing the buttocks, the breasts, and the ear size of the black subject. Not surprisingly, these body parts were depicted as being “unusually” large in representations of the white prostitute as well. The historical process of feminizing the black *other* seems impossible without reference to bodily difference – to skin color, to size of lips or clitoris or buttocks, to athletic prowess, and performance ability. The fragmenting of the black female body into parts was often made through references to the dancing body. Anthropologists would call attention to the rapid movement of the buttocks, the shaking of the breasts and head – movements that were nonexistent in white, Western vocabularies of gesture.

Josephine Baker’s body was figuratively fragmented through white writings. She herself, commenting on others’ remarks about her buttocks said, “The rear end exists. I see no reason to be ashamed of it. It’s true there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they’re good only for sitting on” (Rose 164). Baker’s metaphor sets up an unusual angle from which to theorize white spectatorship of black exoticism. For the audience member is undoubtedly sitting on his/her buttocks, while Baker is vigorously exercising hers on stage. What can be said, in a performance situation, about the relationship between moving and non-moving parts of the body? Can we theorize a white anxiety about the buttocks? An anxiety that resembles an uncanny reaction, an anxiety that can only be assuaged through a visual consumption of the other’s moving parts?

Uncanny Performance

In the final dance number – the most visually complex scenes of *Princess Tam Tam* – the camera again constructs a complex layering of gazes. Prior to this scene, Lucie and her friends have jealously plotted to embarrass the African Princess. They encourage Alwina to drink at an elegant Parisian nightclub in order to induce the “primitive” side of Alwina’s nature to come out. The scene begins with Alwina sitting alone at a table witnessing the spectacle of a Busby Berkeley style dance number. As she begins to get drunk, the scene before her (and the viewer) begins to grow more and more fantastic.

The dance number is weirdly framed by dissolves, magical disappearances, and hypnotic spirals. A spiral design opens the dance number and fills the

cinematic frame, apparently visible to the film viewer, rather than to the nightclub audience. The spiral motif is especially interesting as its design is repeated in the costumes of the dancers and in their kaleidoscopic formations. The chorus line emerges from the superimposed spiral design, after which the dancers recreate the spiral through an aerial shot of their formation. Then the camera cuts to a shot of the dancers' arms as they form a circle with their hands pointing towards the center. The arms unfold to reveal a succession of female faces, in a pattern that looks exactly like the iris of a camera opening and closing. The repetition of the spiral induces a dizziness in the audience as well as in Alwina.

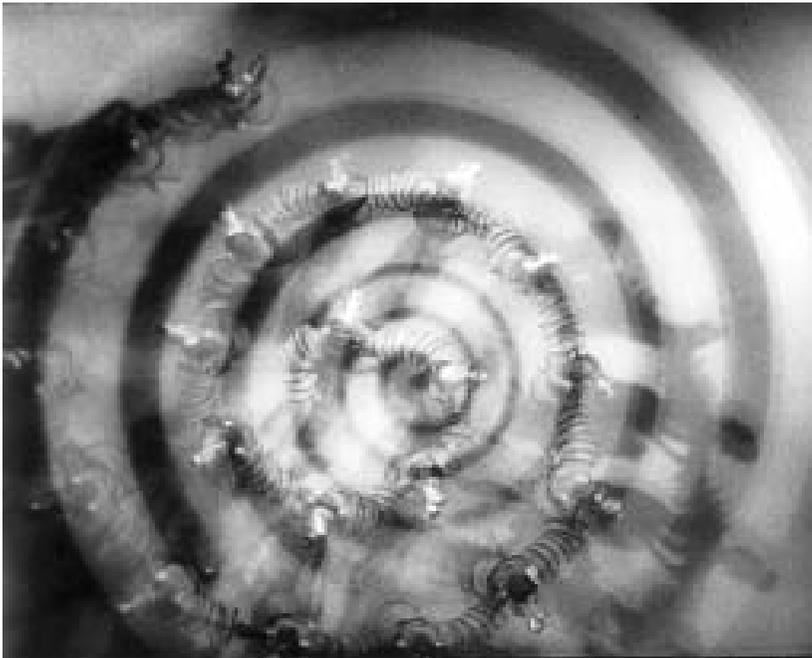


Figure 1 (reprinted by permission of George Eastman House)

The choice of the repeating spiral is significant for a number of reasons. First, the dissolves and the framing of the graphics cinematically break the narrative drive. Second, the moving spiral is coded to suggest a dizziness that leads to hypnotism. The reference to hypnotism positions the spectator in a psychologically sensitive state. Moreover, the repetition of the design in the costumes, graphics, and formations of the dancers reinforces the paranoid condensation of meaning that is typical of the uncanny. For Freud, the uncanny is a moment when a familiar *sight* is suddenly made strange and the (neurotic male) viewer experiences a disorienting crisis of identity (226). Traditional boundaries regarding sexual, and, as I am arguing, racial identity, start to break

down. The neurotic tries to reestablish boundaries through fetishized objects (or body parts) and ritualized performances.

The opening of the dance number foregrounds the connections between the uncanny, perception, and the dancing female body. The uncanny experience of the repetition of the spiral is compounded by the fact that the design itself is already coded as a disorienting visual effect. But most importantly, the spiral design in this musical number is also associated with what, according to Freud, is the primary uncanny experience – the sight of the female genitals, the sight of lack. The chorus dancers facilitate the alienating view with a number of their dance moves. Their legs literally open to reveal the threat of castration. When the arms of the dancers also open (like an iris) to reveal the smiling face of woman, the connection is undeniable. The viewer is left dazed, dazzled, and hypnotized.

The introduction of the spiral design quite clearly designates a space for fantasy. Time is suspended and place is forgotten as a series of dream-like performances by chorus girls, as well as Asian and African performers commences. In other films made of Josephine Baker's stage performances at the Casino de Paris, we find many examples of her dancing framed within a fantasy or dream sequence. In one film, *The Plantation* (1926), Baker climbs down the trees of an enormous jungle stage set, at the bottom of which sleeps the plantation owner in full safari garb. While he sleeps, Baker performs her own particular African-American vernacular dance complete with parodic facial expressions. She, we are to infer, is his dream, a fantasy of the jungle, and yet she performs for the audience. Her performance combines both virtuoso technique and minstrel humor, and remains "safe" as long as it is narratively contained within a dream. Her parody (of the dreamer? of the audience?) provides no real threat, although it serves as a reminder of the altered time/space of the uncanny experience. In all of these performances, the black performer and the white spectator remain separated by the gulf of colonial history, even while their subject positions remain inextricably intertwined.

Primitivism and the Avant-Garde

When Baker's character, Alwina, first meets Max, she tells him that her name is Arabic for "small source." She seems to be the answer to all of his problems. He needs creative inspiration and a way to make his white wife jealous. Prior to this meeting with Alwina, Max had found Tunisia to be rather uninspiring. When he runs into Alwina stealing food in a cafe, however, he begins to look at the country differently. Alwina becomes the "source" for Max's next novel, and thus helps him to overcome his crisis of masculinity. Max's geographic choice for inspiration would not have been an unusual one for a Frenchman of the twenties or thirties. Both artists and anthropologists saw the "primitive," especially the "African primitive," or the ethnic exoticism they projected onto African-Americans such as Baker, as a refreshing alternative to the exhausted

blandness of industrialized Europe. One of the most intriguing aspects of the primitivist movement during this period is the fluidity with which it breaches disciplines and nationalities. Artists, such as Matisse and Picasso, were fascinated by the formal vocabulary that “primitive” cultures used to distort their Western understanding of reality. The magical “simplicity” of tribal culture is also what attracted the anthropologist, who was equally stunned by the physicality of “primitive” man and woman. Marianna Torgovnick’s work demonstrates how anthropologists generally envied their subjects’ relationship to their bodies and their environments, even though their Western prudence may have been shocked by the frank sexuality they witnessed (232).

The artist, the anthropologist, and the government official were all joined by their fascination and appropriation of these other cultures, particularly African cultures. French colonialism superficially embraced the exotic appeal of their colonies. From the arts to administration, France saw the colonies as inspiration for a whole variety of activities. As one West African administrator explained:

The territory is not just raw material for finance, commerce, army and administration to work with; nor is it something to be made an idol of. It is a living body, and we must enter into relations with it if we are to govern it with full knowledge of what we are doing. (qtd. in Rose 148)

The administrator’s metaphoric embodiment of the colonies represents one way that colonial discourse justifies its appropriation of other cultures. But this colonial body is not a gender-neutral one. The “body” that the colonial administrator wishes “relations with” is easily imagined to be a female one. The sequence from *Princess Tam Tam* that positions Baker’s face within a field of cacti, simultaneously positions her within the iconographic field of a feminized and colonized geography. Edward Said’s study of “Orientalism,” which is pertinent here as well, locates the roots for this type of metaphoric allusion in nineteenth-century racist, biological literature, which emphasized the “problems” of the Orient’s “separateness . . . its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability” in order to provide a Western, masculine solution, that is, colonialism (206).

The extent to which Josephine Baker directly inspired the French (and the American expatriate) avant-garde in the late twenties and early thirties should not be underestimated. Many of the most recognizable names of modernism had some form of contact with her: Picasso, Calder,² Cocteau, E.E. Cummings,

² In an examination of Alexander Calder, the art historian Barbara Zabel has also pointed to the spiral design that Calder placed at the pelvis and breasts of sculptures of Baker. The design is the same as the “uncanny” spiral found in *Princess Tam Tam*..

Le Corbusier, Apollinaire, Hemingway, Colette, Leger, Loos, Breton. Many represented her in their works in ways that foregrounded her generalized ethnic exoticism. As much as Baker's persona slides from culture to culture, it also seemed to flow from "high art" to "low art" representations, raising the question of the role that primitivism played in French culture during the thirties, and the way that primitivism's use of generalized ethnicities (most often the black "native," and then the "Oriental") fit into modernist categories.

The history of primitivism as a "legitimate" category of art poses a disciplinary dilemma in the 1930s. More than one critic has noticed that the role of the "historical avant-garde" as Peter Burger defines it, begins to shift in this period. Andreas Huyssen, for example, describes how in the decades before the thirties, "in the art for art's sake movement, the break with society – the society of imperialism – had led into a dead end, a fact painfully clear to the best representatives of aestheticism" (7). Primitivism arrives on the art scene at this point and the attraction to France's colonial relations was seen as one way of attacking the bourgeois institutions of the "mother" country. Artists attempted to reintegrate art and politics, in effect to aestheticize politics, to transform social, cultural, and political relations. But, as Burger and Huyssen both note, soon thereafter art and politics begin to separate and the avant-garde becomes, on some levels, both institutional and "historical." What role did imperialism/colonialism have in these movements? Did the primitivist movement in art perpetuate colonial stereotypes or did it subvert them?

These questions remain to be answered, but what they suggest in terms of a connection to the uncanny has to do again with a breakdown of clearly defined categories. What James Clifford has so clearly shown in his critique of the 1984-85 "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art, in which modern abstract art was compared to "authentic" primitive pieces, is that only certain aesthetic properties, such as design or asymmetry, are shared amongst cultures. Picasso's "Girl before a Mirror" may look superficially like a Kwakiutl mask, or a famous Baker pose in her banana costume may resemble an Angolan carving, but these images function in their respective culture in entirely different ways (199). What the European avant-garde saw in primitivism may, in fact, have been their own projection of an uncanny experience – one where a familiar shape is suddenly made strange and the boundaries between modern/primitive, colonizer/colonized, high art/low art become excitingly vague. The art of the colonies provided a solution, in much the same way that Alwina does for Max, for Western culture's artistic block.

Ambivalence and Miscegenation

An important part of the colonial imagination involves not only the metaphoric "conquering" of a geographic space, or the fetishizing of body parts, but also the literal and metaphoric "penetration" of the feminine. The black female body serves metonymically to represent the colonial challenge: if the

colonist can seduce a native, then he can also seduce a people. The dancing, black, female body often performs within the frame of the colonial fantasy of miscegenation. Miscegenation, or the threat of it, is part of the narrative drive of *Princess Tam Tam*, but with an unusual twist: Max, the writer, pretends to seduce Alwina in order to study her reactions and to provide material for his book. The fictional seduction occurs during an extended fantasy sequence in which Max takes Alwina back to Paris, disguised as the “Princess of Parador.” An important part of the seduction, however, does occur during the “present time” of the film. What seems significant here is Max’s awareness that the narrative of interracial relations is indeed a seductive one – a story that would sell many books and make his wife jealous at the same time. The fantasy flash-forward to a possible future facilitates the narrative, while lessening the threat contained in it. The seduction is mostly fictionalized, and thus relegated to the realm of fantasy and taboo, a space where the viewer too can participate in the uncanniness of erotic “border crossings.”

The term “ambivalence” is frequently used in writings about theories of racial difference, this essay included. Early in *Princess Tam Tam* ambivalence is brought into direct play with an emotional response to the threat of/hope for miscegenation. Directly following the scene in Paris where we see Max’s wife being kissed by the equally exotic Maharajah, Max approaches Alwina in his villa in Tunisia. He has already convinced her to move in with him so that he can “civilize” her. In one scene, which is still in the present time of the film, he tells her that he loves her and he asks if he “moves” her. When she asks what “moves” means, he responds, “Confused.” Later in the scene Alwina agrees that she is indeed confused about her feelings for him, and Max takes this as a sign of her love for him. Importantly, he has deceived her in order to get her to talk. Even more importantly, perhaps, he has defined the limits and the language of love for her. Alwina might feel “confused” over her feelings for Max, but he is never in doubt about whether he would return his affection. He does not seem the least bit attracted to her. He notices her beauty and he delights in her humor, but he treats her as little more than a child. Alwina is merely the key to his success. She is his “small source” of inspiration.

Ambivalent feelings about the potential for miscegenation are an important part of the colonial narrative that resembles, not surprisingly, the colonial situation with all of its “primitive” attractiveness, its natural and human resources ready for economic exploitation, and its underlying tension of oppression. Homi Bhabha points out how discussion of the colonial stereotype has tended to deny its inherent ambivalence and to instead “fix” the stereotype as a moment of stable identification. He also suggests that the ambivalence of the racial stereotype functions similarly to the ambivalence of the Freudian fetish:

For fetishism is always a ‘play’ or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity – in Freud’s terms: ‘All men have penises’; in ours ‘All men have the same skin/race/culture’ – and the

anxiety associated with lack and difference—again, for Freud, ‘Some do not have penises’; for us ‘Some do not have the same skin/race/culture’. (26)

What Bhabha does not point out, however, are the differences for the ethnic woman who is already “castrated” and of a different “skin/race/culture.” The fact that the black woman does not have to be symbolically castrated means that she can be seduced, romanced, brought back to France and fetishized in ways that the black man cannot. She represents a different kind of threat and ambivalence. Sexual and racial difference also explains the feminizing of the colonial geography. As long as the land is feminized, then it is castrated, tamable and in need of a white, Western male. No wonder the colonial romances we see in films and novels often involve a “white” man and an “ethnic” woman (think of representations of Pocohontas): the ultimate colonial conquest is always the other’s body. The ambivalence of the colonial romance is two-fold: the rejection/acceptance of the white male as lover, the rejection/acceptance of the white male as colonial oppressor. The interesting moments in the colonial romance texts are always when we discern the threat of failure—when the disavowal of the fetish is laid bare.

The previously cited scene in *Princess Tam Tam* foregrounds the ambivalence of the interracial romance from both sides and the disavowal of the black woman as fetish object. We witness Max instructing Alwina in how to feel. She is not confused, he tells her. She is in love. But the rest of the scene destabilizes this definition of love. After Alwina wonders to herself, “Confused? ... Moved?” she wanders over to Coton’s table and notices him writing. When she asks why he is always hanging around, Max responds, “He’s my slave.” Coton jokingly replies, “I am a ‘Negro,’ my dear.” Alwina responds with disgust and says that she dislikes Coton. When Max asks if she is confused about her feelings for him, she wonders what it means to feel confused. He tells her that “Your heart beats very fast.” Then she agrees that she is “confused” about her feelings for him, and she turns to the camera in a direct address and sticks her tongue out. The ambivalence of interracial relationships is specifically linked here to the colonial narrative. Alwina identifies the “joke” that Coton is Max’s slave as a part of that narrative. White people are not “Negroes” and thus they cannot be slaves. How, she might wonder, can she, a black woman and potential “slave,” be a white man’s lover? Her confusion over her feelings for Max is like the confusion (and irritation) she feels over Coton’s joke.

The subversive moment in this scene, the moment when the ambivalence of miscegenation is not only foregrounded, but reacted against, occurs when Alwina sticks out her tongue. The direct address of the shot breaks the narrative flow of the sequence; it startles the viewer momentarily. Her impertinence is directed at the audience as much as Coton. Alwina is not a person to be joked about. She will not fit neatly into the colonial romance. Alwina (and the viewer)

are reminded in this scene that she does not have the same “skin/race/culture,” and it is the recognition of her racial difference that underlies her treatment as love object/fetish object. Her defiant expression momentarily reveals the implications of the white man’s disavowal of her racial and sexual difference. Alwina’s status as a fetish object thinly disguises the white man’s own anxiety about his assumed racial and sexual superiority.

Rhythm

The dance of the Negresses is incredibly indecent. They form a circle and mark time by a movement of the top of their bodies in front and by clapping the hands. Each of them leaves her place in the circle and takes her turn in the middle; she gets into positions so lascivious, so lubricious that it’s impossible to describe them.... It’s true that the Negresses don’t appear to have the depraved intentions which one would imagine; it’s a very old custom, which continues as it were innocently in this country; so much so that one sees children of six performing this dance, certainly without knowing what they’re leading up to. (J. F. Roger, *Fables sénégalaises*, (1828), qtd. in Rose 28)

Some of the earliest recorded accounts of Western explorers to Africa include references to dancing practices. Richard Jobson, a seventeenth century explorer, wrote the following description of African customs on the Gambia River:

The most desirous of dancing are the women, who dance without men, and but one alone, with crooked knees and bended bodies they foot it nimbly, while the stander-by grace the dancer, by clapping their hands together after the manner of keeping time. (Thompson 32)

Jobson’s account is evidence of an early fascination with African dancers, women in particular. The Roger’s epigraph cited above, however, demonstrates the more pernicious effects of an historico-racial-sexual schema that directs the white Western gaze at the black female body in ways that exoticise and objectify her.

Jobson’s description of the Gambian women dancing “with crooked knees and bended bodies” could easily describe some of Josephine Baker’s most recognizable moves, with some significant differences. Her dance style resembles an American vernacular style of performance, which was adapted from West African styles that traveled overseas (Stearns). Baker’s style slides fluidly from the bent knees of the Charleston “fan” to the bent knees of Congo dance rituals. A closer examination of her pastiche-like dance style within the context of *Princess Tam Tam* reveals some of the reasons for the ambivalence with which her performance is received.

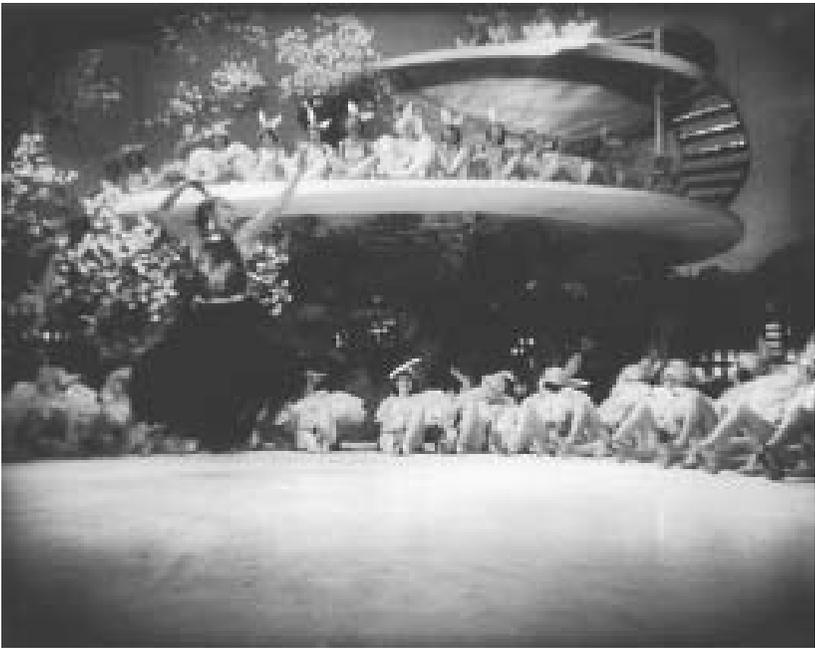


Figure 2 (reprinted by permission of George Eastman House)

How is the uncanny experience of the final dance number connected to racial difference and the colonial narrative? Alwina's intoxication parallels the viewer's metaphoric entry into the altered psychological state of the uncanny; however, her intoxication does not allow her to experience the uncanny, but rather, to become it. Her difference is not only sexual, but racial. The colonial narrative works to reveal her "primitive" nature. The drunker Alwina gets, the more she is fascinated with what is happening on stage. But Alwina's revelation of racial difference cannot occur until the musical number itself undergoes some significant shifts. The first shift occurs when the camera again focuses on the spiral design, which dissolves into spiral tops that are part of an Asian acrobatic act. Here the colonial relationship inevitably surfaces in the coded reference to France's Asian colonies, but it surfaces in a way that privileges design and form over other codes. The repetition of the spiral smoothly sutures over other differences. The act needs one more shift in order to get to Alwina's specific difference, her "blackness." Suddenly, the music changes to the incessant rhythm of a drumbeat, and the film cuts to a shot of a black male drummer. The drummer is visually cut off from the narrative space of the musical scene. At this point the film cuts back to Alwina who is starting to become visibly excited as a chorus line comes onto stage miming the Conga, a tribal line dance. As Alwina gets more excited, the editing cuts grow shorter and faster, while the drumbeat grows louder. When all three (Alwina, the

drums, the editing) reach a rhythmic frenzy, the film positions Alwina's entry onto the stage as the "climax" of the number.

At the beginning of her dance, Alwina kicks off her shoes and they fly into the audience – a move which Josephine Baker was well known for doing in her own acts. Then she tears off part of her elegant dress, which changes from gold to black, and proceeds to dance barefoot on the stage. The whole process of this scene, from her first drink to the revelation of her black dress, is one of transformation to an altered state of being. Baker's dance style is distinctly different from the chorus dancers. Her movements are less restrained and less frontally oriented. Baker defies most conventions of Western ballet dancing: she turns in circles, with her back to the audience; she moves her head up and down; she shakes her breasts. Baker's impassioned face is intercut with shots of the drummer, while the rhythm of her dance moves again parallels the rhythm of the drum.

The connections between rhythm, the dancing black body, and the colonial narrative are foregrounded in this scene. The excited spectators in the audience, the quick cuts, the beating drum, and Baker's dance movements participate metonymically in the revelation of racial and sexual difference. Rhythm serves as an important structuring device in the colonial narrative; it gives shape and pattern, an underlying dynamic. Like the removal of her outer gold dress which reveals a black costume beneath, Alwina's bodily response to



Figure 3 (reprinted by permission of George Eastman House)

the rhythm of the drum reveals her “blackness.” Max cannot bear to witness Alwina’s revelation. He literally turns his head away from the stage to avert his gaze, while his wife and her friends gloat at how successfully they have humiliated the “Princess.” Their gloating is short-lived, however, because the audience at the club loves her performance. Her movements, even though highly stylized, seem strangely impassioned compared to the uniformity of the French chorus line. The juxtaposition of dance styles does more than just set up the ambivalent narrative response. (After this scene, Max returns to his wife, and Alwina marries the servant Dar). The contrast also highlights the attraction/repulsion of the colonial gaze to the colonized body.

Richard Dyer points out that “‘The fear of one’s own body, of how one controls it and relates to it’ and the fear of not being able to control other bodies, those bodies whose exploitation is so fundamental to capitalist economy, are both at the heart of whiteness” (63). The staging of black performance, then, is intimately connected to a white anxiety over bodily control. The colonist fears that his own inability to control his body will resurface in his inability to control the bodies of the colonized; therefore, he repeatedly sets up a supposedly “safe” space for black performance. This “safe” space, whether the space of the artist, the anthropologist, the colonial administrator, or the nightclub producer, is always an ambivalent one. When Max turns his head away from Alwina’s performance, he reveals his own uncanny reaction: he is not-at-home.

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