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RESTAGING RESPECTABILITY

the subversive performances of josephine baker and nora holt in jazz-age paris

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“**L**A BAKER IS BACK,” headlined a feature in the 2 April 1951 issue of *Life* magazine, declaring Josephine Baker’s return to the American stage.¹ Baker (1906–75) was, by this time, as much established in her adopted home of France as she was in the United States, her country of birth. Her journey from the vaudeville shows of her St Louis, Missouri, hometown through the night-clubs of Paris, and into the hearts of the French masses brought an otherworldly allure and exotic dimension to her homecomings. She had become “a legend to Americans.”² Now, at the age of forty-five, read the feature, “she was back on Broadway, singing love songs in five languages and making the Strand movie theatre seem intimate as a boudoir. Swishing her pantalooned gown, she crossed her eyes exuberantly” – evoking the same theatrics that had, so early in her career, captivated her Parisian audiences and catapulted her to superstardom.³ Met with “cheers from the packed theatre,” she shouted to her adoring US fans, “You make me so hap-py!”⁴

Joy exuded from a handful of intimate behind-the-scenes moments around the performance, captured in Baker’s dressing room by *Life* photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt. In one shot, Baker’s French maid is seen attaching the star’s four-foot chignon, which comprised three pyramidic “tiers of buns” and a long ponytail cascading from the smallest bun at the top.⁵ The photograph shows the maid in deep concentration, focusing her gaze on the chignon, while a relaxed Baker hunches forward into the large oval mirror in front of

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them and reflects a soft open smile. In a post-performance shot, a beaming Baker leans in with eyes closed and an electric grin as she receives a kiss on the nose from her husband and musical director Jo Bouillon. And in another, where Baker’s regal hairstyle is on full display, she tightly embraces (as the caption reads) “an old friend, Nora Ray Holt, a former night club singer who is now a columnist for Harlem’s *Amsterdam News*.”⁶

Holt (c.1895–1974) was also an incisive music critic, prolific composer, piano virtuoso, pioneering radio host, and dedicated scholar of African

American artistry.⁷ She was a glamorous society woman, civic-minded Race woman, and “jazz-age goddess.”⁸ She was Chicago’s Black Renaissance maverick and Harlem’s New Negro muse. She traversed careers and continents through the Roaring Twenties, and when Europe beckoned (as her obituary in the *New York Amsterdam News* would later recall), Holt

joined such legendary performers and personalities as her friends Josephine Baker and Ada Bricktop Wright among the favorite entertainers of the wealthy and royal families. The Prince of Wales and Aga Khan III were among her enthusiastic fans who regularly attended her performances and showered her with gifts.⁹

Holt, like Baker, was a theatrical performer, but Holt’s signature medium in the club circuit was her voice (an area that Baker was yet to fully explore in her artistry, but would later become internationally famous for). Reviews in the European press described Holt’s voice as “astonishing”:

It can produce sounds not comparable with orthodox singing at all, or indeed with any human utterance. They range from the deepest bass to the shrillest piping, and are often unaccompanied by words. This, as it were, absolute rhythm – which bursts from Miss Holt’s mouth with a primitive ferocity – is singularly effective in such songs as “West End Blues” [...] ¹⁰

and other popular tunes in which white European listeners could lose themselves in impressions of Harlem, or Africa, or whatever they imagined and mapped onto Holt’s voice, body, and being.¹¹ Baker’s dancing figure and animated expressions elicited similar responses on account of the colonial appetite for fictive Black Otherness. One French critic remarked:

Our romanticism is desperate for renewal and escape. But unknown lands are rare. Alas, we can no longer roam over maps of the world with unexplored corners. We have to appease our taste for the unknown by exploring within ourselves the lands we haven’t penetrated. We lean on our own

unconscious and our dreams. As for reality, we like it exotic. These blacks feed our double taste for exoticism and mystery.¹²

And yet, it was Baker and Holt who conquered their audiences, not the other way around; and they continued to do so through the decades that followed.

In the photograph of Baker’s and Holt’s 1951 reunion, the angle obscures Baker’s facial reaction, as her head tucks behind Holt’s, but Holt is shown in a moment of hearty laughter as Baker pulls her close. Frozen in frame is an uplifting and affectionate display between two Black women who were still in the prime of their careers, with Baker commanding the stage and Holt steering the newspaper columns. It is an image of sisterhood matured, of ambitions realised, of journeys entwined. But outside of the moment captured, what conversations and reminiscences might Baker and Holt have had around the colourful histories that comprised their fabulous lives?¹³ Where did their connection begin to end with such a photograph? Their warm embrace bespoke the intersections of their creative pasts and revolutionary paths.

By the mid-twentieth century “La Baker” was back, as far as her US audiences were concerned, and Holt, too, had more than arrived career-wise – in 1946 she was elected as a member to the Music Critics Circle of New York, marking “the first official recognition of a Negro as a music critic and the first time in the 120-year-old history of Negro journalism.”¹⁴ But with jazz-age Paris being a site of convergence along Baker’s and Holt’s earlier trajectories, and the sociocultural backdrop against which they remade their personal and public lives, could it be that the joyous, celebratory air that enveloped their backstage reunion decades later emanated from the recognition of how far they had come?

In this essay, I venture beyond the frame to locate the earlier intersections of their lives in jazz-age Paris around the year of 1926. During that time, Baker was engaged in the *Folie du jour* revue at the Folies Bergère nightclub in Paris. A year earlier, she had caused a sensation with her 1925 Paris debut in *La revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. She

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performed *La danse sauvage* with her dance partner Joe Alex; the sight of their scantily clad brown bodies, wrapped around one another in sinuous and sensual poses, thrilled Parisian audiences. Through the 1926–27 season, Baker startled and titillated once again in performances made visually iconic by the banana skirt she wore and the way her hips manipulated those phallic fruits. Holt, meanwhile, was drawn to an area a little outside of the centre of Paris: Fontainebleau. She enrolled at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau to pursue studies in music theory, composition, and orchestration.¹⁵ By night, she performed in Parisian clubs, enthralling locals with her singing voice. Back in Holt's home of Chicago, Illinois, however, the messy details of her divorce from her fifth and final husband, Joseph Luther Ray, and the rumours of her adultery played out publicly in the Black press.

The period around 1926 exemplifies the ways in which Baker and Holt tore up the social script of early twentieth-century Black women's respectability in the United States and scripted new visions and versions of Black womanhood on foreign shores. This essay explores the skill, technique, and power of their subversive, interconnected performances. And much like the photographs in *Life* magazine, it seeks to recapture the joy, self-possession, and agency that Baker and Holt derived from these moments.

blurring the respectable and the wayward

Holt landed in Paris by way of Chicago's Black classical concert scene and the Midwest's wider communities of respectable Race men and women. Like their male counterparts, Race women existed in a distinctly middle- to upper-class demographic. They were, as Brittny C. Cooper argues, "the first Black women intellectuals," who, post-Reconstruction, "explicitly fashioned for themselves a public duty to serve their people through diligent and careful intellectual work and attention to 'proving the intellectual character' of the

race."¹⁶ Race women thus adopted the "politics of respectability," as defined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "equating public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group."¹⁷ Higginbotham elaborates that Race women

felt certain that "respectable" behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.¹⁸

Baker, conversely, belonged to the Midwest's Black lower class – a class that was, according to the politics of respectability, so in need of salvation. She landed in Paris by way of Harlem and the chorus lines of "wayward" showgirls whose pursuits were seen as the antithesis to the Victorian moral codes that were embedded in Race women's intellectual work.¹⁹ However, these young "wayward" Black women were also, as Saidiya Hartman asserts, "radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise."²⁰ They were no less intellectual than their Race women counterparts, even though they were (and still are), Hartman explains, yet to be taken seriously "as sexual modernists, free lovers, radicals, and anarchists."²¹ Despite the seeming polarity of their socioeconomic backgrounds, Holt and Baker converged in Europe as artistic revolutionaries. They gloriously blurred the respectable and the wayward, proving the porosity of the lines that sought to class and contain them.

Lucy Caplan writes, "Refusing a false binary between living respectably and living well, Holt fashioned a life that was entirely her own."²² As I have written elsewhere, Holt's "proclivity for enterprise, racial uplift, gendered empowerment, and scandal" remained thematic throughout her life.²³ Born Lena Douglas to Reverend Calvin N. Douglas and Gracie Brown in Kansas City, Kansas, Holt started playing the piano at the age of four, learning from her mother.²⁴ She became highly active in the church as an organist and regularly

performed musical programmes alongside her father's sermons. She graduated from Kansas State College with a Bachelor of Science degree and, around the year 1914, pursued further academic study at the historically Black Western University at Quindaro, Kansas. Western University, as musicologist Helen Walker-Hill describes, "cultivated the ideals of racial uplift in its female students – respectability, refinement, competency, and responsibility."²⁵ Therein, women's behaviour "was monitored and their movements closely supervised."²⁶ The institution was, therefore, an appropriate environment for a young woman of Holt's social standing.

Upon completing her studies "with top honors as valedictorian of her class" around 1916 (and presumably upon the dissolution of a previous marriage through which she acquired the surname "James"),²⁷ Holt moved to Chicago and immersed herself in the city's musical offerings. She enrolled at the Chicago Musical College as a student of composition, piano performance, and music theory, and became the first person of African descent in the United States to receive a Master of Music degree. From artist to activist, Holt co-founded the National Association of Negro Musicians in 1919. In doing so, she became a key figure in the formation and consolidation of the United States' Black classical scene.

The *Chicago Defender*, one of the most widely read Black periodicals in the United States (for which Holt became its music critic in 1917) described her as "an earnest and sincere student" who "in striving for a place in the world of art is leaving no part neglected which tends toward making the finished artist."²⁸ But Holt's musical accomplishments were, apparently, only half of the story. Her romantic life was as much a subject of media intrigue as her professional endeavours, if not more. On 20 June 1917, she eloped with Chicago businessman George W. Holt.²⁹ The following year, the *Defender* printed that Lena James Holt would henceforth be known as Nora Douglas Holt.³⁰ Holt was widowed in 1921, but on 28 July 1923, in one of "the

most brilliant weddings of many seasons," as reported in the *Defender*, Holt married Joseph L. Ray in the presence of society and celebrity guests.³¹ Their short-lived union and lengthy divorce proceedings were similarly showy spectacles that attracted intense media scrutiny. But Holt did not succumb to the negative press. She was, as Cheryl A. Wall astutely depicts, a woman who "reinvented herself constantly, which she could do because she was constantly on the move."³² And in May 1926 (during which time her divorce was fully underway, unravelling sensationally in the Black press), Holt boarded the SS *France* and set off for Paris, ready for her next reincarnation.

Baker's story also epitomised reinvention – in fact, *stories*, plural, is just as accurate an ascription. In the process of tracing the un- and under-documented details of her formative years, Baker's biographer and adoptive son Jean-Claude Baker found that "the earliest of three autobiographies Josephine had written in collaboration with Marcel Sauvage" was filled with "fancies."³³ Furthermore, the other volumes that he came across were similarly "filled with more myths Josephine had planted herself, the misinformation repeated by writer after writer."³⁴ Jean-Claude noted that "she would alter her story again and again, reshaping history as she went."³⁵ For instance, she recast Eddie Carson, the man "thought by many to be her father," as "Eddie Moreno, a good-looking boy with olive skin" in one version of her life, and an unnamed "Spanish dancer" in another.³⁶ I highlight this not to dwell on the veracity of how she saw her past, but to draw attention to Baker's ability to view her world through multiple lenses and reinvent her place within it. If not for this ability, how else might she have envisioned a brilliant future that ventured beyond the limited horizons of a poor, illiterate Black girl and child bride? It seemed that where she came from and who she was mattered less vis-à-vis where she was going and who she could be.

Born Freda J. McDonald, and nicknamed "Tumpy" because she was (in her own words) "fat as Humpty Dumpty" as a baby, the light-brown ochre complected Baker was a perennial

misfit.³⁷ Her mother, Carrie McDonald, had three more children after Baker with the darker complected Arthur Martin. Within the Martin family dynamic, writes Baker biographer Phyllis Rose, “Josephine was noticeably lighter, and although light skin was valued in certain black families, usually families with middle-class aspirations or pretensions, in the dark St Louis ghetto and in the Martin family it had no value at all.”³⁸ In Baker’s second marriage to a man named Willie Baker, “her mother-in-law felt her son had made a bad match – a third rate chorus girl and dark-skinned to boot, for if Josephine looked light-skinned in the Martin family, she looked dark among the lighter skinned Bakers.”³⁹ From the intraracial colourism of her communities to the Jim Crow sanctioned “color code” of the theatre, she remained at odds with those around her.⁴⁰

As a more “smokey joe/brown-skinned” chorus girl,⁴¹ Baker was seen as less desirable than her “high yellow” colleagues.⁴² During her first audition for Noble Sissle’s and Eubie Blake’s *Shuffle Along*, Sissle deemed her “too young, too small, too thin, too ugly. And too dark.”⁴³ But she eventually landed a role and, in true Baker fashion, made it her own, becoming one of the revue’s standout stars. When a friend from Baker’s past joined the cast of *Shuffle Along* and saw Baker “swathed in black seal-skin and a silk turban, sweeping through the stage door,” she threw her arms around the rising star and said, “Oh Tumpy, how good you look [...]”⁴⁴ Baker interrupted and declared, “My name is not Tumpy anymore. My name is Josephine Baker.”⁴⁵ Baker was said to have giggled immediately afterwards, but her conviction could not be denied. She was ready for Paris.

Baker’s and Holt’s subsequent performances in jazz-age Paris were, I argue, both time-specific (i.e., of their time) and time-defiant (i.e., ahead of and beyond their time). With the Black Renaissances of Harlem and Chicago behind them – epochs of Black-authored artistic vibrance, intellectual outpour, social change, cultural rebirth, and

political reawakening – and the warped climate of European negrophilia ahead, Baker’s and Holt’s work in Paris sat squarely in the modernist zeitgeist. However, their presence spoke to more than the current moment and the vantage points of their European audiences. “[T]hese real historical [Black] women existed independently of their representations” in the white colonial imaginaries, as Robin Mitchell writes.⁴⁶ Recognising this independence does not mischaracterise Baker and Holt as “ahistorical” – a pernicious device in colonial fantasies of Black bodies – but, rather, prioritises a historiography that listens closely to the language of their agency so as to comprehend the timeliness of their activity and the timelessness of their impact.⁴⁷ Doing so reveals the role of a gendered “black double-voicedness” from the Signifyin(g) tradition in their performances (as is later explored).⁴⁸

Colonialism, imperialism, and Jim Crowism birthed, rebirthed, and unrelentingly propagandised dangerous narratives about Black women’s (and girls’) bodies. Slavery and its inextirpable “afterlife”⁴⁹ institutionalised the fictive belief that “the bodies of Black women [were] not only [...] exotic objects but [...] symbolized the most extreme sexuality imaginable: wild, insatiable, and deviant.”⁵⁰ But colonisers, imperialists, and Jim Crow white supremacists were not the only storytellers, even though their voices were (and continue to be) over-amplified in the historical record. Kimberly Wallace Sanders counters, “When Black women stand at the center of the discussion about the female body, their bodies tell a profoundly different story about historic and contemporary [...] culture.”⁵¹ And it was from there that Baker and Holt disrupted dominant narratives about the Black female body. They redrew the parameters of respectability and waywardness around their own empowered and ever-changing images. Their performance lives actively reconfigured Black women’s pasts, presents, and futures. Thus, in my focus on their activity around 1926, I deeply consider the simultaneous pertinence, presence, evanescence, and endurance of their craft.

playing with primitivism

In an interview conducted with Baker for the *New York Amsterdam News*, Holt wrote,

I have known Josephine since her days in “Shuffle Along,” in Paris when she lived in a hotel in Place Clichy, and was one of thousands of Parisians who acclaimed the little American when she made her debut clad in bananas and bathed in myriad lights, as a flower-laden basket descended from the ceiling to reveal a new star dancing the Charleston.⁵²

Holt had seen Baker’s transformation from the early minstrel-like routines in New York to the more self-assured, sensual choreographies in Paris. But what Holt immediately recognised in Baker’s banana-skirt routine as the Charleston and, no doubt, a plethora of other contemporary Black American dance styles, white Parisian spectators reduced to a primitive display.

Baker’s success, however, was in her ability to exploit the primitivist vogue that engulfed Parisian culture during the interwar years. (And Holt did the same.) That Baker had never set foot in Africa was insignificant to her audiences. Baker’s brown-ness, nudity, and the abandon with which she performed were enough to fuel fictions that appeared as fact in white minds hungry for Black escapism. They saw the foreignness of her dance in the context of their mythical, made-up Africa, when in reality her style, technique, and flair were, as dance scholar Anthea Kraut notes, “firmly rooted in African American vernacular dance traditions.”⁵³ Kraut explains that

[by] the time she arrived in Paris in 1925, she had years of dance training under her belt [...] She had consequently built up a substantial repertory of moves, including the Charleston, Black Bottom, Mess Around, Shimmy, Tack Annie, and not least, a distinctive knack for crossing her eyes. These same dances and gestures, however, read very differently in a French setting where, since the turn of the

century, the Parisian avant-garde had been gripped by “negrophilia.”⁵⁴

In this setting, audiences read Baker’s bodily movements as authentically African. Had she been the prized lighter complexion of the lead dancers back home, her performances would probably have been regarded as less authentic. Here, however, her complexion made audiences take notice – albeit in grossly objectifying ways. Baker was not naive to the ways in which her white audiences perceived and misperceived her. In fact, it was in the potential for her artistry to be read and misread in multiple ways that Baker found her power.

Baker’s banana-skirt routine at the Folies Bergère simultaneously heightened the fantasies of her audience and deepened her own sense of autonomy. What her audience likely did not know (or could not see beyond the primitivist lens) was that her performance was steeped in the African American tradition of Signifyin(g), i.e., a “black double-voicedness” (as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. illuminates) that delights in the possibility to have certain things appear one way yet be another.⁵⁵ Deriving its practices from the Signifying Monkey (a quick-witted trickster figure in African American folklore), this “black double-voicedness” – “ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language” – is integral to an array of Black vernacular art forms, including dance.⁵⁶ Signifyin(g) relishes the vastness of the imagination – that of the performer and that of the unsuspecting target. This was the space in which Baker thrived. She had once remarked, “The white imagination sure is something when it comes to blacks.”⁵⁷ And she certainly knew how to play with it.

In Phyllis Rose’s commentary on the performance, she writes:

[Baker] made her entrance through an electric twilight walking backward on her hands and feet, arms and legs stiff, along the thick limb of a painted jungle tree and down the trunk, like a monkey. A white explorer was sleeping underneath by the side of a river. Barely dressed black men sang softly and played their drums.

She was wearing nothing but a little skirt of plush bananas. It was the outfit she would be identified with virtually for the rest of her life, a witty thing in itself and wittier still when Baker started dancing and set the bananas in jiggling motion, like perky, good-natured phalluses. She came onstage laughing, laughing at everything.⁵⁸

The “monkey” reference is particularly striking when reread in the context of the Signifyin(g) Monkey, which embodies, to quote Gates, an “ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simian like.”⁵⁹ Neither the sleeping white explorer nor the entranced white audience could see the double-voicedness of Baker’s guise as she made her way down the trunk. Her laughter – at everything – signalled and sounded her agency.

As for Baker’s attire, what appeared as a “little skirt of plush bananas” (to reiterate Rose) was also, as K. Allison Hammer argues, “a multiple dildo harness that intervened in complex ways in colonial racial and sexual discourses.”⁶⁰ In a reading that entwines queer theory, transgender theory, and African American performance, Hammer elaborates: “Through not one but sixteen rubber banana dildos, she comically confronted her audiences with the exploitative reality of colonial power and the racist and sexist ideologies that structure Western society.”⁶¹ Countering colonial cravings of her audience for uncharted territories to penetrate (as voiced by the French critic who remarked, “We have to appease our taste for the unknown by exploring within ourselves the lands we haven’t penetrated”),⁶² Baker’s subversive performance instead “made a profound statement about her ability to penetrate her audiences rather than the other way around.”⁶³ With this performance, Hammer concludes,

[not] only did Baker invent one of the most queer multiple dildo harnesses in the history of Black women’s performance, but she also gained a sense of her own humanity in the moment of dance, a right not bestowed upon all bodies, both in her time and today.⁶⁴

The moment of Baker’s performance was, inevitably, fleeting, but it left an indelible mark on popular culture. In the music video for her 2006 song “Déjà Vu” (from her second solo album *B’Day*), Beyoncé Knowles-Carter alludes to Baker’s banana-skirt routine in a dance break that occurs towards the end of the video. The sequence, filmed at the Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, casts Beyoncé against a backdrop that can easily be read as a pseudo-African dusty plain. Therein, a bare-foot Beyoncé – clad in a ruffled grass-green skirt that duets with the movement of her hips, and an ornate, tasselled brassiere that shakes and shimmers with her upper body rhythms – delivers an intensely physical and expressive choreography. Jarvis C. McInnis observes how in this moment “Beyoncé channels Baker’s brazen sexuality and virtuosic performance style into a routine inspired by contemporary African dance”⁶⁵ and additionally steeped in her embodied knowledge of Hip Hop dance.⁶⁶ The phallic imagery is absent from Beyoncé’s sequence here, unlike in her live performance of “Déjà Vu” at the 2006 Fashion Rocks event, in which she substituted the grass skirt for the banana belt and drew more heavily upon Baker’s routine as images of Baker herself appeared on the screen behind Beyoncé.⁶⁷ Still, the primitivist evocations and subversive Baker-isms in the “Déjà Vu” video are undeniable.

Responses to the video seemed to echo the contemporary criticism around Baker’s performances. Fans decried Beyoncé’s dancing as “erratic, confusing and alarming at times,”⁶⁸ while critic Natalie Y. Moore cautioned “if she wants to bask in the same career longevity [as Diana Ross and Tina Turner], she should remember life is a marathon, not a strip tease.”⁶⁹ Moore’s criticism was redolent of the respectability narrative that has historically sought to circumscribe Black women’s lives. However, that Baker and Beyoncé danced on sites of Black exploitation, i.e., on Parisian stages and Louisiana plantations, recapitulates the role of double-voicedness. On the one hand, Baker and Beyoncé appeared as sex

objects under the gaze of a white, patriarchal mainstream audience, but on the other were their choreographed, coordinated reworkings of respectability. That their longevity as artists and subsequent legacies stem from the expansive and expressive definitions of Black womanhood their performances engendered (and continue to engender) certainly shows who had the last laugh.

Déjà vu, indeed.

orchestrating liberation

In early February 1926, a few months before she left for France, Holt gave an interview with the *Chicago Defender* in which she addressed the rumours surrounding her marriage and divorce. She sought to clear her name and defend her stance on not having spoken publicly about the matter until now. At the end of her statement, she foregrounded the patriarchal dynamics at play throughout the whole affair; she urged readers to recognise her vulnerability as a woman and adeptly flipped the gendered script of respectability, holding to account her husband's conduct. She closed:

As a woman I can only ask the public, whose justice I would naturally expect, and my host of friends who have so bravely stood by me through all these ugly developments to consider the motives underlying the series of attacks and they will see that I have been unjustly framed and persecuted not because of any crime, but to appease the anger and jealousy of an unscrupulous husband whose sense of decency should have restrained him from playing the game of Ray versus Ray in such an unmanly and unsportsman like [*sic*] manner.⁷⁰

It was not until March 1930 that “the last curtain [fell] on the Nora H. Ray case.”⁷¹ But in the meantime, Holt had a life to lead. She thus joined the long history of African American expatriates in search of seemingly more liberating pastures abroad.

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes that during the interwar period:

France became a place where African American women could realize personal freedom and creativity, in narrative or in performance, in clay or on canvas, in life and in love. Paris, as it appeared to them, was physically beautiful, culturally refined, inexpensive as a result of the war, and seductive with its lack of racial animus.⁷²

Unpacking attitudes to race in jazz-age Paris, Sharpley-Whiting explains:

black Americanness had a social currency that allowed access to artistic communities and creative spaces. Though they were talented, they were also privileged as Americans and exoticized as blacks. The French fascination with American technologies and popular culture, including film, radio, and jazz introduced by African American GIs, and French Republicanism itself, embodied in the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity – even if imperfectly practiced – helped to further grease the wheels of social equality and freedom for African Americans in Paris.⁷³

Europe's appeal to Holt as a composer stemmed from what Kira Thurman identifies as Black classical musicians' “righteous anger and frustration with the American classical music market, which used extreme measures to exclude them.”⁷⁴ Thurman elaborates,

While many had trained at conservatories of music such as Oberlin College or the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC)⁷⁵ since the late nineteenth century, once they stepped off the podium at graduation they encountered constant institutional barriers to their success.⁷⁶

Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Teresa L. Reed reveals, “Misconceptions about the intelligence of (white) women and African Americans created a virtually insurmountable barrier for any black woman aspiring toward ‘serious’ composition.”⁷⁷ Thus, enticed by what Thurman describes as “myths of European color blindness,” as well as possibilities for multifarious womanhoods, Black women such as Holt embraced the unknown

in the hope that the unknown would embrace them too.⁷⁸

Holt claimed her identity as a composer in a realm that I have described as “gendered male and oppressively racialized as white.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, she competed at the highest international level: the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau was a recurring site for her musical study. A host of renowned pedagogues bolstered the institution’s prestige and in 1931, Holt returned to study under the Conservatory’s most celebrated instructor: Nadia Boulanger. Many American practitioners flocked to Fontainebleau for the rare privilege of Boulanger’s instruction, heading home after their studies to then transform the American musical landscape. Fellow Black Renaissance composer Robert Nathaniel Dett, Black post-modernists Julia Perry and Dorothy Rudd Moore, classical music giant Aaron Copland, and popular music trailblazer Quincy Jones were among a few names.

How different the story of American music might have been had Holt’s hundreds of music scores (encompassing piano suites, art songs, chamber pieces, and orchestral works) not been stolen from their place of storage in the United States while she was abroad. As a composer, her manuscripts were supposed to outlive her, finding longevity in the performances of Black feminist concert musicians like myself.⁸⁰ When I play Holt’s sole surviving work for solo piano, called *Negro Dance* – a two-minute burst of lively vernacular rhythms, flamboyant pianistic gestures, capricious harmonies, and buoyant melodies – I can only imagine how her clear predilection for the virtuosic and vernacular may have transpired in a large-scale work such as her 1918 master’s thesis composition, *Rhapsody on Negro Themes*, which was a forty-two page opus written for a one-hundred piece symphony orchestra.⁸¹ The breadth and depth of her compositional palette remain a grey area in Holt’s historiography. It is just as well, then, that she poured herself into such kaleidoscopic enterprises, leaving hints of her colourful presence everywhere she went.

Holt’s 1926 studies at Fontainebleau only lasted through the summer, but her performances continued. Prior to her Paris stay, Holt’s performance life in Chicago largely comprised classical piano recitals that unfolded in concert halls frequented by white Chicagoans, and in church halls located in the Black neighbourhood of Chicago’s South Side (where Holt lived).⁸² Her programmes featured the canonic works of Frédéric Chopin alongside those of African-descended composers such as the British Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. She performed her own solo piano compositions, which often paid homage to African American folk songs and dances. And she also played as an accompanist: for herself as she sang Black folk songs, and for other gifted sopranos who lived on the South Side.⁸³ It was not until she returned from Paris to Chicago in 1927 that she fully launched her career Stateside as a club singer and hostess.⁸⁴ During the intervening period, Paris, it seemed, provided the opportunity for her to take centre stage as a vocalist in ways that exceeded her past experience.

In October 1926, she made her debut at Les Nuits du Prado in Paris. The performance was a success, but she found the superficiality of it all uninspiring. Writing to her close friend, author and Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten, she said,

The little music hall “Prado” goes on well. It is quite chic, no dancing and only French people. Imagine them liking me and they don’t know a word I am singing or what it’s all about. The real truth is, I’m selling my hair and personality. So far so good. I am not greatly enthused. It’s a lark for me you know.⁸⁵

Reinventing her performance persona after her studies, Holt had dyed her hair blonde, which resulted in being read by her foreign audiences as a “blonde Creole” (and Creole, she was not).⁸⁶ As with Baker, Holt’s audiences amused her as much as she amused them, and she returned to the Parisian stage at many points in her career over the next few years. What is significant about Holt’s Les Nuits du

Prado debut, however, is that she relinquished her married name, presenting herself as Nora Holt, only.⁸⁷ Her divorce was far from finalised; nevertheless, Holt exercised her right to self-definition, as she had always done.

In Holt's world, the concert hall and the nightclub worked together to grant her the autonomy she desired. She inscribed her multifaceted Black womanhood into realms that sought to negate or fetishise it. A modern-day parallel might be with the ways in which contemporary artist Melissa Viviane Jefferson, otherwise known as Lizzo, resists the false dichotomy of classical music vs. popular culture and its high-brow vs. low-brow connotations. Lizzo cites her training as a classical flautist alongside the Black vernacular dances of her heritage and culture, twerking as she plays florid "Flight of the Bumblebee" style passages at breakneck speed.⁸⁸ Black women (from Holt to Lizzo, and those who came before and between) have orchestrated their liberation by reclaiming and finding harmony in the aspects of themselves deemed dissonant in the white mainstream, such as their bodies, skin, hair, intellect, talent, and ambition.

That interwar Paris was a key site in the geography of African American women's liberation is due to the ways in which it served as "a training ground, a field where they could mine their dreams until mature and ripe for transport home."⁸⁹ Sharpley-Whiting continues, "Many would return in the midst of the New Negro era, fully equipped to take up their roles as 'pioneers' of the race in areas of art, education, letters and civil rights," as Holt did.⁹⁰ Indeed, both the European conservatoire and nightclub were her training grounds, her platforms for self-discovery, her vehicles for autonomy. From restaging respectability in these arenas, she acquired the tools and techniques to further navigate the cacophony of a Jim Crow society that vilified every facet of Black womanhood.

coda

The 1951 image of Baker and Holt in *Life* magazine captures the ways in which I have

sought to emphasise the interlocking aspects of their artistic and intellectual lives, to not silo their activities on account of their socioeconomic backgrounds, but instead to layer their stories on account of the futures they strived towards and the transformations they engendered along the way (within themselves, each other, and the world around them). Their embrace reifies the entwined trajectories of the former Chicago Race woman and Harlem showgirl. Using this photograph as a starting point, I have resolved to examine the ways in which Baker and Holt found cohesion amid the potential for contradiction, empowerment amid the possibility for exploitation, and joy amid the constant threat of white terrorism, both in Europe and the United States.

Baker and Holt used their social and artistic performances as a means to untether themselves from the aspects of their past they wished to leave behind, and to find new freedoms in identities that (regardless of how the public read or misread them) were born out of their own volition. In tracing their lives back to jazz-age Paris, I have listened for the language of their agency in the double-voicedness of their displays, and in humorous critiques of their audience that challenged the hegemonies and hierarchies around their position as Black female entertainers. I conclude that Baker and Holt actively disrupted dominant scripts in favour of more nuanced narratives and staged bold Black womanhoods that would set the blueprint for years to come.



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notes

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1 “La Baker is Back,” *Life*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2 Apr. 1951, p. 55.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid. 59.

6 Ibid.

7 See Lucy Caplan, “‘Strange What Cosmopolites Music Makes of Us’: Classical Music, the Black Press, and Nora Douglas Holt’s Black Feminist Audiopia,” *Journal of the Society for American Music*, vol. 14, no. 3, Aug. 2020, pp. 308–66 and Lawrence Schenbeck, “Nora Douglas Holt and Her World,” *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (UP of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 171–208.

8 See Cheryl A. Wall, “Nora Holt: New Negro Composer and Jazz Age Goddess,” *Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History*, edited by Deborah Willis et al. (Open Book, 2019), pp. 94–104.

9 Mel Tapley, “Nora Holt Dies on the Coast,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 Feb. 1974, p. A1.

10 “Nora Holt Now Popular Hostess in London Club,” London review reprinted in *Chicago Defender*, 5 Oct. 1929.

11 For further scholarship on the racialising of sound in Western music, see Jennifer Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York UP, 2016); Matthew D. Morrison, “Blacksound,” *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*, edited by Tomás McAuley et al. (Oxford UP, 2020); and Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Duke UP, 2019).

12 Quoted in Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (Vintage Books, 1989), p. 23.

13 “Fabulous is the word for Mrs. Nora Douglas Holt,” read the first line of her obituary in the *New York Amsterdam News*, which is why I have invoked the word “fabulous” here. Tapley, op. cit. A1.

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19 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Stories of Social Upheaval* (W.W. Norton, 2019), p. xv.

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21 Ibid.

22 Lucy Caplan, “Nora Holt,” *Black Renaissance Woman: Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, Nora Holt, Betty Jackson King, Helen Hagan*, by Samantha Ege (Lorelt (Lontano Records) LNT145, 2022).

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25 Ibid. 12.

26 Ibid.

27 Tapley, op. cit. A1.

28 “Lena James Douglas to Write About Opera and Symphony,” *Chicago Defender*, 3 Nov. 1917, p. 11.

29 “George Holt and Miss James Married,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 Aug. 1917, p. 7.

30 I am, as yet, unable to explain Holt’s motivations for changing her first name and from where the name “Nora” derived.

31 “Holt–Ray Wedding Styled Most Brilliant Affair,” *Chicago Defender*, 4 Aug. 1923, p. 4.

- 32 Wall, op. cit. 94.
- 33 Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (Random House, 1993), p. xix.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid. 13.
- 36 Ibid. 16–17.
- 37 Ibid. 17.
- 38 Rose, op. cit. 11.
- 39 Ibid. 50.
- 40 Saidiya Hartman illustrates the “color code” of “Negro theatre” at this time:

d.c. = dark cloud/black (there was never a place for a dark-skinned girl in the chorus); s.j. = smokey joe/brown-skinned; h.y. = high yellow. Virtually all of the female leads and dancers at the fancy Harlem clubs for downtown folks were light, bright, and damn near white [...] your complexion decided where you could play, who looked up to you and who looked down on you. (Hartman, op. cit. 312)

- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Baker and Chase, op. cit. 58.
- 43 Ibid. 49.
- 44 Ibid. 55.
- 45 Ibid. 55.
- 46 Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (The U of Georgia P, 2020), p. 16.
- 47 Ibid. 15.
- 48 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Oxford UP, 2014), p. 56.
- 49 Hartman locates “the afterlife of slavery” in the reality that “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” and in her own existence as the progeny of a forcibly displaced African diaspora. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), p. 6.

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- 67 See Jennifer Sweeney-Risko, “Fashionable ‘Formation’: Reclaiming the Sartorial Politics of Josephine Baker,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 33, no. 98, 2019, pp. 498–514.
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83 See Ege, "Composing a Symphonist" 7–27 and Ege, "Nora Douglas Holt's Teachings."

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