

DRAKE UNIVERSITY

“ONLY THE NEGROES CAN EXCITE PARIS”:  
VIEWING BLACKNESS IN *LA REVUE NÈGRE*

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On the evening of 2 October 1925, a new show opened to a packed house at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées in Paris: *La Revue nègre*.<sup>1</sup> Orchestrated by theater managers André Daven and Rolf de Maré, the evening's entertainment consisted of a series of seven stand-alone scenes, each with its own set designs and costumes. Following the orchestra's instrumental introduction, the curtain rose to reveal Sidney Bechet, the New York City skyline behind him, pushing a vegetable cart to center stage before taking out his clarinet and performing an improvisation.<sup>2</sup> The next scene took place on a Mississippi levee, steamboats visible in the background, with "bales of cotton and women in mammy caps and red bandanas".<sup>3</sup> It was in this scene that Josephine Baker made her first entrance before Parisian audiences. Wearing stock ragamuffin attire, she emerged on stage on all fours before dancing the Charleston as the orchestra played "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby!"<sup>4</sup> It was not this scene, however, that started the St. Louis dancer on her path to becoming *La Baker*, but rather the show's *grand scandale*: the *danse sauvage*, an erotically-charged duet in which Baker, and her dance partner Joe Alex, emerged on stage naked, save for feathered rings around their waists, wrists and ankles. The dance was a highly sexualized pas-de-deux, shocking

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Haney, *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1981), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

even by Parisian standards. With her wild gyrations and comic faces, a sensation was loosed upon the City of Lights, and a star was born.

The success of *La Revue nègre* was no accident. Indeed, it was specifically calculated to appeal to a Parisian audience that held distinct ideas regarding blackness. An amalgam of both French and American understandings of blackness, *La Revue nègre* offers an intriguing look into French race relations in the 1920s as African-American soldiers began settling in Paris following World War I. Various art, literary, and musical currents were vital in paving the *Revue*'s path to success, not the least of these being the arrival of jazz. In this paper, I will examine the popularity of *La Revue nègre* by investigating the different artistic currents in vogue at the time of the show's premiere, and by positing a three-pronged approach to viewing Parisian understandings of blackness during the early interwar years.

### **Blackness: Origins of Perception in France and the United States**

Unlike other shows of its time, *La Revue nègre* combined discrete conceptions of blackness from two countries with very different relationships to the black Other: France and the United States. The construction of the show itself reflects these hybrid qualities: though conceived for Parisian audiences, it featured a wide range of American vernacular musical styles presented by black performers. While most elements of the show could be found in a typical black vaudeville performance in the United States, it was the *danse sauvage* that identified the show as one intended for an audience of French urbanites.

Generally speaking, French understanding of blackness at the *fin-de-siècle* was strongly influenced by African culture, as most French citizens' only interaction with blacks before World War I came through colonial accounts and exchanges. Information about these interactions

reached the French public through written descriptions and drawings made by Victorian explorers, such as David Livingstone and Count Pierre-Paul-François-Camille Savorgnan de Brazza, (the Franco-Italian explorer who opened the Congo to French colonization), as well as through sensationalist “live African” stage shows. The product of enterprising showmen, these shows involved presenting actual African people, often abducted from or sold by their home tribes, on stage performing war dances, tribal rituals, and even battle re-enactments.<sup>5</sup>

Increased colonial trade throughout the early nineteenth century also led to greater commercial importation by French businessmen, and marketers began using black-oriented imagery to advertise items like rum, coffee, sugar, and spices. Such images communicated the excitement and exoticism of the product to consumers, but in ways that were still safe and accessible to white European patrons.<sup>6</sup> The Golliwog character is a perfect example of this: though the character is marked as Other by his skin color and minstrel-derived facial features, he is harmless, his depiction a means of rendering “black savagery cuddly” (figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 32-33. For more information on live African shows, see Bernth Lindfors’s *Africans On Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



Figure 1  
Vintage 1930s Economy Design Golliwog Doll Pattern<sup>8</sup>

Excursions into southern Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also served to fuel both the public's interest and imagination regarding Africa and its people. La Croisière Noire was one of the most prominent examples: sponsored by car manufacturer André Citroën, the 1925 expedition was the second in a series of races that ran through sub-Saharan Africa. Featuring Citroën cars, these races were designed to promote French manufacturing in Africa. The 1925 Croisière was a huge commercial success; it produced both a book and a film of the same name, as well as countless postcards, posters, statues and photographs, thus providing the general public with access to actual images of an area that had hitherto been largely unknown.<sup>9</sup> The images associated with the Croisière differed from those like the Golliwog, in that they exploited the savage side of black imagery, recalling earlier colonial sketches and paintings that depicted Africans as fearsome, even bestial creatures. This new

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<sup>8</sup> Frost's Meditations. "Golliwog – racist toy that won't go away." <http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/oct2008/golliwogs.html> (accessed April 30, 2011). See also Allison Ray's "Sew Fun Sewing Patterns" <http://www.sewfunpatterns.com/Blackamericanpatterns.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

representation, though, followed the French colonialists' subjugation and taming of "darkest Africa". Having lost their earlier bite, these images were based slightly more firmly in reality than depictions like the Golliwog, the result of developing photographic and film technology, as opposed to the more imaginative depictions characteristic of nineteenth century advertising posters. Africans were now exotic, foreign, and unpredictable, but they did not pose a direct threat to their white conquerors, making them both appealing and accessible.

The Exposition internationale des Arts décoratif et industriels modernes of 1925 was another important event in the dissemination of new African imagery to the masses. A World's Fair-type exhibit lasting several months, the Exposition featured primarily luxury items (furniture, textiles, objets d'art), and many of the works presented by more avant-garde artists exhibited markedly African or pseudo-African influences. This elicited a significant response among members of the bourgeoisie, who were looking to flaunt their wealth and/or status by seeking out and even setting new trends in fashion. The Exposition inspired middle-class consumers to commission works in droves, particularly by French artists who could incorporate a pseudo-African style into their designs. For the bourgeoisie, owning authentic African objects would have been too outré, but the so-called "black deco" style, born out of a desire to find a popular, manufactured, African-influenced style, was just exotic enough to be chic.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the avant-garde set did not share these reservations. Rather, they embraced the more alien or exotic qualities of African art, and came to be some of its most important proponents and perpetuators (notably, Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Guillaume).<sup>11</sup> Looking to

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<sup>10</sup> "Black deco" refers to an Africanist art style (*l'art nègre*) applied to modern art, but can also be used in referring to *l'art nègre's* influence on decorative arts. According to Archer-Straw, black deco "represents the stylizing attitude that allowed for a playful recombination and transmutation of *l'art nègre* into modern art", but must be viewed against a "background of...conservative, élite appropriation of African forms" resulting in a "more popular, manufactured 'black deco' style". (*Negrophilia*, 71).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

establish their social position as outsiders, these avant-garde artists and their patrons sought to transgress or shock, and on a certain level, to impress, and such goals could not be accomplished by sharing aesthetic tastes with the bourgeoisie. Rather than turning to the more colonially-influenced African art sought after by middle-class consumers, avant-garde artists appropriated more authentically African styles, most notably from African sculpture – geometric shapes, abstract patterns, forms not based in reality, and earthen materials like clay, wood, or bone. The resulting object need not be “authentically African” (in the sense that it actually originated in Africa, or was made by an African artist), but it had to at least be a close enough approximation to be mistaken for the real thing by other Parisians, whose only contact with the real thing would have come through exhibits at the Musée Trocadéro and the Exposition des Arts décoratifs.

For the avant-garde, the overriding importance of an object or display was what it signified to viewers, not its actual status as African *per se*. However, in order to be an object imbued with an appropriately edgy aesthetic value, such artworks had to be distinct from the mass-produced commodities that filled bourgeois living rooms. By choosing to replicate the “authentic object”, which would have been generally avoided by the bourgeoisie for being too eccentric, the avant-garde appropriated “authenticity” for the purpose of shocking the bourgeoisie and establishing their transgressive social position. The end result, then, is not a copied “authentic” object, but rather a new object based in a perceived authenticity. As long as the resulting object *seemed* authentic – that is to say, both unfamiliar and exotic – it played to avant-garde aesthetics and sensibilities. It was this desire which created the *soirées nègres*, in which attendees would participate in drum circles, use African-influenced masks, and write poetry in “fictitious, African-sounding ‘mumbo jumbo’”.<sup>12</sup> Though rooted entirely in the artists’ imaginings of Africa and not in reality, it was enough that it *felt* authentic to the participants.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 57.

Having felt that they were taking part in an “authentic” experience, the successful transgression of societal norms was therefore achieved.

While France was developing its relationship to an African Other at the turn of the century, America had been wrestling with the role of black Americans in the public consciousness for a considerably longer period of time. Much white thought and understanding of blackness during the nineteenth century was shaped by popular entertainments like minstrel shows, which first came to prominence through white actor Thomas D. “Daddy” Rice’s invention of the Jim Crow character around 1828.<sup>13</sup> Rice would appear on stage wearing blackface makeup, and perform song and dance numbers which he claimed to be based on an actual performance he had seen given by a black stable groom. The success of this show spawned numerous imitations, and it was from the Virginia Minstrels performing troupe that the genre took its name and rose to popularity in the north in the 1840s.<sup>14</sup> Initially, these shows were almost exclusively performed by whites in blackface, but after the Civil War, actual black people began to be included in the programs. However, these black actors still “blackened up” like their white counterparts before taking the stage, in keeping with the conventions the show had developed by this time regarding the stage appearance of “black people” (real or imagined).

By the 1850s, a standard three-part form for these shows had developed. The first part began with a large opening number where the entire ensemble performed, usually a dance, followed by comic exchange between an interlocutor and the two “end men” (Mr. Tambo and

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<sup>13</sup> For more on minstrelsy and its effect on black/white relations, see Nathan Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), William J. Mahar’s *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), and Dale Cockrell’s *Demons of Disorder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> James Sellman, “Minstrelsy,” in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, Second Edition*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Oxford African American Studies Center*, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0002/e2672> (accessed March 9, 2011).



Mr. Bones). This gave way to the so-called specialty songs, wherein members of the group would emerge and perform a short number that might refer to the topic of the previous conversation. The second part, called the “olio”, was a series of song and dance numbers, performed either individually or in groups, which resembled what we would recognize today as vaudeville. The third part acted as a grand finale, usually culminating in a “walk-around” or cakewalk.<sup>15</sup> Believed to have begun as an elaborate dance used by slaves to mock their masters (and to win a cake for having the best dance), the cakewalk was incorporated into the minstrel show to serve as a showy culminating act. It is also thought that the roots of jazz and jazz dancing in the United States can be found in the cakewalk.<sup>16</sup>

As more black performers participated in these shows in the post-Reconstruction era, and as white audiences became more accustomed to seeing them on stage (even in blackface), minstrelsy became a viable and important venue for black performers. By the end of the nineteenth century, many successful black performers on the minstrel circuit, such as Billy Kersands, Bob Height, and James Bland, were drawing large audiences.<sup>17</sup> By the turn of the century, however, minstrelsy was beginning to be supplanted by vaudeville as the major popular entertainment of the day. Emerging around the 1880s, vaudeville employed much of the same racist and sexist humor as minstrelsy, though the format lacked the formal structure of a minstrel show, featuring instead a series of musical and dance acts disconnected from a larger narrative or conceptual thread. Another marked contrast involved the relaxation of conventions regarding

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<sup>15</sup> Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 249-250.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Sellman, “Minstrelsy”, in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*.

black performers appearing on stage in blackface. In the context of vaudeville, black performers were allowed onstage without makeup, something which would be unheard of in minstrelsy.<sup>18</sup>

Vaudeville also had a French equivalent in the form of the music hall. This genre evolved from the café-concert tradition, in which singers would perform on small stages inside cafés, surrounded by patrons who would typically continue with their meals and conversations during the performance. (This was similar to the music hall tradition as practiced in England, where the entertainment emphasis was on singing, especially popular tunes.)<sup>19</sup> However, French regulations barring the performance of plays or dances on café-concert stages were lifted in 1867, resulting in a greater variety of performances. By the turn of the twentieth century, elaborate costumes, sets, and staging had replaced the more pared-down café-concert performance practices, and larger venues were necessary to accommodate both the increasingly expansive acts and the growing audiences. With the cost of attendance roughly equal to a cup of coffee, these innovative presentations, increasingly referred to as music hall performances rather than café-concerts, were extremely popular across a broad economic range and drew diverse audiences as a result.<sup>20</sup>

Music hall performances consisted of a series of ten to twenty acts, a full performance of which could last for several hours at a stretch. These acts could either be connected through a common narrative thread, or presented in the style of a variety-revue, in which each scene or act was intended to stand alone, similar to a vaudeville show.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the two terms are often used

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the history of minstrelsy in the United States, see Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance*, and Allen Woll's *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Lamb, "Music hall", in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19440> (accessed April 6, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 106.

interchangeably, “variety” being used to indicate many different types of acts within a single show.<sup>22</sup> The revue-style presentation, however, was recognizable as a distinct genre by the early nineteenth century, originally providing satirical commentary on current events (literally, “passing in review”), presenting narratively disjunct scenes or acts.<sup>23</sup> The same shift that marked the transition of the café-concert into the music hall was also visible when the Folies-Bergère presented its first “outfit revue”, *Place au jeûne*, in 1886.<sup>24</sup> In the outfit revue, the focus was no longer on witty banter and satire, but rather on “lavish visual effects, extravagant costumes and elaborate staged dances and songs”.<sup>25</sup>

As theaters grew and more space was made available, presentations became more and more elaborate, with the emphasis increasingly shifting toward visual spectacle. Jugglers, gymnasts, acrobats, and dancers were presented along with musical acts, drawing in audiences with lavish costumes, cheap tickets, and more often than not, the promise of scantily-clad women.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, an influx of foreign performers and foreign-influenced performances reflected a growing desire not only for European spectacle, but for exotic acts as well. By the 1920s, this influx of outside performers and settings indicate that blackness was clearly not the only game in town when it came to Parisian desire for the exotic. Jeffrey Jackson, in consulting programs for various music halls around Paris during the early 1920s, notes the appearance of polkas, tangos, Russian folk music, Asian-themed music and tableaux, and various

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<sup>22</sup> Lamb, “Music hall”, in *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Lamb, et al, “Revue”, in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/23288> (accessed April 27,2011).

<sup>24</sup> Folies-Bergere Official Website, “Trois siècles d’histoire [Du 19eme au 21eme siècle] “ (Paris : Folies-Bergère, 2010), <http://www.foliesbergere.com/Du-19eme-au-21eme-siecle--fid36.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Lamb, et al, “Revue”, in *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 71.

types of American popular music, including jazz, in music halls throughout the city.<sup>27</sup> In the years following World War I, jazz (or rather, what we would recognize as jazz today) was usually performed in nightclubs and cabarets in the entertainment districts, most notably Montmartre and Montparnasse. In these venues, the performers were typically black American expatriates who played in a more “harsh, shocking style” than what was later presented in music halls all over Paris by white bandleaders such as Paul Whiteman and Jack Hylton.<sup>28</sup>

Given these conditions, the production values of a show like *La Revue nègre* certainly would have lived up to what a 1920s Parisian audience expected in a venue like the Théâtre Champs-Élysées: singing and dancing, lavish costumes, elaborate sets, and exotic appeal. However, the presence of such a large number of black people on a Parisian stage meant that this was “not the usual sort of 1920s music hall fare”.<sup>29</sup> Until *La Revue nègre*, bands like those led by Whiteman and Hylton were the primary purveyors of jazz amongst the bourgeoisie. An American and a Briton respectively, they presented classical music, popular tunes, marches and folk tunes in a “jazzed” style, similar to styles later popularized by Glenn Miller and Guy Lombardo, and fronted almost entirely white bands.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, a show like *La Revue nègre* was more of “a specialty [program], whereas white performers appeared to be more typical” for shows in this genre.<sup>31</sup> Excursions by members of the white, urban bourgeoisie to the “real” jazz locales – clubs like Bricktop’s and Le Grand Duc in Montmartre – would have been rare, and as

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Jackson, “Music Halls and the Assimilation of Jazz in 1920s Paris.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no.2 (Fall 2000), 70.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 109-111.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 115.

a result, many believed this softened version to be more real than what was being played on the Butte.<sup>32</sup>

Given such associations, then, was the music for *La Revue nègre* actually jazz? To its patrons, yes, but only in the sense that anything advertised as “modern” or “black” was almost immediately associated with jazz, the word functioning more like an adjective than a noun. Anytime the word “jazz” was affixed to an advertisement, it was in the hope of communicating modernity, novelty, and an affiliation with the sorts of American advancements, both in machines and popular art, which were in vogue in Europe following the war.<sup>33</sup> However, the expectations of a typical audience at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées would have been to see white musicians playing watered-down, “tamer” versions of the sort of music one would hear in the Montmartre nightclubs (*les boîtes*). Most likely, *La Revue nègre* would have been the featured presentation following a series of smaller acts, such as jugglers, magicians, acrobats, and other circus acts.<sup>34</sup> Though the strong exotic appeal (the all-black cast, American dancing and settings, more “authentic” jazz performed by black musicians) makes the show’s appearance in a music hall setting logical, the material itself would have been both scandalous and surprising to the Théâtre’s varied audience, whose acquaintance with jazz would have come primarily via acts like Whiteman and Hylton’s: scandalous, because of Baker’s exposed black body intertwined in no uncertain terms with Joe Alex’s, and surprising because the jazz band accompanying the show was entirely black. Thus, despite being cloaked in all the trappings of a typical music hall

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>33</sup> Jed Rasula, “Jazz as Decal for the European Avant-Garde”, in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21-26.

<sup>34</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 119, and Bryan Hammond and Patrick O’Connor, *Josephine Baker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 17.

performance, spectators would have perceived the content of *La Revue nègre* as deviating wildly from typical shows in the genre.

*La Revue nègre* drew heavily on stereotypes that came from a distinctly American conceptualization of blackness – in fact, with the exception of the *danse sauvage*, all of the show’s scenes were based on white American stage portrayals of blackness. Since the French would have been largely unacquainted with these specific ideas, growing as they did out of slavery, a show like the *Revue* would have had little more than novel appeal for French audiences. The inclusion of an act like the *danse sauvage*, however, demonstrates Daven and de Maré’s desire to increase the show’s appeal by offering a portrayal of blackness that would have been more familiar to Parisian audiences of the day – namely, that of actual sub-Saharan Africans. The result is a superimposition of the French interpretation of “African blackness” onto the ostensible performance frame of “African-American blackness”. While a topless black woman dancing suggestively has its own fair share of novelty, its faux-African presentation was something Parisian audiences would have been more familiar with, drawing on the rather reductionist French understanding of “black” equating with “African”. Petrine Archer-Straw characterizes this French fascination with blackness – without regard for its specific geographical or cultural origin – as “négrophilia”: a taste for all things that could be perceived as African, and specifically sub-Saharan African, regardless of authenticity. It derives from the French *négrophilie*, referring to a love or affection for black culture. Using Archer-Straw’s etymology, it has been adapted from Jean Laude’s use of the word in the last chapter of *La peinture française (1905-1914) et l’art nègre*.<sup>35</sup>

Coincidentally, the word “African” also operated as a catch-all term, particularly in artistic discourse, for any object (primarily visual) seen to lack the sophistication and restraint

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<sup>35</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 190n1.

typically associated with European art and society – again, disregarding the object’s actual “Africanness”. This abstraction of the word from its strict denotation (i.e., something or someone originating from Africa) made phenomena like the original *Revue nègre* possible, drawing heavily as it did on American blackface traditions and faux-African spectacle (e.g. the *danse sauvage*) while still being perceived by Parisian audiences as “African”. The irony, of course, is that neither the minstrel-derived entertainments nor the *danse sauvage* was remotely “African” in the literal sense of the word, nor were the performers associated with them. It seems, then, that the first level of “African-ness” is skin color. In being black, regardless of place of birth, in the eyes of interwar Parisian audiences, one is “African”, and to be “African”—whether real or imagined—is to be chic and transgressive. It is at this juncture, then, where both middle-class patrons and avant-garde artists embraced an imagined blackness, that *La Revue nègre* emerged, proving itself capable of capturing the attention of both groups.

### ***La Revue nègre*: Origins and Receptions**

*La Revue nègre* was the brainchild of American socialite Caroline Dudley Reagan, who proposed the idea of an “authentic Negro vaudeville” to André Daven, one of the managers at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées in early 1925.<sup>36</sup> Reagan’s description of the show as “Negro vaudeville”, rather than “minstrelsy”, is intriguing, in that most people would fail to make a distinction between these two practices. It also draws attention to the shift in popular entertainment occurring at this time in America, specifically regarding the decline of minstrelsy and the rise of vaudeville and black musical theater.

Given the success of the Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs in 1925, the increasing use of Africanist elements in both French commercial and avant-garde art, and the

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<sup>36</sup> Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 44.

growing popularity of jazz, Reagan's proposition could not have come to Daven at a better time. Fernand Léger, an avant-garde artist who had been involved with Ballet Suédois's staging of Darius Milhaud's *La Création du monde* (a performance heavily influenced by the artistic *africainsme* popular at the time), told Daven that he should "Give [Parisians] the Negroes. Only the Negroes can excite Paris."<sup>37</sup> Daven gave Reagan the green light, charging her with finding the performers, about thirty in all. Reagan spent the summer scouting for talent, spending considerable time in Harlem.

Meanwhile, Sidney Bechet, on a recommendation from his former conductor Will Marion Cook, had joined Claude Hopkins's band, and was playing with them the night they auditioned for Reagan as the house band for *La Revue nègre*. It must have been a very successful performance, as Reagan apparently "signed the musicians then and there".<sup>38</sup> Other bookings included Louis Douglas (Will Marion Cook's son-in-law) as dancer and choreographer, Michel Covarrubias as set designer (known for his *Vanity Fair* drawings, which would later inspire Paul Colin's publicity poster for the show), Spencer Williams as pianist and composer, and Maud de Forest as the headliner, a singer known for her renditions of blues and spiritual tunes. Soon after arriving in Paris, however, the theater's managers realized that de Forest's repertory, particularly the gospel tunes, would not be well received by an audience expecting fast-paced, danceable jazz. As a result, Josephine Baker replaced de Forrest as the show's star attraction, and it was her image which Paul Colin immortalized in his *affiches*. It was Williams who suggested that Reagan consider hiring Baker, which prompted Reagan to visit downtown

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1987), 73.



New York City's Plantation Club where Baker was working as a chorus girl.<sup>39</sup> Reagan offered Baker a position with the troupe, and after initial salary negotiations, she agreed to join.<sup>40</sup>

Having booked her cast, Reagan and the company set sail for Paris on the night of 15 September on the S.S. *Berengaria*. They arrived on 22 September, and after taking the train from the port in Cherbourg into the city, were greeted at Gare St. Lazare by Daven. Upon meeting the train, Daven watched as “out spilled a little world, rocking, boisterous, multicolored, carrying bizarre musical instruments, all talking loudly, some roaring with laughter”.<sup>41</sup> With only ten days remaining until opening night, rehearsals began that afternoon, Daven being understandably anxious to see the results of his large investment. It was at this point that the notorious *danse sauvage* was added to the show in order to appeal to a French audience in the throes of *négrophilia*.

Initial reviews of the show praised its originality and, paradoxically, both its primitiveness and modernity. Paul Achard, in his *Paris-Midi* review, gushed that the show validated “all our readings that pass before our excited imagination...Stanley, the Thauraud brothers, *Batouala*, sacred dances, the Sudan”, while Jacques Patin's review a few days later described the performers as “that ultramodern group”.<sup>42</sup> This framing of modernity through the application of primitivistic traits was a common trope of the day, and an important ideological factor driving avant-garde art currents. Generally, audiences were shocked not so much by the

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<sup>39</sup> Chillton, *Sidney Bechet*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Accounts conflict regarding what position she was offered. Some suggest she was offered a position as a chorus girl, reflecting her reputation as the “highest paid chorus girl in the world” for *The Chocolate Dandies*, and later replaced de Forest as the headliner act. Others state that she was offered the headliner position outright. See Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen Through Parisian Eyes”, *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 911-13, and “Blues Writer in Sweden,” *Ebony Magazine* 9, no. 6 (April 1954).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 104-105.

material of the show (with the possible exception of the *danse sauvage*), but by the sheer number of black performers on stage at once. The final number, however, with its inescapable sexual content, was simply too much for certain viewers, prompting them to leave in the middle of the performance.<sup>43</sup> The degree of scandal which the show created is often compared to the premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*. This is fitting in that the scandal acted not as a deterrent for either show, but as a powerful draw for audiences anxious to witness and take part in the city's new theatrical sensation.

Following the first opening weeks, however, reviews cooled. The initial shock having worn off, writers began realizing that this sort of manufactured African spectacle was nothing new. "Truthfully, we have already seen almost all of this before in detail," critic Gustave Fréjaville pointed out in *Comoedia*. However, critics were still taken with the show's female lead, crediting much of the show's success to "the personal valor of several of the artists, overall of the star, Josephine Baker".<sup>44</sup> Such positive reviews for the star, and the continuing popularity of the show amongst the general populace (regardless of decreasingly enthusiastic reviews) would have contributed to the Folies-Bergère's increasing interest in landing Baker as their new headliner.

Because of the lack of extant scores or playbills, it is difficult to say for certain what music would have accompanied this show. Various accounts confirm that the show began with the band playing an opening number, along the lines of an overture. Given the large resources invested in producing this show, it is most likely that the music for this opening number would have been an original composition by Williams, something new and unique that would stand as a musical symbol for the show; however, it's also possible that Williams simply provided an

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<sup>43</sup> Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Jordan, *Le Jazz*, 107.

arrangement of an American jazz standard. The lack of primary source documents (scores, lead sheets, playbills, etc.) makes it impossible to state one definitively over the other. Following the band's introduction, Bechet performed "an improvisation", this time most likely based on an American popular tune, though whether he was performing this improvisation solo or backed up by the band is not known.<sup>45</sup> In Baker's opening act, she performed the Charleston, implying that the accompanying music would have been of a faster tempo with heavy syncopation, particularly featuring the quarter note-eighth rest-tie figure that distinguishes the Charleston tune. Although copies of the music accompanying the subsequent scenes – or even detailed descriptions of that music – could not be found, the titles of the remaining tableaux provide strong clues as to the sort of music that would have been featured (figure 2).<sup>46</sup> *Les Strutting Babies* implies a walk-around or cakewalk, which would also have featured faster tempos and syncopation, perhaps more along the lines of a rag. *Louisiana Camp Meeting* seems a likely point for Maud de Forest's blues and gospel tunes, while *Les Pieds qui parlent* (literally, "talking feet") would have been another fast dance number, serving as an opportunity for Louis Douglas to show off his formidable tap-dancing skills. The title for the final scene, *Charleston Cabaret*, is a misnomer, in that the scene features neither the Charleston dance, nor singing in the style of a cabaret performance. To add to the confusion, the scene is supposed to be taking place in a night club similar to those found in Harlem, with the *danse sauvage* acting as entertainment for both the fictitious American audience and the actual Parisian viewers.<sup>47</sup> In reviews, discussion of the

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<sup>45</sup> Haney, *Naked at the Feast*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> Tableaux titles from Bennetta Jules-Rosette's essay in *Josephine Baker: Image and Icon*, ed. Olivia LaHs-Gonzalez (St. Louis, MO: Reedy Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Dalton and Gates Jr., "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen Through Parisian Eyes", 914.

music was couched in the same terminology that was employed to talk about the phenomenon of jazz generally – “frenetic”, “fever[ed]”, “epileptic”, and animalistic.<sup>48</sup>

<b>Scenes for <i>La Revue nègre</i></b>
New York Skyscraper [Sidney Bechet’s entrance]
Mississippi Steamboat Race [Baker’s entrance]
Louisiana Camp Meeting
Les Strutting Babies
Darkey Impressions
Les Pieds qui parlent [Louis Douglas’s tapdance]
Charleston Cabaret [The <i>danse sauvage</i> ]

Fig. 2  
 Scenes featured in *La Revue nègre*  
 From Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s essay in *Josephine Baker: Image & Icon*

***Le Tumulte Noir: A Study in Perception***

While no recordings of *La Revue nègre* exist today, much of the feel and tenor of the show was immortalized in Paul Colin’s *Le Tumulte Noir*, a portfolio of lithographs released in 1927 as a tribute to Josephine Baker and other major black performers working in Paris. This collection provides an important visual record of French engagement with the exotic black Other during this interwar era. The collection itself features 45 hand-colored plates, depicting Baker and other French stars of the film, theater and art worlds. Nearly all of the subjects in *Tumulte* are portrayed with dark skin, and often with the exaggerated facial features one associates with

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<sup>48</sup> Jordan, *Le Jazz*, 105.

Negro caricatures (e.g., enlarged red lips, round white eyes). What is notable, however, is that with the exception of Baker and a few imaginary characters, these figures are actually white people who have been “blackened up” by Colin. Because of this, *La Tumulte noir* provides an important reflection of one way in which French people mediated blackness in the 1920s.

The preface to the portfolio, written by Rip (the penname of author Georges Thenon), gives a tongue-in-cheek account of the state of Paris in the midst of her *tumulte noir* from 1925-27, referring to it as an “epidemic” (*épidémie*), a “wild madness” (*la rage*) that Paris had caught, and which drove its citizens to try “negrifying” themselves (“*nous nous négriâmes à qui mieux mieux*”).<sup>49</sup> The drawings that follow illustrate this claim, in that the viewer is presented with well-known figures who had “caught” négrophilia to such an extent that they had become black themselves.<sup>50</sup> This is supported by the language of pathology Thenon employs, albeit facetiously, throughout the introduction. Phrases like *vomito negro* and *delirium tremens* are invoked to communicate the suddenness and severity the craze held over Parisians, joking that, by its end, “fewer old ladies are dying from dancing the Charleston”. Instead of women tanning themselves (*se bronzer*) in an attempt to mimic Baker’s coloring, they demand “heliotherapy”, as though it were a medical procedure. It is “under [Colin’s] incisive pencil, which is both scalpel and lancet” that the madness of the black craze is both revealed to and preserved for future generations.<sup>51</sup> All of this suggests that “blackness” was seen not only as an immutable physical condition, but a communicable one as well, which could be “caught” either through association with or imitation of “African” behaviors. One no longer has to have black skin in order to be

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<sup>49</sup> [Paul Colin], Josephine Baker and La Revue nègre: Paul Colin’s Lithographs of *Le Tumulte Noir* in Paris, 1927, trans. and ed. Harriet Welchel, introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Karen C. C. Dalton (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1998), 14.

<sup>50</sup> Much of the information in this paragraph is drawn from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s and Karen C.C. Dalton’s introduction to *Josephine Baker and La Revue nègre*.

<sup>51</sup> Georges Thenon, introduction to *Josephine Baker and La Revue nègre*, 1927, 14/63.

“African”, the logic being that while all dark-skinned people are “African”, not all “Africans” are black (e.g. white people dancing the Charleston or participating in drum circles).

Capturing movement generally, and dance in particular, is a dominant theme throughout the portfolio. In the depictions of his various subjects, Colin often uses contorted forms and faces, and elements of the grotesque; however, he also employs an incredible delicacy of line and form to achieve his ultimate goal of capturing movement. An excellent demonstration of these two approaches comes from a comparison of plates 18 (Figure 3) and 22 (Figure 5). Plate 18 is a drawing of the star of the Folies-Bergère, Mistinguett. Though known for her blonde hair and elegant dress on stage, Colin presents her in a wildly contorted pose, elbows and knees creating sharp points at odd angles. She grins madly, lips lined with red, her one visible blue eye rolled almost into the back of her head, the other hidden by the brim of a crushed top hat. Against the dark skin Colin has given her, her distinctive blonde hair looks like a matted straw wig. Breasts bared and legs akimbo, her portrayal is a far cry from the long satin dress and feather plumes with which she was associated at the Folies-Bergère.



Fig. 3: Plate 18 ("Mistinguett")  
From Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte noir*

Such an image supports a third conceptualization of blackness, illustrated by Colin's transformation of his subjects from white to black. Not only is blackness something that is "caught" by intrigued white parties, it is also a state that can be imposed on someone, regardless of their actual skin color. Again, this shows that blackness is more than just a physical trait, but a means of conceptualizing those who operate outside accepted bourgeois practices or values. Black skin becomes a visual shorthand for communicating one's exotic qualities, behaviors or beliefs, and establishes an individual's status as a transgressor, just as the adoption and incorporation of African artistic styles served a similar purpose for avant-garde artists looking to distance themselves from the mainstream. These three notions of blackness (as an inherent physical trait, as a communicable state caught through interaction with blacks or whites who exhibit transgressive qualities, and as a state imposed by an outside viewer) are incredibly fluid, with one, more often than not, informing another aspect. Such crossing between ideas lends itself to a Venn diagram, which can be seen in figure 4.

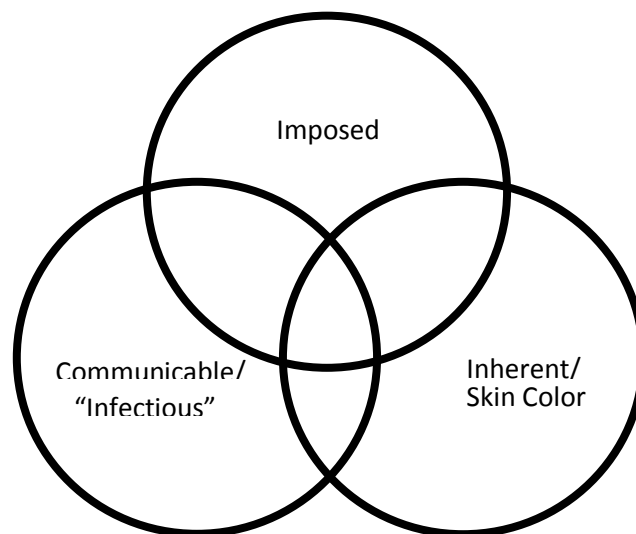


Fig. 4: French conceptualizations of blackness vis-à-vis *La Revue Nègre* and Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte Noir*.



Plate 22 comes as a marked contrast (figure 5). Portraying Josephine Baker in her own Folies-Bergère costume, the infamous banana skirt, the skin color this time is authentic, though the coloring between Mistinguett and Baker is almost indistinguishable. Unlike Mistinguett's flailing limbs, Baker's form creates a gentle arc, beginning with her outstretched left arm, moving through the torso and down the left leg. The bent right arm and leg convey a sense of motion without interrupting the line, creating the impression of her alighting delicately onto her left toe after leaping. Her face is situated in a *profil perdu*, eliminating the ability to convey many of the obvious visual signals for "blackness" (such as enlarged lips or rounded eyes). The end result is the complete opposite of Mistinguett's wild grotesquerie; instead, the viewer is presented with a graceful, even beautiful picture of blackness.

These two plates seem to present two contradictory notions of blackness. On the one hand, it is wild, uninhibited, savage, dangerous; on the other, it is attractive, sensual, elegant, modern. With a figure like Baker, though, it becomes clear that these two conceptions are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, can be inhabited simultaneously.



Fig. 5: Plate 22  
From Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte noir*

Plate 2 of the portfolio (figure 6) provides an excellent union of these two ideas. Featuring two unnamed characters, Colin presents a scene from a dance hall, a man and woman dancing together. The man's back is the focal point of the image, the only indication that he is black coming from the shading of the hand clasped over his white female partner's. This partner is almost entirely obscured by the man, her only visible features being her outstretched arm, an elbow, and a corner of her face. A bottle of champagne waits in a bucket of ice on a nearby table. The pair is outlined in a vivid, electric blue. The most striking element of the plate, however, is the ghostly image reflected in a mirror immediately behind the couple. The angles are now reversed, the woman's back to the viewer, but it is not the man's face we see; rather, a skull leers over her, and though in the "real" image the two seem closely intertwined, in the reflection, she almost appears to be shrinking away in horror.

The two contradictory ideas presented in Plates 18 and 22 are united in Plate 2. If one were to cover the reflection, only the image of an elegant, sensual dance would remain, charged by the blue and purple lines surrounding the couple. When the entire picture is revealed, the grotesque makes itself unmistakably recognizable, a *danse macabre* inverse of the "real" image. The point is not necessarily to equate blackness with death, but rather with danger, transgression, the thrill of doing what one knows they should not. In speaking of *La Revue nègre*, the *danse sauvage* is a perfect example of this: it was both wild and sensual, attractive by virtue of its scandalous, transgressive nature. This concept of death ties into nineteenth century Romantic notions of Death as a mysterious and sensual figure; dangerous, but not necessarily evil. Works such as Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* quartet and Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" are perfect examples of this portrayal of Death as seducer.



Fig. 6: Plate 2  
From Paul Colin's *Le Tumulte noir*

Applying this three-pronged approach to French conceptualization of blackness to *La Revue nègre* reveals the fluidity of the categories. Two prongs are applied easily enough; those of inherent blackness based on skin color, and imposed blackness, specifically an “African” blackness eliding the participants’ American origins. Their performance of jazz music would have further enhanced such an understanding, jazz being an allegedly nostalgic or atavistic outpouring by a people whose true home was believed to be in Africa.<sup>52</sup> While the contagious element of the approach seems to apply less clearly to *La Revue nègre*, the fact that people walked out during the *danse sauvage* implies a level of contagiousness; presumably, to sit through the remainder of the performance would taint or corrupt them. Conversely, for those seeking entertainment beyond the confines of bourgeois taste, this would have been an opportunity to dabble in the forbidden in a safe manner. While attending a black cabaret in Montmartre or one of the Dadaist *soirées nègres* would be straying too far from the dictates of the mores of middle-class good taste, the opportunity to watch wild “Africanness” play out within the confines of the theatre stage, seated safely in one’s chair, allowed for a safer form of interaction while maintaining a comfortable distance.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

Many questions still persist at the end of this study. One of the primary issues faced in conducting research for this paper was that of a lack of primary-source documents, particularly scores and playbills for the show. Though many accounts confirm that Williams was hired specifically as the show’s composer, it’s difficult to ascertain what, if anything, the band would have been playing from for their performances. Had Williams composed and orchestrated

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<sup>52</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 90.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the *soirées nègres*, see Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 57.

specific parts for each instrument? Or were they following lead sheets, and essentially improvising over a set melody? Did Williams compose new tunes for the show, or, in keeping with the sort of “best of black theater” vibe of the show, did he write arrangements for pre-existing tunes of the type that would have been featured in this sort of performance? Without playbills or scores, it is also difficult to know to what extent Baker’s first show at the Folies-Bergère, *La Folie du Jour*, borrowed from material originally used in *La Revue nègre*. The banana skirt dance, with which Baker is so readily associated today, is an obvious reference to the *danse sauvage*, and Williams later went on to compose songs for her at the Folies. Whether or not he recycled songs from *La Revue nègre* is unclear.

What we can establish, however, is a better sense of how French colonialist excursions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries launched a widespread fascination amongst Parisians for black peoples and cultures. The opening of sub-Saharan Africa to Western Europe in the later nineteenth century began the first exchanges between these two cultures. Such exchanges fueled the public imagination back in Paris, whether they were based in reality (such as the museum exhibits of African masks and fetishes at the Musée Trocadéro) or entirely in fantasy (Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions d’Afrique*, an avant-garde play conceived entirely around Western imaginings about Africa, being an excellent example).<sup>54</sup> Parisians, confronted by changing relations with their colonial subjects and a post-war disenchantment with older European modes of expression, sought escapist relief and artistic renewal in an imaginary African playground.

Following World War I, however, the arrival of black American soldiers complicated this exchange by confronting white Parisians with a real blackness that challenged the romanticized notions that had been developed over several decades. Rather than attempt to incorporate these

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 86.

new notions of blackness, as dictated and created by actual black people, Parisians instead transposed their enduring colonially-inflected constructions onto these black American expatriates. Instead of being accepted as Americans, they were seen as African hostages, who, even as third or fourth generation Americans, still longed to return to their native Africa. Jazz, being rooted in their genetic makeup, was a natural outpouring of their longing to return home.<sup>55</sup> In this way, Parisians were able to make black Americans conform to their well-established ideas regarding blackness (that is, as something distinctively “African” and thus conquerable by the west).

*La Revue nègre* neatly straddles this line. Featuring black American performers and a program deeply rooted in American minstrelsy and black vaudeville, the show’s most famous number was in fact a colonially-influenced creation, featuring black bodies on display for the entertainment and vicarious pleasure of its white audience. Sentiments regarding this show, and blackness in general, were multifaceted, with different perceptions often overlapping and informing one another. While conservatives objected to the “contagious” quality often associated with “African”-influenced dance and music, the avant-garde and the bourgeoisie embraced it as an opportunity to escape the everyday and to participate in an “African” fantasy world of their creating. Caroline Dudley Reagan arrived in Paris at the peak of Parisian fascination with blackness, a phenomenon which Josephine Baker was able to leverage into an entire career. *La Revue nègre* therefore serves as an important example of various social and artistic currents that allowed the French cultural fascination with blackness to translate into a popular and commercial stage success.

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<sup>55</sup> Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 90.

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