



## Article

# “The Whole Ensemble”: Gwendolyn Bennett, Josephine Baker, and Interartistic Exchange in Black American Modernism

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**Abstract:** Since her debut in Paris in 1925 and meteoric rise to stardom, views of Josephine Baker have been dominated by the white artists and audiences who constructed her as an exotic “Other”. This article revisits the phenomenon of “La Bakaire” from the perspective of a Black female artist who witnessed her performance first-hand and participated in the same Jazz Age projects of fashioning New Negro womanhood and formulating Black Deco aesthetics. When Gwendolyn Bennett saw Baker perform, she recognized her as a familiar model of selfhood, fellow artist, and member of a diasporic Black cultural community. In her article “Let’s Go: In Gay Paree”, July 1926 *Opportunity* cover, and “Ebony Flute” column, she utilizes call and response patterns to transform racialized sexual objectification into collective affirmation of Black female beauty and artistry. The picture that emerges from Bennett’s art and writing is one of communal practices and interartistic expression, in which Baker joins a host of now-forgotten chorus girls, vaudeville actors, jazz singers, musicians, visual artists, and writers participating in a modern renaissance of Black expressive culture.

**Keywords:** Gwendolyn Bennett; Josephine Baker; Harlem Renaissance; New Negro movement; Black American modernism; Art Deco; Black Deco; poetry; visual arts; performing arts; interartistic; transmedia; call and response



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## 1. Introduction

When Josephine Baker took the stage at the Folies Bergère in Paris in 1926, wearing little more than a banana skirt, she electrified European audiences (Figure 1). She performed the “Danse Sauvage” with frenetic speed and uninhibited eroticism. Her exuberance was infectious, her style utterly captivating. Baker’s image—glossy black hair; sultry, kohl-lined eyes; sensuous smile; and shimmering brown skin—circulated widely via posters and periodicals. These posters frequently reduced her to racist caricatures, as in examples below (Figure 2). Nevertheless, such publicity minted her status as a Jazz Age icon, a “Black Venus”, a “Creole Goddess”, the very incarnation of European fantasies and desires.

In the white imagination, Baker defied classification, upsetting hierarchies of race, gender, and power, and blurring the border between demonic and divine. A French journalist wondered, “Was she horrible, delicious? Black white?... Woman, other?... Dancer, fugitive?” (qtd by Cheng 2010, p. 5). A Parisian paper declared her “the most radiant of all temptresses ever to grace the Paris stage... A sinuous idol who enslaves and incites all mankind” (qtd by Murari 2008). Much has been said about Baker’s galvanizing impact on modernist writers, architects, and artists—a topic brilliantly illuminated by Anne Anlin Cheng in *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*. Ernest Hemingway declared her “the most sensational woman anybody ever saw”, Alexander Calder made wire sculptures of her, Le Corbusier composed a ballet for her, Adolph Loos designed a house for her, and Henri Matisse hung a life-size cutout of her in his bedroom (Zeck 2014; Cheng 2010, p. 6). But white men were not the only people in the room where it happened: African American artist and writer Gwendolyn Bennett also witnessed Baker’s iconic performance at the Folies Bergère. She was not the only Black woman writer to take interest; according to Cheryl A. Wall, “Baker’s European stardom was... the talk of black America” and likely influenced

Nella Larsen's portrayal of Helga in her 1928 novel *Quicksand* (Wall 1995, p. 107).<sup>1</sup> But Bennett was unique in responding directly to the Baker sensation in multiple media forms: a typewritten but unpublished article entitled "Let's Go: In Gay Paree!"; a cover illustration for the July 1926 *Opportunity*; and her *Opportunity* column "The Ebony Flute".

Bennett's transmedia representations resist the white-dominated international discourse of the 1920s shaping Baker's image as an exotic, Primitivist "other". Instead of being fascinated by Baker's otherness, Bennett recognized her as a familiar model of Black female selfhood. John Coltrane once said that when a Blues singer sang "I", the audience heard "we", and Hazel Carby argues that this effect was especially powerful for female Blues singers: when they said "I", "many women heard the 'we'" (Carby 1999, pp. 12, 18). Similarly, when Josephine Baker performed, Gwendolyn Bennett saw, heard, and felt "we". She translated that "we" into her art and writing, using call and response patterns from African diasporic musical, civic, and religious practices to affirm a sense of community and connection.



**Figure 1.** Josephine Baker in a banana skirt from the Folies Bergère production "Un Vent de Folie". Wikimedia Commons, Walery (1927). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Baker\\_Banana.jpg&oldid=471910353](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Baker_Banana.jpg&oldid=471910353) (accessed on 1 March 2021).



**Figure 2.** Paul Colin (1925), posters for “La Revue Nègre” (1925) and Bal Nègre (1927) at the Champs Elysées Music Hall in Paris; poster for the Josephine Baker Review at the Johann Strauss Theater in Vienna (artist unknown, n.d.). Courtesy Estate of Paul Colin/ Artists. Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP.

Bennett’s reasons for emphasizing Baker’s role in a larger Black arts community were both cultural and personal. According to pioneering Bennett scholar Sandra Govan, “the sense of shared sensibilities, mutual responsiveness and group inspiration was... a dominant modus operandi” among younger artists of the Harlem Renaissance. It was especially important to Bennett, who thrived in an artistic network that included Countee Cullen, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, Hugh Jackman, Langston Hughes, Eric Walrond, and Wallace Thurman. Recalling the collaborative spirit among Black artists of the era, Bennett told Govan, “The idea that you had to write or paint never existed because your peers were your inspiration” (qtd by Govan 1980, p. 115) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Gwendolyn Bennett (center) with a group of friends, c. 1920s. “Gwendolyn Bennett with a group of friends (n.d.): Charley Boyd, Hoggie Payne, Jayfus Ward, ‘The Fat One’ Hoffman and ‘Bon Bon’ Simmons’”. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e970b1c0-967a-0131-026b-58d385a7bbd0> (accessed on 21 December 2021).



A talented, versatile artist and writer, Gwendolyn Bennett was a rising star of the New Negro movement in the 1920s (Figure 4). She studied fine arts at Columbia University and became the first Black graduate of the Pratt Institute. At only 22, she was hired by Howard University to teach in their newly formed fine arts department. The next year, she won a sorority scholarship to study art in Paris, where she mingled with Ernest Hemingway, Henri Matisse, Paul Robeson, Gertrude Stein, and other modernist celebrities. Her art, poetry, and other writings appeared in the most important race magazines of the day, *The Messenger*, *Opportunity*, and *Crisis*, and in the influential anthologies, Countée Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927), Charles S. Johnson's *Ebony and Topaz* (1927), and James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931). She co-edited and contributed to the celebrated Black arts magazine *Fire!!* (1926) and wrote a monthly arts column for *Opportunity* called "The Ebony Flute" (1926–1928). But in the 1930s, Bennett began to fade from the spotlight, her creativity hindered by personal and political crises: financial struggles, marital troubles, harassment from both the KKK and FBI, and other intersectional obstacles. Despite efforts by scholars such as Sandra Govan, Maureen Honey, Nina Miller, and Belinda Wheeler to restore her legacy, including the 2018 publication of her *Selected Writings*, Bennett remains an understudied figure in the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 4.** Gwendolyn Bennett, Columbia University (1924, summer). Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books Library, Yale University. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2036373> (accessed on 1 March 2021).

The neglect of Bennett—a “renaissance woman” skilled in painting, graphic art, batik, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—is surprising given the sustained critical interest in artistic cross-fertilization in the Harlem Renaissance. Beginning in the early 2000s, scholars unleashed a stream of studies analyzing the interplay of words and images in constructions of the New Negro in literature and visual art,<sup>3</sup> with a corollary current examining music and performing arts.<sup>4</sup> These studies have deepened our understanding of the “interartistic” exchanges that shaped the Harlem Renaissance, yet as Martha Nadell points out, the goal of a “common vocabulary” for discussing “the cross-fertilization in music, literature, art and

other forms of black creative expression” remains “elusive” (Nadell 2004, p. 8). In addition, although many of these studies mention Bennett, they rarely scrutinize her interartistic practices. Literary scholars draw attention to her versatility as an artist and writer, but tend to focus on the painterly qualities of her poetry, while art historians examine how her poems inform her few surviving artworks.<sup>5</sup> Building on their work and contributing to the larger goal of considering not only words and images, but also what W.J. T. Mitchell calls “the whole ensemble of *relations* between media” (Mitchell 1994, p. 94), this essay puts the spotlight on Bennett as a creator and interpreter of African American cultural forms who was keenly attuned to new stylistic and aesthetic trends in literature, art, music, fashion, and dance.

Though Bennett’s primary *métier* was words and images, she joined other early twentieth-century Black theater and performing artists in the effort to “transform the image of black culture from minstrelsy to sophisticated urbanity” (Krasner 2002, p. 10). She examines Baker’s appearances on stage and in newspapers. She evokes her in drawings, poems, and essays. In her interartistic responses to Josephine Baker, Bennett adopts strategies from verbal, visual, and performing arts to extricate the dancer from the racist arenas of minstrelsy and Primitivism and position her within an ensemble of talented artists on a sophisticated, urban, international stage (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Josephine Baker (center) and the Revue Nègre troupe of performing artists (1925). Copyright unknown.

In what follows, I analyze Gwendolyn Bennett’s transmedia representations of Josephine Baker to show how she counters stereotypes of racial otherness and affirms a Black, female “we”. Following Gloria T. Hull, Cheryl A. Wall, Sandra Y. Govan, Maureen Honey, and other feminist scholars who insist on the need to analyze the work of women artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the contexts of the intersectional barriers they faced, I

intersperse analyses of Bennett's responses to Baker with biographical interludes that show how her work, framed in the context of lived experiences, opens up a more complex story of artistic aspiration and creative expression in the face of external barriers and attendant internal conflicts. As Govan and Michael Daniel observe, "Few artists can work, let alone work well, under the kind of pressure that beset Gwendolyn Bennett. She started out with three strikes against her: she was black, a woman, and an artist" (Daniel and Govan 1987, p. 9). In her efforts to actualize herself as an artist, Bennett depended on artistic community and found an inspiring model of New Negro womanhood in Josephine Baker. Jayna Brown argues that "the black female dancer was a potent figure of self-reclamation for black American artists, writers, and intellectuals", and that is certainly the case for Bennett, whose representations of Baker contribute to her own artistic development as well as to the larger New Negro project of "collective self-fashioning" (Brown 2008, pp. 190–91).

Bennett's transmedia responses to Baker also shed light on the interartistic dimensions of her more well-known poetry, which is noted for its "visual sensibilities"—"as though she were painting with words", using "verbal brush strokes" and "visual artistry" to create "a verbal tapestry" (Langley and Govan 2010, p. 9; Honey 2016, p. 105; Miller 1999, p. 221). In addition to its visual effects, her poetry draws upon music, dance, and performance, emphasizing song, rhythm, and movement.<sup>6</sup> For example, her 1923 poem "Heritage" evokes the figure of the Black female dancer in a project of self-reclamation that culminates in a communal affirmation of a shared cultural inheritance (Bennett 2018, p. 24):

I want to see lithe Negro girls,  
Etched against the sky  
While sunset lingers.

As art historian Carolyn Goesser points out, this poetic image prefigures Bennett's July 1926 *Opportunity* cover illustration (Goesser 2007, p. 191). The illustration, which I examine in Part 3 in connection with Josephine Baker and Black Deco, incorporates a chorus of semi-nude dancers shimmying in front of a stylized Africanist backdrop. Like the illustration, the poem emphasizes the visual artifice of the "etched" scene, representing Africa as an imagined space that stimulates the modern imagination, rather than an authentic, primitive place.

In the final stanza, Bennett puts the idealized African scenes in sharp relief against the contingencies of the present day (Bennett 2018, p. 24):

I want to feel the surging  
Of my sad people's soul  
Hidden by a minstrel-smile.

The ironic revelation of the last line exposes how Primitivist performances may be misconstrued by white audiences who see the "minstrel-smile" but fail to detect more complex expressions of pain, desire, and aspiration. The poem strikes a balance between the desire to extricate "my sad people's soul" from the legacies of slavery and white supremacy, and the urge to connect "lithe Negro girls" to an African heritage in order to affirm their beauty.

Bennett's 1925 poem "Song", published in Alain Locke's landmark anthology *The New Negro*, similarly features "A dancing girl with swaying hips" in a lyric that blends various African American musical traditions (Bennett 2018, pp. 25–26). Bennett incorporates the sounds and rhythms of sorrow songs, folk tunes, work songs, lullabies, and jazz into the continuous present of a modern medley that concludes on an upbeat note:

Sing a little faster,  
Sing a little faster,  
Sing!

Both the anaphoric repetition and the emphatic exclamation echo Langston Hughes's poem "Danse Africaine" (Hughes 1922): "The low beating of the tom-toms,/The slow beating of the tom-toms... /Dance!" Although Bennett's poetry has occasionally been belittled as



imitative, it is better understood as responsive and synergistic, reflective of her sensitivity to the artistic currents of her time. She operated like an antenna, picking and recombining emerging signals from across the arts in her own transmedia work. Just as her poems sample sounds and images from the poetry of Hughes, Cullen, and others, her responses to Baker echo the performer's style, rhythm, and tempo.

Rather than measuring Gwendolyn Bennett against the ill-fitting, individualistic standard of the mythic modernist artist, we can better appreciate her as a member of an extraordinary Harlem Renaissance ensemble—a chorus that included Josephine Baker and many other talented Black chorines who, though unrecognized today, were essential to the production. Bennett's transmedia responses to Baker, which I turn my attention to now, adopt strategies from verbal, visual, and performing arts in order to resist the racist images that pervaded both popular media and the fine arts in the 1920s. She combats crude stereotypes with multidimensional portraits, depicting Baker-esque figures in drawings that evoke dancing, poems that describe etchings, essays that resound with jazz rhythms, and articles that conjure conversation. In the process, she develops a powerful interartistic vocabulary for composing sophisticated images, compelling stories, and infectious rhythms that affirm Black beauty, artistry, and humanity. She draws upon this verbal, visual, musical, and gestural vocabulary to create vivid portraits of an exceptionally talented Black female performer and the broader ensembles and diasporic communities in which she took part.

## 2. The Article

### 2.1. *Call and Response at the Folies Bergère*

Bennett's article "Let's Go: In Gay Paree!" is less about Josephine Baker than about the transatlantic Baker sensation (Figure 6).<sup>7</sup> She situates the celebrated performer within a long tradition of unnamed chorus dancers and among the diverse ensemble of *La Revue Nègre*, only to extol her transcendent talents. This strategy has a twofold effect: it embeds the superstar within a constellation of artists of color, and it whets readers' appetite for her appearance in the spotlight.

Bennett begins by identifying the origins of the Charleston in the unsung arena of nameless chorus girls who took the first steps of the dance. She credits the "second rate vaudeville actresses" who dominated the music halls and whose fast kicking and shimmying attracted large, appreciative audiences to the revues. These interchangeable performers—"Tille so-and So" and "Mollie O-what-Not"—made headlines in the European editions of American newspapers, paving the way for the "present-day madness" that took hold in Paris on or about October 1925, when Baker debuted with *La Revue Nègre* at the Folies Bergère (Bennett 2018, p. 156). Bennett recognizes that, despite her stardom, "Baker was really just one of the many women working in chorus lines during the 1920s and 1930s", or as one dancer put it, "She was just a chorus girl, baby, we all was chorus girls" (Brown 2008, p. 200).

In crediting Black chorus girls for germinating a major new cultural form, Bennett anticipates a central claim of Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls: Black Woman Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Brown 2008). This study validates the cultural work of Black female performers whose bodies in motion shaped ideas of the modern and experiences of modernity. Brown does not just study Black female dancers' galvanizing, often mystifying effects on white audiences, but considers them in relation to one another, performing together and mentoring one another. In these collaborative ensembles, originality was less prized than the ability to pick up, mimic, and put a fresh spin on an already established move. Artistic innovation was a mobile, grassroots affair, rather than the creation of an individual genius, as Brown explains: "Cultural forms traveled in and between the streets, the club and cabaret, the stage. Artistic expressions are developed in motion; they have no single originating site" (Brown 2008, p. 5).

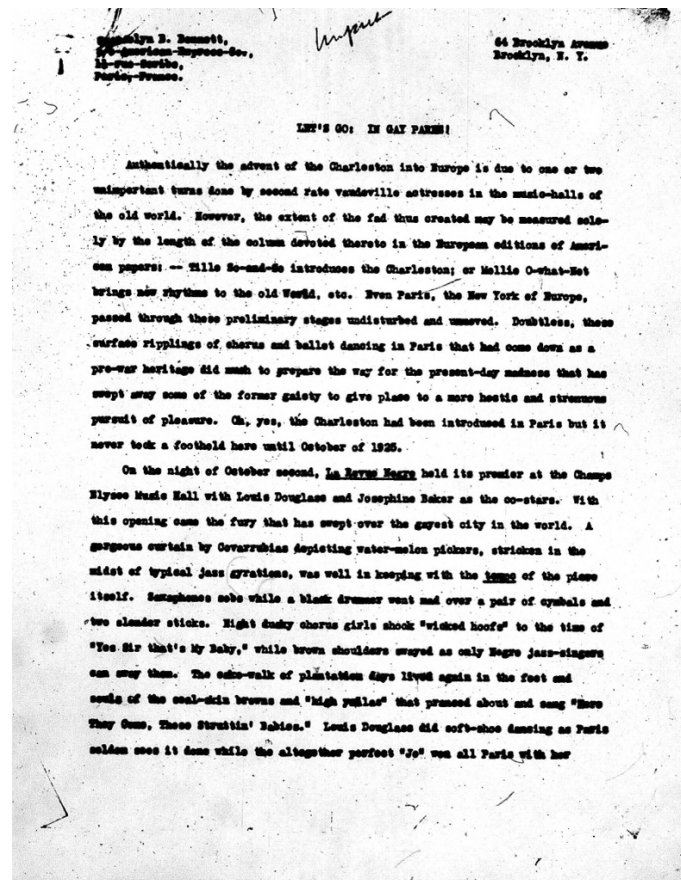


Figure 6. Gwendolyn Bennett, typescript of "Let's Go: In Gay Paree!" (n.d.). Gwendolyn Bennett Papers (1916–1981). Sc Micro R-4846. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The New York Public Library.

When Bennett turns her attention to Baker's Paris debut, she emphasizes the communal nature of Black performing arts by situating the dancer within a dynamic ensemble of many moving parts, including co-star Louis Douglass, set designer Miguel Covarrubias, a "sobbing" saxophonist, a Black drummer, "eight dusky chorus girls", and several "brown-shouldered" jazz-singers:

On the night of October second, *La Revue Nègre* held its premier at the Champs-Élysées Music Hall with Louis Douglass and Josephine Baker as the co-stars. With this opening came the fury that has swept over the gayest city in the world. A gorgeous curtain by Covarrubias depicting water-melon pickers, stricken in the midst of jazz gyrations was well in keeping with the tempo of the piece itself. Saxophone sobs while a black drummer went mad over a pair of cymbals and two slender sticks. Eight dusky chorus girls shook "wicked hoofs" to the time of "Yes Sir that's My Baby", while brown shoulders swayed as only Negro jazz-singers can sway them. The cake-walk of plantation days lived again in the feet and souls of the seal-skin browns and "high yallas" that pranced about and sang "Here They Come, Those Struttin' Babies". Louis Douglass did soft-shoe dancing as Paris seldom sees it done while the altogether perfect "Jo" won all Paris with her adorable mimicry. And through all its wealth of color there pounded the mad rhythm of "Hey, Hey! Bump-ty-Bum! Hey, Hey!" (Bennett 2018, pp. 156–57)

Bennett engages in her own fast-paced verbal dance, mimicking the Primitivist discourse that posits Black performance as a spontaneous, atavistic expression of a primal past, whether African-born, Southern plantation-based, or some phantasmic merging of both. Yet as she mimes this well-worn vocabulary, she ironically distances herself from its underlying



Primitivist assumptions, putting animalistic terms such as “wicked hoofs” in scare quotes that highlight the artifice, and calling attention to Baker’s “adorable mimicry” of minstrel show motifs. *La Revue Nègre*’s pounding rhythm is a work of artistry rather than the natural expression of a primitive race, and their color is a source of “wealth”. Bennett’s language both describes and adopts the Revue’s strategy of exploiting and subverting Primitivist stereotypes by recalibrating them in a distinctly modern, ironic, energetic style.

*La Revue Nègre* issues a powerful call that elicits a participatory response from Bennett. She feels the call of the music and dance, and responds in kind with an enthusiastic “Hey, Hey! Bump-ty-Bum! Hey! Hey!” This response—variations of which punctuate the end of four of the remaining five paragraphs—is not irrational nonsense, but a sensory and sensible reaction to an exhilarating performance. Such call-and-response patterns have deep roots in African American work songs, religious services, and civic events. For example, at African American church services, congregants often utter spontaneous expressions from of “um-humm”, “preach it”, and “Praise God!” mid-sermon or mid-prayer. Bennett’s “Hey, Hey!” is a similar act of joining in and affirmation, a vocal gesture of participation in a communal tradition that moves her body, mind, and soul.

Bennett pokes fun at the “consternation” and categorical confusion expressed by white critics unfamiliar with such uninhibited expression: “they had never known such madness, never dreamed such abandon” (Bennett 2018, p. 157). She caricatures their reactions, as they debate whether *La Revue Nègre* reflects an authentic expression of “the primitive souls of Negroes” or the dangerous, corruption “American Negroes” who were “not truly Negroes but ‘mulattos’ or international hybrids”. The inability to decide “whether to accept or reject the new Negro Jazz” locks white critics in a state of mental confusion and paralysis.

Meanwhile, European audiences jam the music hall with “roof-splitting applause”. Rather than being mentally perplexed, theater-goers are physically caught up in the “infectious rhythm of the Charleston”, which “creep[s] into the soles of French feet...” (Bennett 2018, p. 157). Bennett is having fun here, punning on “soles” rather than “souls” to suggest that this new music is less an authentic expression of Negro primitive rhythms than a fast-paced, modern tempo that quickly moves across cultures, races, and languages: “Hey, Hey! With a French accent became the word of the day”.

Bennett explains how the “contagion of the Charleston” spread from America to Paris, Germany, and Russia, infecting everyone who came into contact with it. “Every member of the Revue Nègre cast became a Charleston teacher. Every dance academy in Paris became a Charleston center” (Bennett 2018, p. 157). Everyone—Black or white, elite or working class—was dancing the Charleston: “The Coliseum reverberated with the same mad rhythm as store-clerks and stenographers had their night out”. In contrast to white anxieties about dangerous mixing and contamination, Bennett celebrates the “contagion” as a transatlantic, democratic dissemination of energy and pleasure. All people, regardless of race, class, or nationality, get caught up in the irresistible rhythms of “bumpty-bump, hey-hey!” Dance troupes disband and reform, travel to Europe and return to America, and “Even as they find their way back across the ocean they leave their trace behind them” (Bennett 2018, p. 158). Such traces, movements, and mutations are what keep the dance alive, vital, and current: “And so the dance goes on... Let’s go, Charleston now!”.

So contagious is the excitement, so irresistible are the rhythms and tempos of this new, modern jazz, that Bennett slips in and out of the present tense in the last paragraph of her essay—the moment when Josephine Baker finally takes the spotlight: “And mirabile dictu, Saturday night, April twenty-fourth, marks the final coronation of the Negro as jazz dancer. Josephine Baker, the dusky star, opened at the Folies Bergère as the premier of the program” (Bennett 2018, p. 158).

## 2.2. Biographical Interlude: Finding Community in Paris

It is not surprising that Gwendolyn Bennett slips into the present tense when describing Baker, since she actually was present at Folies Bergère to witness the iconic banana-skirt dance firsthand. Bennett had sailed solo to Paris in June 1925, funded by a scholarship

from the Delta Sigma Theta sorority (Govan 1980, p. 70). Baker arrived in September of the same year, traveling with a troupe of Black performing artists (Sharpley-Whiting 2015, p. 40). Bennet was 23 years old at the time, Baker only 19.

Both artists were among the first of a small but significant wave of African American women who migrated to the City of Light in the 1920s to seek freedoms and opportunities unavailable to them in America. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting describes this transatlantic migration: “Between the first and second World Wars, the period some call the Jazz Age, 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” (Sharpley-Whiting 2015, p. 5). France represented a reprieve from the constraints, violence, and humiliation of American racism:

The French were not colorblind; they were simply not color averse. Throw in a dash of French exoticism and paternalism and Paris had the makings of a utopia for African Americans accustomed to slipshod and occasionally murderous treatment in their home country. There’s no place like home. And Paris was definitely unlike home—in a good way. (Sharpley-Whiting 2015, p. 7)

Performers, writers, and artists such as Ada “Bricktop” Smith, Lillian “Madam Evanti” Evans-Tibbs, Jesse Fauset, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Augusta Savage, and Laura Wheeler sailed to Paris to be liberated from racism, sexism, and class prejudices. In the U.S., Black women were assumed to be sexually licentious “jezebels” unless they conformed to narrow ideals of white middle-class femininity, but in Paris they could express themselves creatively and sexually with considerably less fear or shame. The social freedoms of Paris delighted Josephine Baker: “I saw couples *kissing* in the streets. In America, you went to jail for that. It was true—this was a free country. France was a wonderful place!” (qtd by Sharpley-Whiting 2015, p. 40). Bennett enjoyed dancing in integrated public spaces, reporting: “Paris is Charleston mad. I who never did the Charleston in my life am now dancing it in the best of Parisian places. It’s done here you know”.<sup>8</sup> Blues singer Alberta Hunter sums up the spirit of *la liberté française*, rhapsodizing, “I am mad about the freedom of Paris. Color means nothing over here... Paris, in fact, all of France, is heaven on earth for the Negro man or woman” (qtd by Sharpley-Whiting 2015, p. 65).

But Paris was no “heaven on earth” for Bennett when she first arrived. She was greeted by bone-chilling rain and heart-aching homesickness, writing in her diary:

For two days now it has rained—the people tell me that this is typical Paris weather. A cold rain that eats into the very marrow of the bone... and I am alone and more homesick than I ever believed it possible to be. [...] at the Foyer [International des Étudiantes] they discourage my plans for studying art anywhere except at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art—which I think is silly! They talked to me as though I were a kid who had come here just to sort of dabble in art. And it rains... and I am cold and heartsick... and nearly starved... no umbrella, no coat except for my suit-coat—no one... Paris!!! (26 June 1925, Bennett 2018, p. 179)

Living alone “in a small, poorly lit pension”, Bennett also “faced the problem of having no studio to work from” (Govan 1980, p. 72), and the USD 1000 scholarship proved insufficient to cover her expenses. As she wandered the boulevards, visited art museums, attended her first opera, and discovered the beauty of Paris, she lamented her financial limitations: “Money is so necessary to make a place for beauty. Today when I so want to live and learn I am filled with sorrow to feel that money keeps me from so much” (Paris Diary, Sun. 2 August 1925, GBP-S).

Bennett missed the camaraderie of her circle of artist friends in Harlem. As Melissa Barton explains, she was plagued by fears of missing out on the exciting happenings there: “Please write to me”, “I’m starved for both news and companionship”, and “I would have loved to have been there” are frequent refrains in her letters. Separated from the inspiration

and support of the Harlem community, she questioned her worth as an artist, confiding to Countee Cullen:

Money is scarce and I am dreadfully lonely for home and friends... I am about as convinced as I can be that I can't write. I feel so close to real discouragement. (14 January 1926, [Bennett 2018](#), pp. 200–1)

She told Langston Hughes that she knew of no place so “joyous, yet so miserable” as Paris and admitted that she felt as if she had “no right to be here” (28 August 1925, qtd by Barton 2021). Three months into her stay, Bennett was so unhappy that she considered “buying immediate passage home” ([Govan 1980](#), p. 75).

Although Bennett’s loneliness and alienation are palpable in her Paris diary and letters, her writings also evince her sense of “fledgling independence” and driving ambition to “make a mark” as an artist ([Barton 2021](#)). She refused to give into homesickness or self-doubt, willing herself to take advantage of the unprecedented opportunities Paris offered her. Stoking her ambitions, her father predicted she would join the ranks of Michelangelo, Whistler, and Henry Tanner, the African American artist who launched his career from Paris in 1891 by studying at the Académie Julian. Bennett was determined to live up to her father’s high expectations. “Tanner became a touchstone for Bennett”, whose letters boast about taking classes at the art school he attended ([Barton 2021](#)).

Hungry for companionship, Bennett used her Harlem contacts to connect with fellow artists in Paris. Laura Wheeler was one of her first acquaintances and a balm to her loneliness, as she noted in her diary: “After dinner we had a long walk and talked of this and that, principally of artists and how they suffer in Paris. We shared many of the same attitudes together and this little tete-tete helped worlds!” (Paris Diary, Sun., 28 June 1925, GBP-S). When Paul and Essie Robeson arrived in November, she “horned in on all the wonderful places to which they were invited”, including tea at Sylvia Beach’s, where she met James Joyce, George Antheil, and Ernest Hemingway, whom she described as “a charming fellow—big an blustery with an out-doors quality about him coupled with a boyishness that makes him just right” (to Harold Jackman, 11 January 1926, GBP-B).<sup>9</sup> The Robesons took her to Gertrude Stein’s salon “and of course everybody was there”, and to Henri Matisse’s home, which “was like going to a holy shrine” (to Langston Hughes, 2 December 1925, [Bennett 2018](#), p. 199; to Jackman, 2 February 1926, GBP-B). They also introduced her to Konrad Bercovici and his family, who became “great friends” (to Jackman, 11 January 1926, GBP-B). By late October, she observed: “I’m beginning to people my world here with the same kind of ‘regular’ folks I knew in New York only none of them are colored. Queer, this!” (to Jackman, 27 October 1925, GBP-B). Eventually Bennett moved from her dim, cramped pension to 13 Rue De Salles, a hotel near Sylvia Beach’s bookstore *Shakespeare and Company* that served as a meeting place for artists ([Govan 1980](#), p. 72). She began visiting the bookstore daily and got to know Hemingway, who, when he heard about a prize offered by Boni and Liveright Publishers for the best work by a Negro writer, said to her, “Gee, I wish I were a Negro. I could use a thousand dollar prize” (qtd by [Govan 1980](#), p. 73).

Judging from Bennett’s letters and diaries, although her new white acquaintances “peopled her world” and supplied the camaraderie she craved, most did not seem to jell into friendships that endured beyond her Paris year. Perhaps their interest in Bennett was an expression of the curiosity and vogue among white folks for mingling with Black artists in Paris in the Jazz Age. Bennett’s most consistent source of joy in Paris came from seeing, listening, and dancing to Black musicians and performing artists, with whom she felt a deep kinship.

Bennett’s Paris diary documents the sense of inspiration, community, and belonging she gained through contact with other Black artists. She reflects on hearing her friend Louis Jones play the violin accompanied by a “Mr. Callilaux”: “It makes my heart sing with pride to know these musicians who are black and yet so wonderful” (2 August 1925, [Bennett 2018](#), p. 181). At the posh night resort “Les Acacias”, she “had one of the best times I’ve ever had—just dancing my life out for sheer love of movement” (8 August



1925, Bennett 2018, p. 182). She and a cohort of African American expatriates (“our folk”) regularly patronized popular restaurants and jazz clubs, where night-time revelries often lasted until morning (Figure 7):

Then at 4:15 a.m. to dear old Bricktop’s. The Grand Duc extremely crowded with our folk. Lottie Gee there on her first night in town and sings for “Brick” her hit from “Shuffle Along”—“I’m Just Wild About Harry”. Her voice is not what it might have been and she had too much champagne but still there was something very personal and dear about her singing and we colored folk just applauded like mad. (8 August 1925, Bennett 2018, p. 181)

The sense of shared culture and intimacy among “we colored folk” lifted her spirits, quickening her appreciation for the City of Light:

I shall never quite forget the shock of beauty that I get when the door was opened at “Brick’s” and as we stepped out into the early morning streets... looking up Rue Pigalle there stood Sacred-Heart... beautiful, pearly Sacre-Coeur as though its silent loveliness were pointing a white finger at our night’s debauchery. I wished then that so worthy an emotion as I felt might have been caught forever in a poem but somehow the muse refuses to work these days. (8 August 1925, Bennett 2018, p. 182)

Given her uncooperative muse and nagging self-doubts, it is not surprising that Bennett would be invigorated by Josephine Baker’s confident model of Black female artistry. She had heard about Baker long before seeing the performance, writing to Jackman: “Yes, there’s a ‘Revue Nègre’ in town. The white folks have gone wild about it. It has received wonderful reviews in the papers here. As yet I have not seen it. Shall be going in a day or two” (to Jackman, 27 October 1926, GBP-B). Seeing Josephine Baker perform—more than any other performer in Paris—snapped Bennett’s muse out of the doldrums and into action, inspiring her to write and draw.



**Figure 7.** Ada “Bricktop” Smith, owner, and others at Bricktop’s club Rue Pagalle, Paris (1932). The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6a352fe2-7ff9-8a42-e040-e00a18067cb6> (accessed on 1 March 2021).

### 2.3. Emulating Baker’s Image, Sound, and Movement in Words

The undated typescript manuscript of Bennett’s article “Let’s Go: In Gay Paree” was likely composed soon after she saw Baker perform and intended for publication in a newspaper like *Opportunity*, to which she also contributed cover art and poems during

her year abroad.<sup>10</sup> Bennett's verbal portrait of Baker emphasizes her beauty, poise, and confidence:

Josephine Baker, the dusky star opened at the Folies Bergère as the premier of the program. Her sleek brown body sways through the maze of white ones as night after night makes her more and more certain in her position as the idol of Paris. (Bennett 2018, p. 158)

Baker's self-possession is remarkable, as she navigates a "maze" of white bodies without getting lost. She stands out as a "dusky star" against a backdrop of whiteness, reversing the order of the Western universe with a Negro artist reigning over Europeans. Bennett represents Baker as a sophisticated, world-class Black performer who exploits and subverts Primitivist stereotypes. At first mention, "Jo" is surrounded by wide-eyed winks that call attention to her "adorable mimicry" of the Pickaninny motif.

Later in the essay, when Baker takes center stage, Bennett emphasizes her extraordinary artistry:

The inimitable "Jo" does a Charleston like no one else in the world, white or black. Her long shapely "n— legs" fly this way and that with a rhythm and beauty that is maddening. Her sleek black head turns this way and that as she twists her face into all sorts of ludicrous masks. With warmth and beauty she carries the rhythm of her race through a review that is world famous... Let's go, Jo! Hey, Hey! Bumpty-bump!! (Bennett 2018, p. 158)

Bennett extricates Baker from racial classifications by asserting that she is better than any dancer "black or white". Although she spells out the racist epithet used to describe Baker's legs, she denaturalizes the term by putting it in scare quotes. In Bennett's interpretation, Baker's facial distortions mimic and exaggerate the racialized performance vocabulary of minstrelsy, working "within and against familiar versions of racialized femininity" in an effort to liberate Black bodies from typecasts (Brown 2008, p. 190), and using dance, mime, and song to "wage resistance against the images that confined and demeaned her" (Wall 1995, p. 109). The heightened artifice produces a beauty of its own, Bennett suggests, even as Baker's hyperbolic gestures expose the artificiality of the racist stereotypes. In describing Baker's "ludicrous masks" and "adorable mimicry", Bennett anticipates Joan Riviere's 1929 exploration of "womanliness as a masquerade" and Jayna Brown's 2008 reframing of racial mimicry to account for the agency of Black women performers. Bennett recognizes in Baker the inherently performative nature of womanliness, particularly as it intersects with Blackness: the social imperative to perform within a pre-set gendered, racialized vocabulary, and the power that can be wielded from distortions and exaggerations of those cultural scripts.

For Bennett, what emerges from Baker's subversion of "ludicrous" stereotypes is a beautiful, distinctively modern contribution to a global Black musical tradition: "With warmth and beauty she carries the rhythm of her race through a revue that is world famous". Bennett positions Baker as contributing to the project of racial uplift; her individual traits become representative of the character of her race: her body parts stand for the whole of her people. As Henry Louis Gates explains, "such metonymic representation—the usual method of describing and defining African Americans—proceeds through a subtle dance of the literal and figurative possibilities of language. This metonymic representation moves from the physical features of the individuals presented to the 'mental image' of the race collectively" (qtd by Thaggert 2010, p. 10). Even as Bennett highlights the artistry, agency, and beauty that distinguishes Baker from the Revue Nègre ensemble, she emphasizes communal participation and enjoyment, concluding her essay by repeating the call and response pattern: "Let's go, Jo! Hey, Hey! Bumpty-bump!" She calls Baker by a nickname, as if she is a friend, and there is a sense of familiarity and belonging in the phrase. When Bennett watches Baker perform, she hears and sees a "we", recognizing herself and her race affirmed in the beauty and power of Baker's artistry.

### 3. The Illustration

#### 3.1. Gwendolyn Bennett, Josephine Baker, and Black Deco

Bennett's cover illustration for the July 1926 issue of *Opportunity* portrays an elegant Black woman, swaying to music in front of an Art Deco frieze in what appears to be a stylish nightclub or theater (Figure 8). The frieze depicts three semi-nude African female dancers, one of whom wears a banana skirt—a clear citation of Josephine Baker's "Dance Sauvage". Composed soon after Bennett attended the Folies Bergère in April 1926, the illustration reflects an almost immediate reaction to the Baker sensation, as well as a rapid response to the debut of Art Deco only months earlier at the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, a world's fair held in Paris from April to October 1925.



**Figure 8.** Gwendolyn Bennett (1926), cover design, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, July 1926. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. "Opportunity" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1926-07. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/99911ba0-39dc-0131-202e-58d385a7b928> (accessed on 1 March 2021).

The illustration demonstrates that, as I argued above, Bennett operated like a sensitive antenna picking up signals about emerging aesthetics and blending them in fresh, pleasing



compositions. In her embrace of popular styles and fashions, she does not fit the mold of the avant-garde genius who shatters bourgeois conventions of taste and representation. Nevertheless, she deserves recognition as an artist whose work synthesizes the styles of the era and documents a pivotal moment in art history. Her *Opportunity* cover is an important expression of Art Deco—and one of the few instances of “Black Deco” produced by a Black female artist in homage to one of her peers.

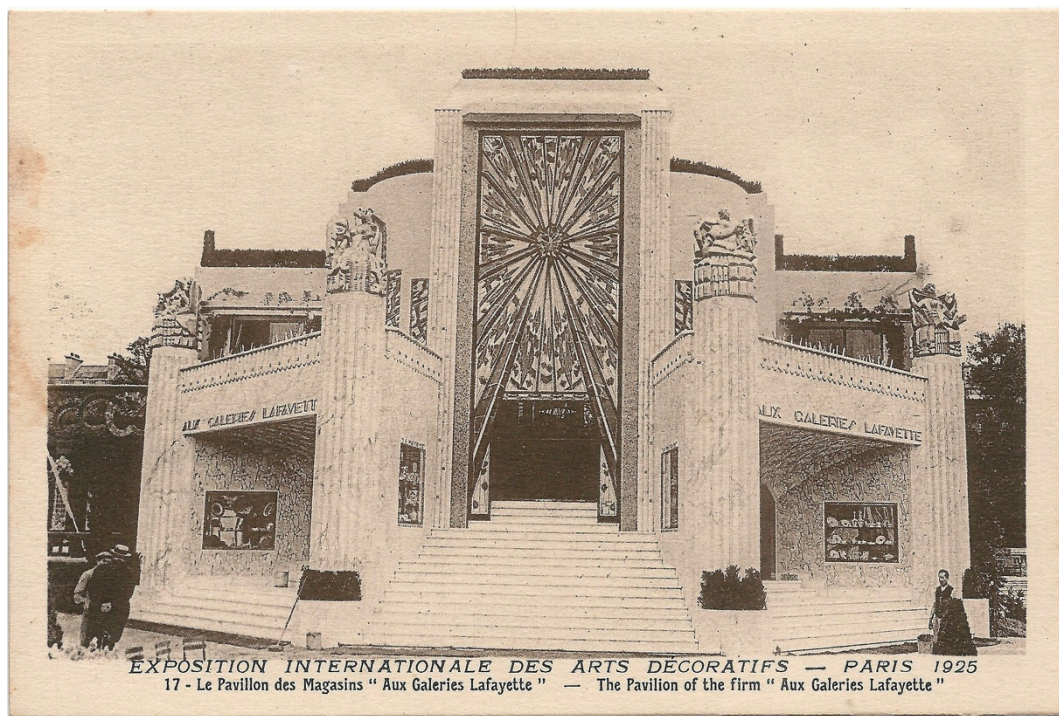
According to art historian Lucy Fischer, “The name Art Deco has come to signify a popular international trend that surfaced between 1910 and 1935 and affected all aspects of world design: fashion, crafts, housewares, jewelry, furniture, architecture, and interior decoration” (Fischer 2003, p. 11). The eclectic style taps mythic associations of “youth, glamour, modernity, exoticism, stardom, and femininity”, blending mechanical, industrial, and geometric elements with sumptuous materials and fine craftsmanship (Fischer 2003, pp. 4, 12–13). Think of the Chrysler Building, Radio City Music Hall, and Greta Garbo. Art Deco was the material embodiment of early twentieth-century faith in technological and social progress, in commerce and industry, in glamor and luxury, mass-produced and newly available to middle-class consumers. The futuristic style reacted against its predecessor, Art Nouveau, “known for its romanticism, sentimentality, asymmetry, intricacy, and biomorphism. ... In keeping with Deco’s start high-tech facades, color was often reduced to the basics: black, white, and silver” (Fischer 2003, p. 14). Bennett’s illustration documents the emergence of Art Deco by combining elements of Art Nouveau—the soft feminine curves and the organic forms of the rose and palm trees—with the geometric patterns of the rising sun and a striking black-and-white design.

The term “Art Deco”, coined in the 1960s, was an abbreviation of the International Exhibition of the Decorative Arts, the event that put the new style on an international stage. Irena Makaryk notes that the Expo was the only world’s fair ever “to take up the targeted goal of the creation of a new, distinctive style”, observing that its “impact is difficult to overestimate; indeed, historians claim that it was probably the most influential and certainly the largest exhibition of design ever held” (Makaryk 2018, pp. 4–5). The Exposition attracted 16 million visitors, including Bennett, to view exhibits of decorative arts from 20 countries and explore French department store pavilions displaying the latest designs in furniture, interior decor, and household gadgets and appliances (Figure 9).

If the 1925 Paris Exhibition was the altar at which the decorative arts married modernism and gave birth to Art Deco, then Black Deco was an offspring of this union. Rosalind Krauss uses the term “Black Deco” to describe “the decorative application of tribalizing detail to a stylized planar background” (Krauss 1985, p. 48), while Petrine Archer-Straw traces its development in more detail:

The first flush of African art’s influence on the Parisian avant-garde in the pre-war years developed after the war into a commercialised version of “all things African”, a sort of blackened version of Art Deco that debuted at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925. This “black deco” cousin was soon applied decoratively to many areas of Parisian lifestyle: furniture was embellished with animal skins and African designs; clothing stressed natural textiles and jungle pelts; jewellery boasted precious metals, gems and enamelling with jazzy contemporary designs. Black deco gradually settled into a style ripe for marketing, and black juxtaposed with white became the vogue. (Archer-Straw 2000)

Once Black Deco became fashionable, its artistic stock value plummeted. John Warne Monroe explains its devaluation, arguing that when the avant garde’s embrace of Art Nègrè was marketed and mass-produced as Black Deco in the 1920s, it lost its cultural caché: “What began as an avant-garde provocation made its way ever more deeply into the mainstream, and as such, came to look far more like a fashion trend than like a timeless example of high art” (Monroe 2019, p. 107).



**Figure 9.** Le Pavillon des Magasins “Aux Galeries Lafayette” (1925). Paris. Postcard. Pavillon des Magasins “Aux Galeries Lafayette”. Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Moderns. 3 July 1925. Public Domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris-FR-75-Expo\\_1925\\_Arts\\_d%C3%A9coratifs-pavillon\\_des\\_Galeries\\_Lafayette.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris-FR-75-Expo_1925_Arts_d%C3%A9coratifs-pavillon_des_Galeries_Lafayette.jpg) (accessed on 1 March 2021).

Classifying Black Deco with fashion and interior decorating, art historical accounts of the movement emphasize white artists and consumers’ appetite for tribal patterns and Primitivist motifs. As Petrine Archer-Straw points out, despite its focus on Black influences, this approach nevertheless recenters whiteness. While Black Deco is understood as an expression of the “craze for black culture” that took hold of Paris in the 1920s, she argues, this so-called “Negrophilia” has less to do with Black culture than with white people: “Negrophilia is thus about Western culture exploring its perceptions of difference in such a way that best reflects white people rather than their exoticised subjects” (Archer-Straw 2000). In focusing on the white appetite for Africanist aesthetics, art historical accounts of Black Deco overlook the agency of Black artists in defining the modern aesthetic. Black artists thus face a double jeopardy: their work is denigrated as a passing fad, and they are not credited as creators of a major international style.

If we accept Josephine Baker’s “status as a Euro-American icon of the Art Deco era” (Fischer 2003, p. 134), then we should also credit her as a progenitor of Black Deco, an artist who, in both her exhilarating performances and her glamorous image, merged modern aesthetics and technologies with Africanist tribal patterns and designs. Gwendolyn Bennett is another unacknowledged progenitor of Black Deco. By combining Africanist tropes with Art Deco aesthetics, her *Opportunity* illustration suggests that Primitivism is not a way of tapping a primal past, but a new technology of seeing, as well as a modern style and performance. Just as it is important to reassess Josephine Baker through the eyes of a fellow African American female artist, rather than through the white gaze, so we should consider Black Deco in relation to Black women artists who developed the style not as an atavistic fetish, but as a thoroughly modern, sophisticated way of seeing and representing Black female beauty.

### 3.2. Biographical Interlude: Discovering the Decorative Arts

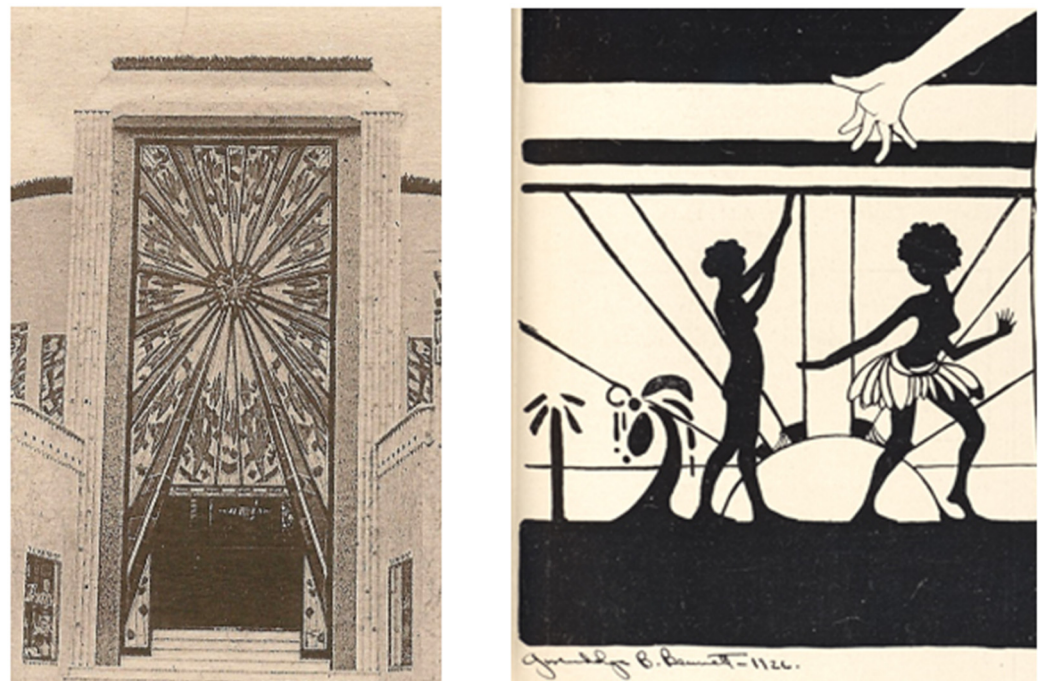
Bennett’s attraction to Black Deco was a natural outgrowth of her interest in the decorative arts. She chose batik as her specialization in art school, an indigenous craft



with applications for fashion, clothing, and interior decorating. Traditionally practiced by Indonesian women, batik may have seemed more attractive and accessible to her than the hallowed realm of oil painting, long dominated by European men. It was certainly more affordable. It even generated income for the cash-strapped artist during her Paris sojourn: she sent batiks to her mentor Charles Johnson, who arranged for their sale at a “fashionable gown shop” in New York (Paris Diary, 1 October 1925, GBP-S).

In keeping with her interest in the decorative arts, the first art school Bennett sought out in Paris was the École des Arts Décoratifs, and the first museum she visited was the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, recording exuberantly in her diary: “I walked there from the Quartier and back. The museum is a marvelous thing. Just think of being able to see Corot’s palette and hat and Delacroix’s brush and pipe. I felt fired with a new purpose to do and learn!” (Paris Diary, 30 June 1925, GBP-S).

One of Bennett’s first social engagements in Paris was attending the International Exposition of the Decorative Arts, which made a deep impact on her imagination. Indeed, the stylized sun adorning the entrance to the Aux Galleries Lafayette pavilion may have inspired the rising sun in the Art Deco frieze of her *Opportunity* illustration (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Details from Expo postcard and *Opportunity* cover illustration. Pavilion postcard detail compared to *Opportunity* illustration detail.

The Expo certainly shaped her understanding of what it meant to be “modern”, as well as her sense of her own developing artistic style, as she explained to Harold Jackman:

“... I too like the moderns although I don’t feel that I myself am one... at any rate not in painting. My batiks are more so. This year in Paris has been a revelation to me so far as modern work is concerned. Our American modernists are about a thousand years behind the Europeans. Why even interior decoration here has a decidedly modern twist to it. That was plainly visible through the exhibits at the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs this summer. I never saw such furniture. It was rather like the modern poet who says this sound of soft wind is love and its turnings are my darlings lips ... it was rather impressionism. They said here is bulk and we will call it desk or here is slimness and we will call it clock....” (to Jackman [“Rosebud”], 23 February 1926, [Bennett 2018](#), p. 202)



Bennett embraced the decorative arts as the vehicle through which she could make a mark as an artist, viewing her batiks as more “modern” than her paintings. Touring the Expo offered an especially significant “revelation” of “modern work”, as it illuminated a synergy between poetry, art, furniture, and design. It led her to the realization that various art forms were engaged in similar processes of transforming abstract concepts (love, bulk, slimness) into sensory and physical forms (wind, desk, clock). As an artist and writer, she was energized by such synesthetic processes. Such thoughts likely informed the synergy of music, dance, fashion, and visual art in her July 1926 cover illustration for *Opportunity*.

### 3.3. Drawing Josephine Baker into the Chorus

Bennett’s illustration evinces her rapid synthesis of Art Deco aesthetics but suggests a different relationship between ancient Africa and modernity than manifested in more typical Black Deco artifacts—one of kinship and affinity, rather than exoticism and otherness. The resemblance between the New Negro woman and the background dancers—similar poses, hand gestures, slender proportions, and natural, curly hair—creates a visual connection between African and modern. But what exactly is the nature of that connection? Is it one of ancient ancestry or modern sisterhood, of ambivalence or embrace? Despite her resemblance to the African dancers, the New Negro woman appears light-skinned, set off in stark relief against their dark silhouettes and the black background. There is also a class difference implied between the elegantly dressed middle class “New Negro” woman, who appears to be attending a performance, and the scantily clad dancers who provide the entertainment. How should we read this contrast?

In depicting a light-skinned model of Black female beauty, Caroline Goesser explains, Bennett seems to step in line with other African American women artists of the Harlem Renaissance, who “gravitated almost exclusively to representations of middle-class, light-skinned women” (Goesser 2007, p. 190). But Bennett goes against this grain by incorporating racialized imagery: “Particularly in her sensuality and engagement with the primitivist theme, Bennett’s woman articulates a different modern type... —one who is... clearly racialized. At the same time, she exhibits a reserve that complicates a seamless relationship with her ‘primitive’ past, as if to remind herself of her modern, ‘civilized’ identity” (Goesser 2007, pp. 190–91). Goesser suggests that the New Negro woman’s relationship to her African past is an ambivalent one, a connection that she, like Irene Redfield in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, feels but must repress in order to appear properly “civilized” by white, middle-class standards of femininity and sexual propriety.

Whereas Goesser sees ambivalence in Bennett’s illustration, I see congruence. The African dancers’ slim figures, lithe curves, and untamed curls echo those of the modern New Negro woman, who extends her graceful hands toward them. Rather than anxiously distancing herself from the African dancers, she appears to be eagerly joining their ensemble, reveling in sensuality, hearing the call of an intoxicating musical rhythm, and responding physically and emotionally. While the relationship between background and foreground could imply a genealogy from ancient to modern, the African dancers’ position within a stylish Art Deco frieze suggests that they are just as emblematic of modern Black female beauty and self-expression as the elegant woman in the foreground. Bennett may have “borrowed from the example of ancient Attic black-figure vases in placing her silhouette figural decoration in a white band on a black ground” (Goesser 2007, p. 79), but her African dancers are not trapped in a distant, antique past. Instead, they dance in front of a stylized backdrop, as if moving in the frames of a cinematic reel, illuminated by the spotlight of the stylized sun. Indeed, the setting evokes the stylized stage sets, dramatic lighting, and costumes designed for Josephine Baker. Similarly, the New Negro woman in the foreground does not repress her sexuality to conform to middle class standards, but openly indulges in erotic pleasure. She sways in a gauzy evening dress in the dark of night, a visual evocation of the “Night Woman” trope that Nina Miller identifies Bennett’s poetry: “Larger than life, the center of her world, even the matrix of that world itself, her position bears certain key resemblances to that of the bourgeois Negro Woman—but without the

strains of ‘exaltedness’” (Miller 1999, p. 217). Combining aspects of the “‘exalted Negro woman,’ icon of bourgeois gentility, and the primitive ‘Brown Girl,’ icon of racial authenticity”, Bennett’s Night Woman reveals the interdependence of “genteel and primitive femininities” (Miller 1999, p. 148). The collaboration between a middle-class theater goer and working-class chorus girls suggests an elasticity in class divisions. Just as Josephine Baker was able to move from poverty to international success and eventually marry into the aristocracy, the New Negro woman finds sisterhood and solidarity across class lines in a mutual affirmation of Black female beauty and sensuality.

Bennett casts her African figures not in the role of primitive ancestors, but as back up dancers in a multimedia performance of the modern, “New Negro” woman—a singular figure who is part of a larger ensemble. Taking a page from Baker’s playbook of gorgeous artifice, the image seems to say: don’t think you’re glimpsing an authentic, ancient African past; you’re in an exciting moment of modernity, tapping into the latest styles, rhythms, and movements. Hear the call, and respond in kind. In Bennett’s handling, Black Deco embodies a modern spirit of Black beauty and pride that is finding expression across the arts in music, art, and literature, as well as in fashion and popular dance.

#### 4. The Column

##### 4.1. *The Ebony Flute: “Literary Chit-Chat and Artistic What-Not”*

In August 1926, a month after her Black Deco illustration appeared on the cover of *Opportunity*, Bennett began writing her column “The Ebony Flute”, whose name she derived from William Rose Benet’s poem “Harlem” (Figure 11).<sup>11</sup> The monthly column, which she described as “literary chit-chat and artistic what-not”, tracks developments in Black arts with a mix of friendly gossip, rhapsodic appreciation, and sharp-witted critique (August 1926, p. 260). The column is itself a form of call and response—a call for community engagement and an enthusiastic response to developments in the arts. In addition to commenting on literature and the visual arts, Bennett gives frequent attention to performing artists, appreciating their artistry and recognizing their significance in shaping international ideas about race. With her Paris sojourn still fresh in her memory, Bennett reports on Josephine Baker in three separate installments, continuing her pattern of positioning the performer within a larger tradition of Black performing artists, extracting her from the tangle of racist typecasting, and recognizing her as both an exemplar of Black female artistry and a vibrant member of the Black diasporic artistic community.

Elizabeth McHenry links “The Ebony Flute” to African American literary salons and societies, such as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “Saturday Nighters”—“an important institution where writers and intellectuals gathered regularly to exchange ideas about literature and to talk about writing” (McHenry 2002, p. 291). “The Ebony Flute” not only “provided news of these literary societies, their membership, and their activities”, but also served many of the same social functions. The column provided encouragement and community to aspiring artists and writers, illustrating “that the literary renaissance so intensely experienced in New York City’s Harlem was indeed sweeping through black communities across the nation” and “raising her readers’ awareness of the indisputable fact that collective reading and writing groups were being formed everywhere” (McHenry 2002, pp. 292–93). As a member of the Saturday Nighters, Belinda Wheeler argues, “Bennett recognized the value of literary communities and created a format that made readers feel like members of their own literary society” (Wheeler 2013, p. 745). She even reports on one of the gatherings, where Charles Johnson was “the guest of honor”, Angelina Grimke comported herself in “ways as softly fine as her prose”, E. C. Williams brought “his genial good humor”, Marita Bonner displayed “quiet dignity, and “the whole group [was] held together by the dynamic personality of Mrs. Johnson” (July 1927, p. 212).



Figure 11. Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Ebony Flute", *Opportunity*, August 1926: 260. (Bennett 1996, p. 104).

Bennett's column is conversational in form, stitching together quotations and mentions via ellipses that resemble tiny stitches in a patchwork quilt or dots in a batik design. Her writing style both conjures and fosters conversations beyond its margins. Early on, she reports an exchange with poet Clarissa Scott [Delaney], in which "the question arose as to what was the most beautiful line of poetry written by a Negro" (August 1926, p. 261). The query generates a flurry of responses: Aaron Douglas nominates lines from Jean Toomer's "Georgia Dusk", and Robert Frost submits lines from Helene Johnson's "The Road" (September 1926, p. 292):

Ah, little road, brown as my race is brown,  
Your trodden beauty like our trodden pride,  
Dust of the dust, they must not bruise you down.

Frost's contribution indicates not only that he read *Opportunity* magazine—and her column—with great interest, but also that the conversation Bennett staged built an artistic and literary network that transcended racial and geographical divides.

"The Ebony Flute" also fostered intergenerational connections within the Black arts community. In October 1926, Bennett mentions the receipt of a "very charming" letter from Georgia Douglas Johnson, who declares that she "likes the column", and another from William Stanley Braithwaite, who says how much he looks "forward to each month as a sort of personal chat with you about books and things" (October 1926, p. 323). By quoting praise from respected elders in the New Negro movement, Bennett endows "The Ebony Flute" with cultural status. Braithwaite describes the column not merely as "chat" or light conversation, but "personal chat with you", suggesting intimate dialogue. Bennett creates the impression that, when we read "The Ebony Flute", we are having a personal chat with her. She is curious, observant, enthusiastic, and occasionally witty and wry—a delightful conversationalist.

As much as she creates an impression of spontaneity, Bennett crafts her column as an orchestrated conversation—a conversation as performance. Her review of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* uses the conceit of a symphony to describe the way he writes about Harlem, incorporating various voices and themes into the composition (Bennett 2018, pp. 79–81).



The “Ebony Flute” column is less a symphony than a jazz composition, with short riffs, repeated themes, and an improvisational, meandering style. “Its coherence derived from the voice of Bennett herself”, Nina Miller observes, noting that “Bennett made her presence felt through the paradoxically self-effacing role of speaking the renaissance” (Miller 1999, p. 227). Rather than adopting the objective tone of the art critic, Bennett makes commentary about the arts personal and social, though no less discerning or selective. This style of writing is conventionally feminine, reflecting the tone of a hostess of a literary salon who deflects attention from herself to promote the work of others and encourage young writers, occasionally offering her own judicious words of praise or censure, or injecting a witty retort to punctuate a debate. Her friendly, affable tone illustrates Nina Miller’s and Maureen Honey’s arguments that Black women writers had to walk a fine line of politeness when, by assuming the public role of author, they transgressed the boundaries of middle-class femininity.

#### 4.2. Biographical Interlude: Rebuilding Community

The cheerful, optimistic tone of “Ebony Flute” belies the turmoil and pain in Bennett’s personal life. She began writing the column at a time of transition and upheaval. Prior to her departure from Paris in June 1926, much of her energy had been focused on preparing a “homecoming exhibition”. Upon arrival in New York, she was busy reconnecting with family and friends, organizing the hoped-for exhibition, joining the editorial board of *Fire!!*, and working as assistant to the editor at *Opportunity* (Govan 1980, pp. 77–78). But her career plans and social activities were derailed when her father was hit by a subway train and killed in August. His death suspended her in a state of grief and shock, while saddling her with the scandal of his alleged affair and suicide, along with his financial debts and legal problems. Still reeling from the trauma, she had to leave her beloved Harlem community to resume teaching at Howard in September.

Bennett found the social environment in Washington, D.C., much less conducive to her than the “whirling, vibrant intellectual circle in Harlem”, as Sandra Govan explains:

In New York she had been a participant in a stimulating, spontaneous arts movement still in its formative stage: the transition to faculty member at a historically black college where traditionally life for both students and faculty is more regimented, more inhibited, and yet conversely more taxing, was difficult and traumatic. The emphasis shifted from pursuit of the arts to an accent on social life. As Bennett and others recall, dress, drink and appearance were the apparent hallmarks of Washington’s closed Negro society. If one had financial resources one dispersed them on fraternity and sorority activities or fine clothing, parties and liquor and not on books or other dimensions of the arts. (Govan 1980, p. 69)

In a letter to Carl Van Vechten typed on Howard University letterhead, Bennett described her environs as a cultural waste land, echoing T. S. Eliot’s poem: “I am in a dry land where no water is ... barren fields are as dry as dust here”.<sup>12</sup> Not only was the social scene stuffy and superficial, but her low-paid but highly demanding teaching responsibilities at Howard commanded most of her waking hours.

One D.C. oasis for Bennett and other artists was Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “Saturday Nighters” salon. Johnson’s home provided a much-needed place for intellectual discussions about the latest developments in the arts and literature. Always important to Bennett, this discourse and sense of community was vital as she coped with grief and financial strain and attempted to rebuild her personal life and reinvigorate her artistic career. But though the Saturday Nighters’ gatherings were stimulating, Bennett found them “more staid and much less exciting than were similar gatherings in Harlem” and considerably less friendly and intimate; she told Govan: “I knew Georgia Douglas Johnson much better in New York than when I went to Washington” (qtd by Govan 1980, p. 70).

“The Ebony Flute” may have been inspired by Bennett’s appetite for the lively and intimate conversation among like-minded artistic folk that she thrived on in Harlem. In the column, she uses conversation as a form of community building, creating a sense

of home and belonging for herself and other Black artists who might also be suffering from isolation or loss. Since the column generated letters from readers near and far, the imagined “personal chat with you” actually connected Bennett to other people, enabling her to look outward from her personal turmoil and strengthen her artistic network. It also provided her to circumvent what Gloria T. Hull identifies as the male privilege built into the patronage-driven movement of the Harlem Renaissance (Hull 1987, pp. 7–11). Nina Miller explains that “Women writers suffered significantly reduced access to money and contacts among publishers and patrons simply because, as women, they lacked the currency of confidence through which these alliances were built. In myriad ways, their work bears the evidence of the consequent stress” (Miller 1999, p. 148). “The Ebony Flute” allowed Bennett to knit together a discursive network that included and connected women writers and artists on an equal footing with men.

#### 4.3. *Playing Baker’s Tune on an “Ebony Flute”*

Bennett repeatedly invites Josephine Baker into the conversation, first mentioning her in the December 1926 installment, where she situates the performer among a wave of African Americans migrating to Europe to take advantage greater artistic liberties:

“With surprising surety American Negroes who go to the European capitals as entertainers in the fashionable night clubs and cafes become endeared to the French pleasure-seeker. The Chocolate Kiddies, La Revue Nègre, Josephine Baker, and Florence Mills... each caught and held the admiration of first Paris and then later other cities on the continent. At the opening of Les Nuits du Pardo, the most chic cabaret Paris has yet seen, Nora Holt Ray entertained in an inimitable way ... she accompanies herself at the piano and her voice has a touching appeal in it...” (December 1926, p. 391)

Bennett has a keen eye for trends and accomplishments among African American performers, and their recognition by European audiences is a signature achievement. Baker is the first performer Bennett names, but she is one in a growing list of Black female performers, part of a larger, diasporic New Negro movement. As in her essay on Baker, Bennett puts less emphasis on her exceptionalism than on her participation in a larger tradition. She gives Nora Ray Holt significantly more coverage in a column where most artists get only a sentence or two, perhaps highlighting her achievements because she was an educated music critic as well as a popular performer. Yet the accomplishments of this glamorous, famously blonde performer ultimately bring Bennett to a pithy and wry deconstruction of race as a distinguishing category:

“... the French are in happy consternation over the miracle of La Blonde Negress... strange, we live here side by side by many members of the black race whose skins are fairer than some of their white neighbors”. (December 1926, p. 391)

Here, as in her article on Baker, Bennett implicitly contrasts white audience’s racial ambivalence—their fascination and bewilderment by Black women who defy categorization—with African Americans’ ability to recognize and live with the complexities and contradictions of racial constructions.

Bennett gives Baker more extended attention in the March 1927 installment, commenting on a feature article in *The New York World* and walking a fine line between appreciating the recognition of a Black artist in a major white newspaper and correcting the racist misrepresentations of a “rather uninformed writer”:

At one and the same time Paris continues to laud the terpsichorean arts of Josephine Baker, colored star of the Folies Bergère. The Magazine Section of the New York World, for January 9th, carries a full-page article on Miss Baker, entitled How an Up-to-date Josephine Won Paris, by Carl de Vidal Hunt. There is much tom-foolery the in article about her undying belief in the power of a rabbit’s foot and a good deal of misstatement about the company with which she first appeared in Paris, but even this rather uninformed writer arrives at this beautiful

conclusion about a Negro girl, whose rise to envied stardom in the music halls of Europe, has been so phenomenal:

*... Her lithe, young body, looking like a Venetian bronze come to life, seemed to incarnate the spirit of unrestrained joy. It is a wild thing, yet graceful and harmonious—a demon unchained, yet delicate in its sleek, symmetrical beauty.*

Miss Baker is barely over twenty years old and full of all the youthful enthusiasm that such an age usually carries with it. She loves clothes... it seems a divine twitch of fate that at present she wears only clothes designed by Paul Poiret, one of the world's greatest designers for women... There is also another very famous Negro woman who is dancing for Europeans. Djemil Anik, one of France's colonists, is at present one of that country's most famous interpretive dancers... (March 1927, p. 90)

The first word that stands out in this Baker encomium is “terpsichorean”, meaning “of or relating to dance”. Terpsichore was one of the nine muses who presided over learning and the arts in Greek and Roman mythology. The patron of dance and choral song (and later lyric poetry), she is often depicted dancing and holding a lyre. Combining terpsis (“enjoyment”) and choros (“dance”), her name literally means “enjoying dance”. “Choros” is also the root of “chorus” (“choruses” in Athenian drama consisted of dancers as well as singers). It seems significant that Bennett would choose this unusual word, which asserts her own status as a highly educated, literate woman, even as it links Baker to the Classical muses, connecting the popular art of the dance halls with the most celebrated and lofty artistic traditions, including lyric poetry. The term also builds a bridge between Baker's performative art and Bennett's own poetry, situating them as sister artists in the same chorus.

Even though Bennett was only 24 at the time, she positions herself as a more mature counterpart to “Miss Baker... barely over twenty years”—a shrewd critic who can distinguish between the “tom-foolery” written by a white journalist and his praiseworthy remarks, which she describes not as wise or accurate, but as a “beautiful conclusion”. Artistic criticism, for Bennett, involves capturing in words the beauty and vitality of a particular art form or expression, and in this case she admires Carl de Vidal Hunt's description of Baker's “lithe, young body”, which he says resembles a “Venetian bronze”, using the kind of interartistic metaphor that Bennett herself favors in her own criticism. Interestingly, Bennett does not recoil from Hunt's categorical confusion—a characteristic white response to Baker—in the way he depicts her as a “wild thing” and “demon unchained”, who is nevertheless “graceful, harmonious” and “delicate”. Bennett seems to concur that Baker has an unmatched ability to bridge the devilish and divine in her performances. Nevertheless, she brings Baker up from the underworld and down to earth by emphasizing her youth and worldly interests in fashionable clothing. Paul Poiret's name conjures European refinement. His willingness to design for Baker signals that, despite her “youthful enthusiasms”, she has a sophisticated ability to charm European audiences—including discerning fashion designers. At the same time, Bennett resists Baker's exceptionalism by putting her in line with Djemil Anik, “another very famous Negro woman who is dancing for Europeans”.

Bennett's final mention of Baker comes in her August 1927 installment, where she highlights her continual rise to the heights of stardom. Bennett incorporates Baker's playful, ironic voice into a chorus of voices commenting on her rising stardom. She lets Baker speak for herself, allowing her words to subvert the white supremacist class pretensions of the European aristocracy:

Louis Douglas, who staged Josephine Baker in her colored show in Paris, is to do the same for *Africana*. Prior to directing in Paris Mr. Douglas was dance director at the Grosse Schauspielhaus for Max Reinhardt in Paris... speaking of Josephine Baker reminds me that the altogether remarkable ‘Jo’ has done the inimitable again... according to the New York Morning World for June 27th she has now become Countess of d'Albertini... in Europe she has been exposed to royalty



and in the manner of the true stage darling has captured one of the nobility in matrimony... her words on the subject are gems: “He sure is a count—I looked him up in Rome. He’s got a great big family there with lots of coats of arms and everything”. (August 1927, p. 242)

In reporting the latest developments in theater and performance, Bennett assumes that Black performers are household names. African American choreographer Louis Douglas’ status is signaled by his collaboration with Austrian-born director Max Reinhardt. This yoking of African American and European celebrities reaches its climax in the marvelous marriage of Josephine Baker to a European Count. His name is less important, however, than her triumph in ascending to the level of royalty. Her words “are gems” that devalue aristocratic stock with their indifference to status and propriety. Baker’s colloquial language renders “his great big family” and “coat of arms and everything” equal parts glamorous and absurd. The “and everything” tag-on suggests that the inherited wealth and prestige of European royalty can be acquired by anyone audacious enough to try, including Baker herself—a mixed-race granddaughter of enslaved people, who survived her childhood by dancing on street corners in St. Louis slums. In letting Baker speak for herself, Bennett showcases the performer’s “adorable mimicry”—a form of double talk that simultaneously feigns naive, starstruck admiration and ironically deflates aristocratic myths.

Baker’s tone echoes Bennett’s own style of energetic positivity, where critique may be delivered through a wry, ambiguous remark—or through what is not said. Using Baker’s quip as a closing remark repeats a move Bennett often makes at the end of her essays and stories such as “Wedding Day” and “Tokens”. She brings them to an abrupt close with an ambiguous or ironic statement that makes a distinctive downbeat even as it defies semantic closure. It’s a sort of “ain’t that ironic?” move—a combination of laughter and pain that might best be described as sardonic, but remains open to interpretation. It is as if she is saying: “Here it is, I can’t explain it, so take it or leave it. Ha!” And in that way, she invites readers to join the conversation. Her writing issues a call designed to evoke a participatory response, making readers feel like insiders in an intimate community of artists and writers. When Bennett writes about Black artists and writers in “The Ebony Flute”, she may say “I”, but she wants her readers to hear “we”—to join in the community that inspires and sustains her own interartistic practices.

## 5. Conclusions: Collective Culture Building through Interartistic Expression

Since her debut in Paris in 1925 and meteoric rise to stardom, views of Josephine Baker have been dominated by the white artists and audiences who constructed her as a fascinating, exotic “Other”. This article revisits the phenomenon of “La Bakaire” from the perspective of a Black female contemporary who witnessed her performance first-hand and participated in the same Jazz Age projects of fashioning New Negro womanhood and formulating Black Deco aesthetics. When Gwendolyn Bennett saw Baker perform, she recognized her as a familiar model of selfhood, fellow artist, and member of a diasporic Black cultural community. In her article “Let’s Go: In Gay Paree”, July 1926 *Opportunity* cover, and “Ebony Flute” column, she utilizes call and response patterns to transform racialized sexual objectification into collective affirmation of Black female beauty and artistry. The picture that emerges from Bennett’s art and writing is one of communal practices and artistic collaboration, in which Baker joins a host of now-forgotten chorus girls, vaudeville actresses, jazz singers, musicians, visual artists, and writers participating in a modern renaissance of Black expressive culture. “While we may lament the thwarting of so many lost talents, we should note that renaissance artistry was generally viewed as collective culture building, the individual work as part of a greater effort to elaborate a racially specific artistry” (Miller 1999, p. 145).

Bennett contributed to this collective effort across media forms, depicting Baker-esque figures in poems, essays, drawings, and journalism. Her transmedia responses reflect her creative versatility and her inclusive appreciation for all art forms, from the fine arts to the decorative arts and popular entertainment. More importantly, her work constitutes a

significant contribution to what Miriam Thaggert describes as “an early black American modernism that is characterized by a heightened attention to and experimentation with visual and verbal techniques for narrating and representing blackness” (Thaggert 2010, p. 3). Bennett experiments not only with words and images, but also with music and performance techniques. She uses interartistic methods to supplant crude, flat racist stereotypes with compelling, multidimensional portraits of Black people. Joining a collective effort among vanguard Black artists to elaborate a modern New Negro aesthetic, Bennett represents and affirms the richness, complexity, and humanity of African American culture.

Like Josephine Baker, but on the page rather than the stage, Gwendolyn Bennett forged a modern interartistic vocabulary for celebrating Black female beauty, artistry, and community. Both artists had to operate within existing economies of race and gender, which stereotyped Black women as primitive and promiscuous, and both strategically recast these inherited typologies to assert more empowering models of New Negro womanhood. Whereas Baker embraces and exploits sexual typologies, Bennett builds a bridge from such uninhibited expressions of female sexual power to middle-class ideals of Negro womanhood, seeing their differences not as in tension but as part of a vital continuum of Black female beauty and self-expression. Her verbal and visual portraits of Baker break down the dichotomy between the bourgeois Negro woman exalted by W. E. B. Du Bois and other elders of the New Negro Movement, and the primitivist African dancer vaunted by the younger vanguard (Miller 1999, p. 148). In Bennett’s vision, the New Negro woman is beautiful, intelligent, and street-smart, equally capable of writing criticism with subtle discernment, composing a lyric poem with utmost craftsmanship, and dancing the Charleston with utter abandon.

Critics continue to debate whether Josephine Baker was the epitome of Primitivist objectification or an avatar of Black female agency: as Anne Anlin Cheng observes, “views of Baker remain tethered to the vexed poles of vilification and veneration” (Cheng 2010, pp. 3–4). Her posthumous induction into the French Panthéon in 2021—she is the first Black woman to receive this national honor—suggests that scales have tipped toward veneration, not only for her contributions to the performing arts, but also for her undercover work for the French resistance in WWII and civil rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s.

Gwendolyn Bennett recognized Baker’s virtuosity from the start, representing her as neither a sellout nor a free agent, but as an innovative artist in a talented ensemble of Black performing artists. Bennett’s portrayals of Baker recuperate her Primitivist moves and motifs in service of the broader causes of New Negro womanhood and the Black diasporic artistic tradition. She does not try to sanitize the performance to make it conform to white, middle-class standards of feminine propriety. Instead, she celebrates Baker as a performer who elevates working class, lowbrow forms into a modern style with transnational appeal. She uses call and response patterns to underscore audience participation across race, class, gender, and national lines, and she applies techniques from across the arts to compose multifaceted portraits of the artist. In these ways, she positions both Baker and herself within an international community that values an emerging, modern diasporic tradition of Black artistic expression. Bennett’s art and writing provide important insight into how Black women artists collaborated within the racialized, sexualized, and class-based visual economies of modernity, adopting strategies from the visual, verbal, and performing arts to create new patterns of self-expression, affiliation, and communal affirmation.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Following the practice of the *New York Times*, I capitalize “Black” to refer to people and cultures of African origin or descent because doing so conveys respect for a “shared history and identity”; I use lowercase “white” because “there is less of a sense that ‘white’ describes a shared culture and history. Moreover, hate groups and white supremacists have long favored the uppercase style, which in itself is reason to avoid it”. *Uppercasing ‘Black’* (2020), <https://www.nytc.com/press/uppercasing-black/> (accessed on 1 March 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> The most significant studies of Bennett to date are Sandra Y. Govan’s (1980) dissertation, *Gwendolyn Bennett: Portrait of an Artist Lost*, which restored Bennett from near oblivion, and Belinda Wheeler and Louis J. Parascandola’s *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond: Gwendolyn Bennett’s Selected Writings* (Bennett 2018), whose expert editing have made much of Bennett’s work available in a single volume for the first time. Nina Miller and Maureen Honey devote chapters to Bennett, and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting details her Paris residency. See (Miller 1999; Honey 2016; Sharpley-Whiting 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Word/image studies include: Martha Jane Nadell’s (2004); (Carroll 2005; Sherrard-Johnson 2007); Caroline Goeser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Modernity* (University of Kansas Press, Goeser 2007); (Thaggert 2010; Hill 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> Studies of performing arts culture in the Harlem Renaissance include: (Krasner 2002; Elam and Jackson 2005; Vogel 2009; Brown 2008; Sharpley-Whiting 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Much of Bennett’s artwork was destroyed in two fires, one in 1926 and the other after her death in the 1980s. See Wheeler and Parascandola’s Introduction to *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance: Gwendolyn Bennett’s Selected Writings* (Bennett 2018, p. 12).
- <sup>6</sup> Bennett’s published poems, along with her surviving artwork and a good deal of her unpublished writings, letters, and diaries are reprinted in *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Gwendolyn Bennett’s Selected Writings* (Bennett 2018). Since her unpublished writings never had the benefit of an editor or proofreader, I correct minor misspellings in order to avoid distracting [sic]s.
- <sup>7</sup> The typescript of this essay is held in The Gwendolyn Bennett Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and reprinted in Bennett (2018, pp. 156–58).
- <sup>8</sup> Bennett, letter to Harold Jackman, 25 February 1926, Bennett, Gwendolyn B., 5 autograph letters and 1 typed letter, signed, to Harold Jackman. Box 1 | Folder 19. 1925–26. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16867529> (accessed on 1 March 2021). Portions of Bennett’s Paris diary and letters are reprinted in Bennett 2018, and when they are I cite the date and the page number from that collection. Others are in The Gwendolyn Bennett Papers at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Bennett Papers, Beinecke n.d.) or in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (Bennett Papers, Schomburg n.d.). Hereafter, I refer to the Gwendolyn Bennett Papers at the Beinecke as GBP-B and to the Bennett papers in the Schomburg Center as GBP-S. If the item is available in the Beinecke Library Digital Collection, I also provide the link.
- <sup>9</sup> The Bennett letters to Harold Jackman cited in this paragraph are accessible online: 5 autograph letters and 1 typed letter, signed, to Harold Jackman. Box 1 | Folder 19. 1925–26. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16867529> (accessed on 1 March 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Maureen Honey says Bennett “attended the 2 October 1925, première of La Révue Nègre on the Champs Élysée, where Josephine Baker wowed French crowds with her exotic dancing” (99–100). But Bennett writes to Harold Jackman on 27 October 1925 that she has not yet seen the “Revue Nègre” and “shall be going in a day or two” (Bennett, Gwendolyn B., 5 autograph letters and 1 typed letter, signed, to Harold Jackman. Box 1 | Folder 19. 1925–26. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16867529> (accessed on 1 March 2021)). Her article gives the date of 24 April 1926 as Baker’s “final coronation”, so it is possible that she saw Baker perform in late October 1925 and again in April 1926.
- <sup>11</sup> The entire run of “The Ebony Flute”, from August 1926 to May 1928, is reprinted in *Black Writers Interpret the Harlem Renaissance*. Edited by Cary D. Wintz. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. (Wintz 1996, pp. 104–37). Hereafter I will refer parenthetically to the column date and page numbers from the original *Opportunity* magazine publication.
- <sup>12</sup> Bennett to Van Vechten, n.d. Though undated, this letter is preserved in a sequence written in October and November of 1926. Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to African American Arts and Letters, Box 2 | Folder 56. 1926, undated. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16820216> (accessed on 1 March 2021).



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