Gloria Shin

University of Illinois Press, 2007

*Josephine Baker in Art and Life* employs what its author calls a semio-graphics, a method that uses tools of sociosemiotics to retrieve the central narratives and representations of biographical subject in order to read the figure with respect to the actual historical and cultural contexts in which she was working. As such, this book is not a linear biography but a tour of Baker’s life through the excavation and interpretation of the signs and images that form Josephine Baker as a star and social actor. Her multiple transatlantic leaps from the U.S. to Europe as well as the content of her work as a performer make her an iconic example of a black American artist in exile during the 20th century.

Jules-Rosette, a sociologist and unapologetic fan, often ably maps the circulation and evolution of Baker’s images across national borders as they were shaped by the various cultural and historical events she encountered as a black émigré. Indeed the author has produced an impressive historiography through the exhaustive examination of archival materials (including her FBI file which is over 500 pages long) that illuminate Baker’s work as an expatriate, dancer, singer, film actor, club performer, author, mother, militant and patriot while living in France from the mid-1920s to the mid-1970s. Jules-Rosette has managed to present the star not only as a complicated, multi-faceted artist, but her real achievement is to convincingly argue that Josephine Baker had fastidiously authored and consciously embodied the many personas that make up her fifty-year career.

I would like to direct readers to two particularly well-written chapters. In chapter three, “Celluloid Projections,” the author uses theories from postcolonial studies, narratology, and spectatorship studies to provide an astute assessment of Baker’s work as a film performer, of her filmic image, and her biographical representation on film and television. On screen Josephine Baker’s charisma and mobile body were showcased as she was always cast as an exotic fish out of water, a narrative trope that paralleled her origins story as a star in France. On film as well as on stage in the earlier part of her career, Baker’s performances played off racial fantasies of the neo-primitive for eager European audiences. Chapter six, titled “Hues of the Rainbow in a Global Village,” recounts Baker’s work as an anti-racism activist and revisits her adoption of
the Rainbow Tribe (twelve children of various national origins and racial backgrounds who united would symbolize her vision of racial harmony) and her failed efforts to establish a university committed to cause of international brotherhood. Here Jules-Rosette examines Baker’s politics which were spurred by the racism she experienced as a child in east St. Louis and as a performer in Europe during World War II. It illuminates her potential and limitations as a politicizing figure and is rather a poignant mediation on exile.

Josephine Baker in Art and Life thoughtfully reads the star as an agent within her socio-historical reality, including speculating how negrophilia and modernism in Europe and the civil rights movement in the United States helped shape Baker’s work as a performer as well as guided her political life. Jules-Rosette’s insistence on accounting for every significant moment in the star’s life is a useful strategy—it allowed her to produce nine chapters of compelling scholarship on a single figure. So the author’s reluctance to unpack some of Baker’s contradictions including her refusal to discuss the whitening of her appearance and the ideological legacy of her performative neo-primitivism are surprising and regrettable omissions. Still, this book is a welcomed addition to the literature of star studies.

Gloria Shin is a Ph.D. candidate in Critical Studies in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. She is currently finishing a dissertation project concerning possessive individualism and postcolonial whiteness as expressed through the film work and extra-filmic image of the star Elizabeth Taylor.