

## **Title** - Terri Francis on Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism In conversation with Ruun Nuur

**Conversation speakers** - Dave Filipi, Terri Francis, Ruun Nuur

(Dramatic music begins as quiet and atmospheric, and gradually becomes louder. It slowly fades out.)

(Dave Filipi introduces the talk and is pictured in the top right screen of three screens. He sits in a brown leather office chair in a room with cream-colored walls and posters hanging on the walls. He is a middle-aged man with a rosy complexion and graying blond straight hair that covers part of his forehead. He wears black framed glasses with a white shirt with dark green horizontal stripes accenting the sleeves.)

(Ruun Nuur is framed on the right and sits in an interior space with cream-colored walls and a sunny window framed by drapes. She is a middle-aged woman with golden brown skin and wears a Hijab with a gold shawl over her shoulders. She wears white wireless ear pods.)

(Terri Francis is framed on the left and sits on a white couch in front of a colorful bookshelf filled with books. She is a middle-aged woman with medium brown skin, and a shorn head. She wears large hoop earrings and a long sleeved, black button-down shirt with a band collar.)

**Dave Filipi** - Welcome everyone and thank you for watching this conversation around the new book by Dr. Terri Francis, "Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism," about the multifaceted, trailblazing, underappreciated, misunderstood, iconic Josephine Baker. Transcendent star of stage and screen, a spy for France during World War II, and a tireless advocate for civil rights among many other facets.

Terri Francis is a critic, historian, programmer and director of the Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University in Bloomington, where she is also Associate Professor in the Media School. This is the third time Dr. Francis has joined us in conversation in 2021. And you should be able to find links to her conversation with artist, Ja'Tovia Gary, and also her conversation with author Hanif Abdurraqib which also touched on Josephine Baker elsewhere on this page.

We're also excited to have our friend Ruun Nuur, joining Terri for this conversation. Ruun is a critic, programmer, activist, filmmaker, and co-founder of No Evil Eye. A radical, nomadic micro-cinema aimed at redefining filming experience through film programming and film education. And with that, I will turn it over to Ruun and Terri and sign off until the end. Take it away.

(Dave exits.)

**Ruun Nuur**- Amazing, thank you Dave for that generous introduction. I just, now I'm remembering Terri that you had those conversations with Ja'Tovia and Hanif, just amazing. Midwest, is it? Midwest in the building for real. (She smiles and laughs.)

**Terri Francis**- Exactly, yeah, (Terri is smiling.)

**Ruun** - Again, I just wanted to say congratulations a thousand times over for this huge accomplishment. I can't begin to imagine the amount of time it took for you to write this. Yeah, but your scholarship is definitely needed and necessary for sure.

**Terri** - Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I was a young woman when I started this, I was in my late twenties when I started this project and I'll be 50 in a couple of years. So, it has been a substantial part of my life defined by working on this book. Working on it and also defined by not working on it and not knowing what it was, and then finally knowing what I wanted to do and then plunging forward.

**Ruun** - So that actually kind of makes a perfect sort of transition. I really wanna learn more about your background and your relationship with Josephine in particular. I know that obviously this isn't a new topic for you. I think you wrote your graduate dissertation on Parisian ex-pats and that's kind of, was the beginning of it. But when it came time to actually write this book, was it more of a reunion for you or were you constantly mulling over her?

**Terri** - Oh, that's, I love the idea that being a reunion, (Dr. Francis rocks forward and back in her seat) the book is very different from my dissertation. The dissertation was broadly about the idea of Black success in Paris, and I looked at a variety of different types of performers. So, the Fisk Jubilee Choir, I think there's a chapter on that. It was super long ago (Dr. Francis deepens her voice momentarily with exaggeration). And I think that one was called like, "Under A Paris Moon," but it was the inciting incident however for that dissertation was an encounter with Josephine Baker through her films, and through people kind of mentioning her to me while I was doing this other research. I was a literature person.

(Ruun nods and adjusts her ear pod.)

That year, I think it was 1998 or 1999, and I went to Paris to study writers in the literary expatriate community, but then was introduced to cinema and cinema study. And Josephine Baker and the whole problem of like exoticism and the pleasures of exoticism, the exiles within being the exotic, like all of it, it was just really interesting to me. And then I think I took a few years, I don't think the dissertation was entirely on Baker, and then, but it was definitely France focused. And at a certain point I decided to be US focused on how I reflected on her career.

**Ruun** - I wanna actually revisit the fact that your entry into film itself kind of was through Baker.

(Ruun circles her pointed finger in the air to emphasize revising) I wanna hold on to that, cause I have a lot to say about that, but I've always kind of, I feel like I've kind of wrestled with the image of Baker and I was really looking to unpack that with this reading, but what I didn't expect was for you to start that interrogation immediately within the first couple of pages, (Ruun laughs and is smiling) I was like, Oh, okay, I'm in, I'm like, I'm right in.

**Terri** - (smiling) Why wait?

**Ruun** - Why not? (still laughing) But what really drew me in was your declaration of refusal to view Baker as the subject. It was more of a, I think you referred to her as a producer of knowledge, right? And I'm really curious, how did you come to that methodology? And also, did you run into criticisms within the Academy for sort of taking that stance?

**Terri** - Not yet nobody has said anything to me yet. But I imagine that there is some skepticism around Baker, the idea of her as a purveyor of knowledge or as a producer of knowledge, because she's not

using the conventional means of authorship. She is not a film director; she is not necessarily the screenwriter. And even in her stardom, the narrative kind of undermines her centrality in her own films. And so, it's like, why would you, like why see her in this way?

(Ruun rests her chin on her hand, and then nods.)

Doesn't that, I don't know, doesn't that take something away from the case that needs to be made for the world as it should have been? And so, there is, I think in my work something of a recuperative project in looking at Baker. I have always been interested just in like my own consumption of her and also in the performers who engage with Baker, that there was, it was always in terms of pleasure and creativity and innovation. It seemed to me that the performers were able to see something in her that, I was not or maybe a typical academic was not in a position to fully appreciate. And my, the other project is to focus less on what the apparatus that she is working in wants to do to her, but to look at her in terms of what she's saying about her own career, and what she would like to do and see how... To me that kind of balanced the scales, that it doesn't, I'm not saying that she did not operate in a colonialist, patriarchal, sexist environment, of course she did, but that doesn't make her entirely just a puppet, I don't blame her for that. I think that is the world in which she found herself. And I also think I'm intrigued by the imperfections or ambivalences that all of this carries. The resistance I have found though, I think it's really just, just like that kind of puritanical vibe around like how women, like it's, whatever someone would say about Beyonce or whatever someone would say about anyone dancing in a leotard. I think you could easily say that about Baker, but I've really worked to value her and to be able to see what she's doing. And so, I guess I'm a little bit about like a defense, like I'm going to make her case. And also, like I would like to be an author. And, I mean, that was my project and so I suppose I saw in her qualities that I was seeking; I understood the ambivalence and the different negotiations and the, it's just hard to be a Black girl.

**Ruun** - Well, listen, we are gonna talk about it, but---

**Terri** - Be creative, it's really hard.

**Ruun** - Right, I know, I just appreciated that declaration right at the beginning. And especially for me, I work mostly in non-fiction and it's very objective, and it's like, okay, how do we kind of move away from the subjectivity of it? And when you're speaking to people, think of them as these producers of knowledge. I'm going to be using that terminology for a long time now.

**Terri** - Yeah, right. (Terri is nodding and side glancing out of the window to her right) Because then these are people you have to listen to, you're not just imposing your own perspective as the interviewer or the filmmaker or the scholar, like it's, you know, people aren't just objects, they have like...

**Ruun** - Right, actually I wanna be very honest and transparent about you or about this next question, because it's kind of, I'm just telling you something, I was like, should I ask her, should I tell her? But I'm gonna tell you, but I actually, vividly remember first reading the book and seeing these direct references to the films. And I kind of had this realization, oh, I don't think I've actually seen a Josephine Baker film before. I know her as this cultural icon, I'm obviously very familiar with her iconography. I've seen her performances on YouTube. I've even seen the film about her life, the one with Lynn Whitfield on BET, I grew up watching it, it was always on TV. And then I realized, wait a minute, what? How is this even possible I've never seen her film? And so, I engage with the book in a whole different way. And I'm

actually really curious if, because you're a scholar on Baker and she's been your muse for so long. I'm curious if you've run into other people who have the same lapse that I do.

**Terri** - That's exactly the lapse I'm writing for.

**Ruun** - Right.

**Terri** - We all know her as, the banana dance lady, (Dr. Francis spreads her arms open) the woman who went to Paris, she adopted several dozen children. Not several dozen but a dozen. Just a dozen. And so, we know her as, as you said, as a cultural icon. And we know her from her story, but do we know her work? (Ruun is nodding) Do we know the actual screen work that she produced, that she appeared in? And thinking of her as an actress in a way it's sort of, it can feel like a step back or a step down, but it's just getting really specific about, so what did she do exactly? (Dr. Francis laughs)

**Ruun** - Right (smiling and nodding.)

**Terri** - And with her dances, we don't have, those, they're her live performances and we're not gonna get to see. The banana dance we can see, there are lots of copies of that on YouTube. And, but these films of hers are important to see. They, I think for a while they were on different streaming channels and now, they've been gone for a minute, and I think they might be coming back. So, I think there's also, the movies just haven't really been that available for people to see. This is a rare moment that people can see her silent film with our conversation, that is a rare moment. That's really important.

**Ruun** - Right, that's why I was kind of like, oh no, I've seen her work, I know her like, it's Josephine Baker, obviously I know who Josephine Baker is. Plus, she's from Missouri, Black girl and I'm like, yeah, listen, me and her, we go together, like we know each other, like, what are you talking about? While I was reading it. Yeah, I was just like, wait a minute, what's going on? I had to go back and like actually familiarize myself with her screen work. But---

**Terri** - What was that like? Like when you, did you feel like you were seeing a different person or?

**Ruun** - It was, actually was a little bit different. I'm really interested in Black women sort of as the nucleus of the image, and that's how I've always thought of Josephine Baker. So, when you're seeing these movies, it's kind of, she's a supporting character, she's not the lead character. And actually, that kind of reminds me, even though she isn't the capital S, star in these films, in the way that these white actresses are, right? She's on like this glowing, a lethal figure, like a Mae West or something like that. But despite that, she is still glowing, she's still the star, she can't even help it. She, you can't eliminate this like inherent charm that she possesses. And I'm assuming obviously that's something that you wanted to explore as well.

**Terri** - (Smiling) Oh yeah, I actually just published a piece, like a short piece on Salon about that exact phenomenon. And I have just, the Mae West films on Criterion. And so, I was just, it was just vividly in my mind, like yes, like this is the sparkling blonde figure that is the definition of what a star is. And so how, what are the rhetoric's, the visual rhetorics that will create Josephine Baker's stardom? And what I noticed in looking at her closely is the way that other characters look at her, that the light doesn't fall upon her. She is a source of light, as you say, her charm can't be eliminated, and she is luminous. But the, you know, her love interest is looking elsewhere. And usually at a blonde, like co-star, like he'll be touching her hair and meanwhile Josephine is, right there, you know, who's supposed to be the star, but

she's not starring in the traditional sense. Although of course we can, I think give her, like we can read her as the star also.

**Ruun** - Completely, that's why I was like, I feel like the Black community just in general, we already give her that moniker. So, it was kind of like, oh, you guys didn't do that? But it just speaks to the glaring limitations of white supremacy, and just the utter lack of imagination both in the US and French context. Even though they're trying to put themselves on a pedestal, it's like, come on.

**Terri** - Yeah, I was gonna say, because I think like the, especially in her story it's like France was so much better. France was an ideal place relative to the US, but we can see even in her, the French productions across her three films, they are still catering to this like white supremacist narrative that cannot, I mean, you've just said it beautifully, like there's just a lack of imagination about her as a leading lady, as a star, and the structure for that just isn't there. So, like she inherently is a star, but stardom is constructed, its lighting, it's where it's blocking it's narrative. And all of those things need to point to her, you know, for her to sparkle. (Dr. Francis is leaning forward in her seat with her chin resting on her intertwined hands.)

**Ruun** - Yeah, that's the other thing. So, another thing when just watching her movies that I did not realize before is just her comedy and just how infectious it is. Like she has such a vivacious, allure that I wasn't expecting. And it's kind of just like, how did you guys not see the star power here? But also like her proximity to these white male romantic partners. Like, they're trying to sell it as though they're the prize, and I'm just like, come on, like, don't sell me this fallacy it's so insane.

**Terri** - And they're not even all that special. I was like, a lot of time I was feeling like, Josephine come on, no, that's not the one, that's not the one, you know. But yeah, now, I absolutely, I mean, I couldn't agree with what you're saying, you know, more, and this is what we miss when we don't get a chance to actually look at the film. So, like with my book I just wanted to focus on the movies themselves and to see what we see when we look at them directly. And I think a lot of it is just kind of seeing these, the structures that she was engaging with, what she was up against. And, but then also seeing her in motion, talking, when, you know, like this idea, like the ambivalent responses to Josephine Baker, I think are this idea that this is a Black woman exposed, her body and we wanna protect her. And I think that, I do understand the sense that the stage nudity, sexuality, all of this, these are all spaces of risk, and the vulnerability. And I think, I dunno how, maybe this was beginning old part, of older, of, you know, process of just getting to a place where I just appreciated that complexity, that this is a place of risk, and yet she enters into it, and she enters into it as a 19-year-old dancer from the US. She doesn't speak French; she doesn't know any of these people. She knows what she's doing. And she does it with panache and with moxie and with her, vivacious energy. That desire to survive and to live and to create, it's, I just, I don't know, I'm just, I can't not be inspired by that. I think there's something really exciting about it. And it comes through a little bit in her written memoirs which are translated by other people and it's a whole thing. And yet, like this moment when she's just like, you know, I cut my hair and I just left my family, I was gone. And I was like, Oh, well, that's a decision. You know, I mean that, I don't know, like those moments of clarity were so important in how she's choosing... While I assume is choosing to represent herself.

**Ruun** - Right

**Terri** - I think it's just really, really exciting.

**Ruun** - Yeah, and it's like you said, like to be that young and to, I dunno that self-possession, that's self-actualization. And the other thing is like, if a 19-year-old now wants to do it, it's like, all right, cool. But at that time period, it's just like, where did you, how did you even come up with that? Like where did you learn? Yeah, it's amazing. But, yeah, so even you, obviously the book is more profiling her films but despite Baker being like the ultimate screen icon, like this legend of image, she does have a complicated view of cinema itself. She doubted it as her personal art form, she more preferred the stage. But then at the same time she also was saying things like, cinema is Black art. I would like to have a cinema in my home one day. How do you, what do you think that dichotomy is? I feel like it's really, I don't know, I find it interesting 'cause it's kind of like, yeah, I feel the same way, honestly.

**Terri** - Yeah, yeah, it's like, yeah. I think that this is, to me this is a mark of someone who's really reflecting on the medium. And she dives into these films, she's excited. She sees the potential and then she's disappointed. And I think that that's discernment, I think that's reflection.

**Ruun** - (nods) I wanna kind of get into your thesis of cinematic prison, um prism and fractured authorship.

**Terri** - Wow, interesting (Terri responds to Ruun's mispronunciation Prism with wide eyes nodding).

**Ruun** - So rather than the book operating as this more classic biography Cinematic Prism, is more interested in offering a way to think about the multitudes of Josephine Baker, right? She is both liberated and exploited and there is this act of refusal of making her this one-dimensional character image by emphasizing the complexity of her images itself. And the opening chapter really offers a very thoughtful analysis of the infamous banana dance that we all know, but through this prismatic gaze, and I wanted to know, how did you first come to this way of seeing? Was it through Josephine Baker that you thought of the cinematic prism, or have you been chewing over this for a while?

**Terri** - I think just chewing over it for a while. That idea, I think came to me like in like 2017-ish, somewhere in there, I tried lots of different ideas. The Josephine Baker's Burlesque, that was one idea that I had for a while to deal with the ironies of her performance. And what was another title? I don't know. There was a Josephine's Burlesque, there was The Racial Burlesque. I was always trying to grapple with her multitudes, as you said, and the form of cinema, how Baker was herself cinematic. And trying to find the right metaphors, you know, one time I talked about her as a kind of veil. And I don't remember the aha moment, but I do have a prism that is a water, like a paperweight that's on my desk. And I ended up using that to help me remember the multiplicities of Baker and all that I wanted to talk about. And I think it just tumbled out of me that there was, there were these, they're not really layered images but that they're images at angles to each other. The persona that she presents in newspaper stories, this overall celebrity that, I think even then people were more familiar with than actually being able to see her live, to see her films.

**Ruun** - Right.

**Terri** - And then there's what she does on film. And then there's what she does on stage in a variety of different countries. And then there are her songs that she records. So, there were always these, any one image of her is meant to refer to these other images. And so, it seemed to me to be a very particular kind of cinematic image, that it was a dynamic prismatic, it was in motion, and it was a way to hold together her contradictions, but also to let them be contradictory. Not in a, hopefully not in a facile way

as I think that her ambivalences are very important to hold in front of us. Like her limitations, the blind spots of things that she didn't notice and think about. The ways that she changed her mind, the things that she made up, like I'm gonna, I'm marrying this guy and, just kidding.

**Ruun** - (Laughs) Yeah.

**Terri** - Just wildly fictitious forms of her life. And that she, and I love also, as a writer, as a film scholar that the subject is, does not fully belong to me. That there's, that she can always say, oh, no, I didn't mean that. And, I mean, I would just have to, oh, it's time for the sequel or someone else can write the next bigger book on this new material that's emerged. So, like, I liked that play back and forth, and I ended up just, I suppose collating it into this idea of cinematic prism.

**Ruun** - I think I heard you say that you also sort of dived into video essays or cine-essays, and that helped you to also sort of flesh out this cinematic prism, or maybe just Josephine in general. So that was also a way.

**Terri** - Yeah, I mean, yes. I mean, the book was already called Cinematic Prism and was that part of it was finished in a sense. But the video essays just helped me because I had to mine for different kinds of materials. And in particular, I had to go beyond the 1930s. So, like, everything, in the book I talk about Baker's citations in contemporary art and among white performers. But the video essay project had me looking at, it had me looking at interviews with her from the seventies. And it had me listening to Diana Ross talking about what the time that Baker put her hands in her hair, what that felt like, and, I don't know, these like really great stories and encounters. And so, one of the effects immediately was that Baker sounded like us, like she could be in this conversation right now. She wasn't this wild banana person with no sense of reality or no sense of politics or who she was, or just like a puppet, a vapid idiot. She was just like thoughtful, deep, very warm, witty woman. And in one of the videos, I was able to create like a dual screen with the older Josephine Baker in one half of the screen and the younger Josephine Baker doing her banana dance. And so, the older Baker is just sort of, just talking about that weird time in her life. She's like, yeah, you know, I was young, the public adopted me, and I wore this skirt and it had bananas in it, and it was wild, yes. (Ruun leans back laughing) And it just kind of gives you the sense of the person who, apart from the costume and the character. (Ruun is nodding) And that was also an important move for me in the book, was to think about that Baker is? When we see her in the banana dance, we're looking at like, like that's us up there. And like, that's just Josephine being Josephine, but that's Josephine in character as Fatou, in a really specific, this like weird, like colonial banana plantation fantasy. And he's a bunch of bananas come to life as Josephine Baker. And that is, I mean, maybe in the end it's like, you know what? Yes, this is so colonialist nonsense. Yes, shut it down, let's talk about something else. But it seemed at the time really important to see the work of her performing as this character. And that character Fatou has a lineage as well in colonialist literature, kind of this exoticist literature. And so, it was all about just like locating Baker's productivity, sometimes through the characters that she plays but a lot of times apart from it. And so, in the video essays, it allowed me to just make that literal. That she's a creative person like anyone who plays characters and who engages in performance, and that's fine.

**Ruun** - Right, also like in addition to this prismatic viewership you also build on Josephine Baker's fractured authorship. So, can you actually expand a little bit more on that as well?

**Terri** - Yeah, the fractured authorship, I mean, this is a very optimistic book.

(Ruun laughs.)

So, I mean, the fractured authorship, it fractures apart you know, from her. So, this goes back to what I was talking about earlier where it's really difficult to establish Baker as the subject, the purveyor of knowledge, the author, because she isn't doing like author-y things. The books that she does write are co-written, they're translated and they're within this publicity machine of her celebrity. So, it's difficult to think about that work in the conventional way. And then, she didn't direct the films they are based on her, they don't exist without her. Would we watch "Princess Tam Tam" if it wasn't for her?

**Ruun** - No, and I was supposed to say, absolutely not. But that's the thing, I really appreciate your definition of authorship. It's not an explicit relation to the texts, right? It doesn't mean that you can have credit as screenwriter or credit director, but authorship as an expression of agency itself.

**Terri** - Yeah, of authority and of presence and of command. And just to have, of her there-ness, that absolute purity of her presence across her work, I think that's another kind of authorship. We don't, we think about authorship as having control and as an act of power. Maybe it's presence, maybe it's charm, maybe you illuminate for others.

**Ruun** - Absolutely, especially in this dream making landscape of film itself. Actually, I remember years ago coming, this is back when I used to watch TCM, Turner Classic Movies like it was my job. But I remember coming across a story of Marlene Dietrich, and she was talking, or somebody was talking about how she would always line the bottom of her eyes with a white eyeliner as a way to catch the light and to make her eyelids appear more heavy. And I always remember that in the back of my head because that is sort of like agency, right? That's her expressing her screen agency, she knows how she looks in front of the camera, this is how she catches the light. So, I'm wondering, are there any particular anecdotes on Baker's screen agency that stand out to you?

**Terri** - Hmm, that's interesting. You know, I have to say that her discussions of what she would do on screen were not as positive as Dietrich's. And I know that Dietrich had a very close collaborative relationship with, is it Von Sternberg?

**Ruun** - I believe it, let me double check.

**Terri** - I think it's Von Sternberg, really and they made multiple films together. And so even though they come out of, I think a similar world of European, not vaudeville like the European music hall performance excess, sort of world. I think Baker was in a way at a disadvantage in that she did not have a true creative partner to develop her powers in the cinema. She was in a way on her own. And the, like you were mentioning some of these like contradictory or paradoxical thing she would say, like she'd be excited about cinema and then it's like, she doesn't like her movies. And I think that's it. I think she had a real sense of excitement about being in the movies. And then she would be disappointed because she wasn't supported. And actually, one of my video essays, she says, one of the reasons she didn't like being in the movies is that she, it just felt cold to her. It didn't feel, you know, she couldn't connect with the audience. And I was like, yeah, because the whole setup was not for you. And they also kind of didn't think about it cinematically, like that, that note about her catching the light on her eyes. That's really important with, I remember in Baker's discussion of "Siren of The Tropics" she's really frustrated that she's just being asked to do what she already does on stage.

(Ruun is resting her cheek on her hand and nodding.)



So, she wants to do something unique and different, but nobody's teaching her. Like how would you, how do you know anything by yourself? So, I think there were a lot of people who were more wanting to capitalize on her notoriety and fame, and who underestimated her awesomeness and kept it within this, like just be a primitive, be a colonialist fantasy figure on which we can build this other story that we would rather be in.

**Ruun** - Right, right. She had, maybe it's just, her agency came in different forms, right? Maybe the stage or singing, other types of performance. That's completely understandable that she felt... I remember that quote was like, I feel cold when it comes to film. I get that warmth on stage, I'm like, of course you do, of course you do. And you don't have that same relationship with the form, and you can express your agency in that way as your white counterparts can.

**Terri** - Yeah, and I think she never, I think she, I mean, agency is, I dunno, maybe agency isn't completely the right word because, if we define it as that ability to act, she's definitely taking action. But I think we have to decide at some point like, are we going to read her through the prism of her prison way that she's captured within certain types? Or are we reading her as pushing through, moving with being herself within these confines. And that's where I think I would more go with the latter in terms of thinking about, this is someone who arrives in a narrative she didn't invent or control and does something spectacular. She does star in these films, and she remains kind of intriguing and enigmatic while being completely known in certain ways. And that, I think that's really important, and its essential dilemma, this performance dilemma, I think of all of our lives. How do we negotiate the structures that we're in with our creativity? This is something that's fundamental to all of us, that I think we need to understand and can understand through her.

**Ruun** - Yeah, completely, also there's so many different ways that you could have entered into the realm of Josephine Baker, but there's a particular chapter on the Black American press that helps contextualize that particular moment and her stardom. I'm actually curious like what made you take that perspective? That entryway?

**Terri** - Yeah, I wanted to look at Baker with her peers, other creative types. I wanted to see what the folks back home thought of her. And I wanted to know what her career was like before she went to Paris. And so, the Black press was the only way into that part of her life.

**Ruun** - At the time of her stardom or even beforehand, the African American press and just the film industry at large was focused on promoting a dignified cinema, right? There was an emphasis on good representation and yeah, Baker, she had a more complex and more complicated screen presence. And yet in spite of that, of like her being, what? The object of ethnographic French gaze, like all these different ways of describing her, she's still like this bastion of African American excellence, that's what I'm getting from the book. There was still like this love and admiration that, I mean, it's astounding.

**Terri** - Yeah, it's real, I mean, it's really prismatic. It's like they appreciate that aspect of her, the achievement, the excellence, the celebrity, the success. And yeah, when her films, like when "Siren of The Tropics" played in New York and Chicago, Baltimore, the film reviewers were very critical of the film, that she, you know, they didn't...one of them said, she's just throwing herself at this guy and he's not even trying, you know, what is going on?

**Ruun** - Right (laughing).

**Terri** - So that's also part of in the late twenty. Before she goes to Paris, there's a, what I saw was a really strong appreciation for her as a comedian as a comedy dancer. And that that performance and that way of reading her performance becomes different in Paris. They don't see her as comedy, they see her as Black woman, revelation, colonial, you know, uncanny. And, but she's kind of doing, I mean, it seems like she's doing a lot of the same kinds of dances that she was doing in the US, but it's being contextualized differently. So, but I'm glad that I looked at that because it allowed me to see her being appreciated in terms that were neither minstrelsy nor exoticism. They saw her as the lightning of jazz, they saw her as funny, as smart, and as a creative. And that allowed me to see her that way. So, then I brought that lens and those standards to thinking about her screen characters and all of these other kinds of performances. So, like, I'm seeing the vaudeville twenties Baker operate in these other structures that are not able to completely define her because my perspective is just different now. But I also take really seriously the criticism of the Black cinephiles.

**Ruun** - But that was the thing, I know earlier talking about, maybe I'm being optimistic but that's what really kind of struck me at the time of, I mean, like, yeah, this dignified cinema and all that, but it was also so humbling to read that. There was a space for grace, in a time where Black people were not receiving that from other communities, we were still offering that to our own. And Josephine was still a part of that. In a way I feel like people are way more critical now than they were.

**Terri** - Yeah, now, yeah. I don't, I mean, I can imagine the, I don't have to imagine it, the skepticism of someone like a Baker, you see it. It's like what we all say about, like all entertainers, people are being held to a very, well, it's interesting. Is it a strict standard? (Pauses) I don't know what's going on with the way that we are judging entertainers and entertainment. I think I just go back to the sense that there just seems to be something exposed, something vulnerable in the performing woman, in the performing Black woman. But also, culture is misogynistic, and we don't trust what women are doing. Whatever, whatever it is, it's wrong. There is too much of it, there is not enough of it, it is also wrong and offensive and not respectable especially if it's not contained in some way, I think. And Baker does push against all of that. But I actually I think with her films people were critical of her, maybe not of her, but of the movies. They were definitely critical of the movies. But beforehand, I liked that too, that it was a space where people were appreciating her and that she seemed to be, well, I don't know if she fully enjoyed it. So, I think she wasn't getting paid a lot, it was cold, you know, I think it was kind of a tough circuit, the Black vaudeville circuit, but it was really nice. I remember that feeling of like, oh, wow, they really like her.

**Ruun** - Yeah, that's why I was like, oh, they really, they like me, they really like me, I didn't expect that.

**Terri** - Yeah, me neither, I didn't expect it. And if I hadn't, I think if I had stayed thinking about her just in the Paris story, I would never have asked myself that question. But shifting the lens to the US... I don't know I could say I could leave the primitivist exoticist stuff behind, but it definitely gave me a comparative context. It gave me a way to think about Baker as someone creating something specific that she is holding within her as she goes through these different performances. So, like, I dunno, maybe it is too optimistic, I don't know. (Ruun laughs) But like these moments where, you know, like she's the fantasy figure of this terrible colonialist figure. He's like laying down and like dreaming of her. Where there's another one where there's this fireman who is drunk and he's stumbling around the city and he bumps into a woman who is working at the train station, and that person turns into Josephine Baker and does the dance. So, like, there will be the moments where I think she...like in the filming of it,

sometimes it will be from that fantasizing figure's perspective. And then sometimes, that disappears and it's a straight on framing. And that allows me to imagine all that's gone and it's just us. In her films she, yes, these mediocre, terrible, unworthy, men like, don't choose her. But then she gets to be Josephine Baker. And she gets to be the creative, the artist, and that there's something there. It isn't enough for her but it's interesting, like these structures and choices, or were interesting to me and I didn't, I guess I never felt like, I dunno, I guess I feel like all the answers are right and all the answers are wrong. Where we live in a very difficult time, and we always have very limited powers of self-expression and...

**Ruun** - Yeah, I wanna talk about her legacy, because that's the Josephine Baker I know, right? That's the one I grew up on. She is without a doubt the blueprint for which all international Black female performers are built on. And at first I was thinking I wanna ask you, who is a part of her progeny, right? Like Nicki Minaj, who are her sons?

**Terri** - Yeah. (smiling)

**Ruun** - But it's really limitless, it's everybody, actually.

**Terri** - (Laughing) Yeah, I mean, the main one that springs to mind is Beyonce who performed in a banana outfit at... (indistinct)

**Ruun** - I remember. Yeah. I remember when the "Deja Vu" video first came out, and there was a lot of controversy around it. And I was like, what are you guys so angry about? I'm like, it's just Beyonce dancing...Like, let her live. Like I was living for it, but it was a callback, right?

**Terri** - Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was a callback. And I remember I wrote at the time an article called, What Does Beyonce See in Josephine Baker? And that was like the beginning of me realizing, these performers seem to... 'cause a lot of the academic literature has this like dichotomous read of like saying that Baker's be totally ironic and none of what you're seeing is the real deal, she's playing with these images. Then the other is that she's for a failed figure, kind of like a false consciousness. And, but these performers seem to be embracing her in a totally different way. Like they're lending their own bodies to her name, to her persona and to her legacy. And that seemed very powerful to me. And then once I started looking, then, as you say like I saw Baker everywhere. It's just citations of her, you know, the African film "Touki Bouki" that has a sample of her singing, Paris, Paris, Paris, and in this she shows up in a lot of different places as specifically as a sign of beauty, pleasure, self-realization, all of these figures of delight that are otherwise difficult to name. And the glamour, so then it's not exotic but glamorous, you know, other kind of---

**Ruun** - Share everything

**Terri** - Yes, yeah.

**Ruun** - But also Beyonce but, I know Diana Ross was a huge fan, Tina Turner. The fact that Tina Turner's now in Europe and she's just like, bye America, I'm out. That's just very Josephine Baker of her.

**Terri** - Yeah, now, it was very Josephine Baker of her. And I think whenever I see like women, like a Megan The Stallion, or even like Lizzo, like I just all of, it's really, her legacy is in, is wherever there are these Black women artists who are bold, who are killing it, who are international.

**Ruun** - Exactly (nodding).

**Terri** - And people are drawn to her to work that out. You know what I mean? They really like that. There's an opera singer, Julia Bullock who did a wonderful project meditating on Baker as partly to just think about what it means to be a performing woman. What it means to be seen as exotic within your field. And, I don't know, I think that it's like her powers are reflected in those who reflect upon her. The fact that she draws all these people to her is important.

**Ruun** - Yeah, okay. So, this is what I really wanted to get into because you talked about this earlier that Josephine Baker was your sort of entry into film studies itself, right? You started to literature but then it was this evolution through Baker. And I love that. I love that so much because when I'm thinking about who is her progeny, who is like, whatever, who's building on this blueprint, Janet, right? It's Nicki, Beyonce, Rihanna, Whitney, Diana, Tina, all these women. And whenever I sort of referenced them, as like my own personal points of reference or inspiration, people tend to like flippantly like, Oh, they're just pop culture musicians. And I'm like, no, they're like, they are the stars, they are everything, they're writers, they're stylists they're filmmakers, in addition to being these musicians, right?

**Terri** - (nodding) Yeah, people are really under, all those names that you mentioned that people really underestimate them.

**Ruun** - Completely, see that's why I've always been fascinated by screen performers as an authority of their own visual identity. And what's so incredible about Josephine in particular is that she's a pioneer of this singular Black woman operating as the nucleus of the image. Even though she's not meant to be, she's still doing it, like the material isn't making her that way but she still occupies that centrality, right?

**Terri** - Whew! (Snaps both her fingers repeatedly.)

**Ruun** - Okay, it like you said, Terri, I love that so much and that's why I love the book. Have I even showed you what I've been doing with this book? (holds up a pink book with lots of yellow sticky notes marking pages throughout) (Terri is laughing) Like, I was like, oh, is that what we're doing? Okay, let me get into it because I love that so much, I always say that. Because for so long people would be like, what's your inspirations? How did you get into film? Like what film inspired you? And I'm like, it's not my entry into film, it's not how it works. I don't have that relationship with cinema, I don't trust the material like that. But what I do trust are these Black women. I know that they own who they are, and even when the material isn't letting them, they're still gonna go out and do it. Even when the industry is not letting them, they're still going to go out and just own their selfhood on screen. And I felt like within this book, I really felt a kinship with the language that you're using to describe your connection with Baker, because I've always struggled to articulate that myself. Like I love these women and I relate to them like beyond just being a fan, right? Like they are the producers of their knowledge, and Baker is the ultimate, right?

**Terri** - Yeah, yeah, yeah, Oh yeah. Well, I mean, I saw that, the Tina Turner doc. And just even, I mean, what a woman? There is the leaving to go to Europe and then just like, but at each stage creating her persona. I mean, I don't think I fully understood that process, because, again, it's a journey, just like we don't bow, I think it's partly we don't trust the screen or we don't, there's not a real knowledge of how movies work or how performance works. Then it's just bound up with a bunch of stuff that we don't trust like, pleasure, women, sexual things, and movie things. And the only way, and I don't know if I said pleasure? But I think pleasure is part of one of those things that there isn't a lot of knowledge around how to, how that is, an epistemology is a way is an analysis or an analytical tool. And so, there's this way of just kind of positioning all of that as like a trifle or at best a trifle and at worst, a betrayal of

womanhood, of who we are, of all the things. And I think it's, there needs to be another way of learning, how to embrace creativity when it comes in many forms and in many vessels, this is what Baker teaches me. And there are all these things that I felt like I had to learn in order to appreciate her. But I think I also had to unlearn a lot of things, you know, Audre Lorde was really helpful. And when she talks about the power of the erotic, you know, but just embracing ambivalence and risk I think were also critical components there.

**Ruun** - Completely, yeah. You also cited Saidiya Hartman as well, which was great.

**Terri** - Oh yeah, that was really helpful. And I didn't read that until, I think it was like this time last year when I was like finally putting the, writing the prologue and after finishing all the copy edits. The way that she talks about women, young women in the early 20th century who were unknown experimenters and adventurers, like that was really, really helpful. Because someone like Baker, like that story is always told as like she had to go, she's fleeing. And women who, you know, they're not married or they're not, I don't know, they're just not respectable. The way that Hartman embraces them as adventurers and as people who are experimenting with a variety of different forms of living, just really like opened, I mean, it just gave me the language I needed to be able to see Baker as one among those women. Those young, like slavery's been over for 40 years but freedom has not fully come. And these young women are figuring it out. There is waves of migration happening across the country. There are new technologies, there are all these possibilities, and they don't have the same hold on these paths to what would supposedly be respectable, and they are figuring something else out. And I don't know, and I loved that, and I loved the idea of Baker going to Paris as an adventure. And the idea of her being on a quest for, I don't know, for life. I mean, she lived in a castle. Yes, it was, she...they seize the castle (Terri snatches the air with both hands) but---

**Ruun** - They seize the castle.

**Terri** - Yeah.

**Ruun** - Right, right.

**Terri** - So, to me I, look, I just respect that, (Ruun Laughing) I guess so. I just ended up looking at her very differently. I just didn't have a lot of the like, sort of sad narratives of...

**Ruun** - Yeah, in the same way that you're saying that, what Saidiya Hartman was saying about Wayward Lives helped you out, this really did help me out. Because like I said, it offered me that language. I've always been, I've been articulating it, I feel like the last couple of months, but now, especially since I'm kind of stepping behind the camera it's more of an acknowledgement. These women are the center of their lens. And as I stepped behind the camera, okay, I'm occupying this more precarious real estate behind the camera as they're occupying this precarious state in front of the lens.

**Terri** - Yes, and that appreciating the precariousness, I think is so important. Because I think that's when P...I don't, like people will, there's just such a readiness to be disappointed. Like women, like, Oh, well, she's just a sexual something. And you're like, well, I don't know, isn't that part of being a person though?

**Ruun** - And also like, at least in the case of Josephine Baker like, this is a woman who had, how long of a career? Like a five, whatever. That's genius, you can't last that long. There's something else there, she's defying everything. Anyway---

**Terri** - That right, now it's 50 years. What you said, that's what I said to myself. I said, this lady was not performing for 50 years as just an idiot puppet or just a latter-day minstrel character, come on.

**Ruun** - Right, is not possible.

**Terri** - Yeah, that's not possible, that's genius there's a humanity there. And we need to find what that is.

**Ruun** - Yeah, also, I mean, I learned about this years ago, but I just went to go watch her, listened to her speech. She was one of two women who spoke at the March on Washington, which is just like...

**Terri** - Yeah, yeah.

**Ruun** - Come on, like, and she wasn't even, America wasn't her central place of work, right? She was in France, she came back. (Ruun chops the air with her hands to indicate distance traveled) It's just like, this woman is not a joke. It's not, you can't write her off as just like doing this banana dance, there's a genius here and there's a respect as well which I loved learning about. Yeah, For the last question though, (Ruun laughs noticing the Dave has reappeared in the Zoom space. He is smiling) I wanted to know, now that you've written about "Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism," are there other performers that you're interested in analyzing in that way?

**Terri** - Hmm, no, I think---(Ruun is laughs, as Dr. Francis smiles burying her face in her palms facing inward)

**Ruun** - Maybe that was me selfishly, like, please do something else. (Ruun is smiling and adjusting her ear pods)

**Terri** - Yeah, I mean, I do think a lot about, she's so singular, you know, but I think about women who are similar and different to her are, Katherine Dunham, who was an academic and a dancer, and kind of in this primitivist world, but as an anthropologist, as an academic, as a choreographer and a dancer. (Dr. Francis counts on her each of her fingers) And I think I would like to read more about her. I'd love to read more about Nina Mae McKinney, who performed in "Hallelujah," and she was...I think she would have been the Josephine Baker...I don't know, she kind of had it all as this like really deep performer and actress. But she, you know, whatever, Hollywood, racism, white supremacy, misogyny.

**Ruun** - The usual (Laughs).

**Terri** - just the usual and, you know, cause she, they were saying that she was difficult to work with. Yeah, okay. You mean she had dignity and self-respect? I mean, I just assume that's what was happening. So, like there are women kind of in the cohort of Baker that I'm interested in, but my next books are all on Afro Surrealism and looking... Whereas in this book I looked at, an innovator of the early 20th century. I'm interested in innovators of the early 21st century, and looking at contemporary experimental filmmakers and how they intersect with portraiture and an amateur filmmaking home movies, that type of material.

**Ruun** - Okay, we'll definitely make sure to keep an eye on that. Thank you so much for this conversation, truly like means the world. I'm glad we got to talk and interview this work. Thank you for this book.

**Dave** - To second that, I mean, Terri, here's the book everyone, make sure you, I know Ruun showed it earlier. Indiana University Press, and you can pick it up at the Wexner Center Shop and thank you both for this conversation. It was so, it illuminated such big portions of the book. And so, I hope people will pick up the book, read it, and then come back to this conversation even. I think it really did broaden some of the points that were made in the book. And so, thank you Ruun, thank you Terri. And, oh, I should also mentioned something you were talking about, if any of the films are available. I do believe Kino Lorber has a box set of the three features that are "Siren of The Tropics", "Princess Tam Tam" and "Zou Zou."

**Terri** - "Zou Zou" okay.

**Dave** - I'm not sure about streaming at the moment, but you definitely can get the box set of those three.

**Ruun** - A Criterion with Terri (Laughs).

**Terri** - Yeah, maybe so. 'Cause I know we're gonna be doing, we as in, the Wexner part of we, were gonna be screening "Siren of The Tropics" with this conversation.

**Dave** - For a week, I mean, people might watch this and it's not there anymore but---

**Terri** - Okay, then in June on her birthday, we'll be screening "Princess Tam Tam" through the IU cinema starting June 3<sup>rd</sup> or somewhere around there. So, but this was so great. I thank you so much for having me, for talking about this book. It was really nice.

**Ruun** - Of course, Oh my God, thank you, this is great.

**Terri** - Thank you.

**Dave** - Thank you.

(Dramatic and atmospheric music fades in and out again.)