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Joséphine Baker and Eartha Kitt: How Two Americans Became French Icons

*Shannon Poggi*¹

“I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents,” she said. “But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad.”²

- Joséphine Baker

Introduction

The spotlight seared from above, making the singer’s gown sparkle. Constellations of glitter shimmered across the performer who outshone even the beauty of her gown. As she took a breath, the band began to play, and the soft rasp of Eartha Kitt’s voice captivated crowds of onlookers. Though no one noticed how she gripped her microphone, as her hands shook white-knuckled.³ On the other side of France was another woman, Joséphine Baker. In her life, she had been a singer, dancer, and spy, who found herself down on her luck, indebted millions to a good cause gone awry.⁴ Both women were American by birth, French by chance, and entertainers through and through.

Both Baker and Kitt were stars who found great success after immigrating to Paris. France had garnered widespread perception as a racially safe haven due to the perception that it showed considerably more accepting treatment of its Black citizens.⁵ Despite its reputation, however, the French public and entertainment industry continued to foster negative stereotypes against their Black citizens and entertainers in their attempts to be progressive. Despite being American by birth, Baker’s early career especially saw her being typecast and styled in orientalist roles that reflected French stereotyping and fetishization of Africans.⁶ In spite of the troubles Black entertainers experienced in

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² BlackPast, “(1963) Joséphine Baker, ‘Speech at the March on Washington’,” 23 September 2019.

³ Eartha Kitt, *I’m Still Here: Confessions of a Sex Kitten* (Barricade Books, 1999), p. 68.

⁴ “Joséphine Baker,” Le Château et jardins des Milandes, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://www.milandes.com/en/Joséphine-baker/>.

⁵ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. (Houghton Mifflin, 1996), p. 5.

⁶ Anne Anlin Cheng, “Second Skin: Joséphine Baker and the Modern Surface,” *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (Oxford University Press, March 2013). <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2013.0022>.

France, she and others, such as Bricktop⁷ were tour de forces who paved the way for stars like Kitt to find success in the country.

As Baker faced bankruptcy near the end of her life, Kitt was just blossoming into her success in the French entertainment industry. Although these women's experiences have been rarely compared, they both have influenced history and pop culture with their work on and off the stage. Both women maintained glamorous and sultry personas while their personal and political lives were wrought with staunch activism. It is also necessary to delve into their achievements and personal lives to further understand them as people and to contextualize the world around them. Therefore, it is necessary to begin with the genesis of jazz in Paris during the First World War.

An Overview of The Black Expatriates' Experience During The First World War

The people of the United States, and particularly the South, did not believe Black Americans should be allowed to die for a country that they did not consider them a part of. Black Americans who joined the military were intentionally placed in menial positions and were relegated to work as cooks, cleaners, or cargo loaders. To add insult to injury, they were also typically deployed in France with the hope they would not die "heroically" in combat there. The people of France, however, were quickly enamored with the Black soldiers.

The French were particularly fond of the jazz that Black Americans had brought with them. Although the United States in the early twentieth century was wrought with radical racial discrimination, it also saw the blossoming of the Harlem Renaissance as well,⁸ and Baker became a breakout star during this period.⁹ This artistic era established jazz as a staple in American popular culture. Jazz was, and is, an integral force in American music. The genre found a new home in Paris as Black Americans flocked to France in droves.¹⁰ Black Americans were also quite enamored with France. Many found a stark difference in the level of respect they were allotted in France as opposed to the United States. The French respected the soldiers greatly for their valiant work ethic, rich culture, and amiable company. The two million deaths experienced by the French also led to their quick welcoming

⁷ Tamara J. Walker, "At Her Globe-Spanning Nightclubs, This Black Entertainer Hosted a 'whos Who' of the 20th Century," Smithsonian Magazine, 30 April 2024, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/at-her-globe-spanning-nightclubs-this-black-entertainer-hosted-whos-whos-20th-century-180984224/>.

⁸ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, pp. 16-22.

⁹ Library of Congress, "Research Guides: French Women & Feminists in History: A Resource Guide: Joséphine Baker," - Research Guides at Library of Congress, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://guides.loc.gov/feminism-french-women-history/famous/Joséphine-baker>.

¹⁰ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, pp. 16-22.

of Black expatriates.¹¹ Many of France's blue-collar workers had been casualties of war, and the French public happily welcomed people they saw as not only the provision of a new cultural touchstone, but also an opportunity to fill the gap of blue-collar workers that had been hollowed out after the war. Hundreds of thousands of other immigrant workers also trickled into France to fill this gap and did not receive the same pleasant treatment.

Of these workers, 222,592 were non-Europeans (Algerians, Indochinese, Chinese, Tunisians, and Malagasy). This large group of immigrants was the first significant example of racial diversity in the country and sparked ire among French citizens. These immigrant workers faced an uptick of racial violence and discrimination as embittered French citizens ascribed to the idea that migrant workers had imposed upon and threatened French culture by picking up the slack left by most of France's male population participating in military service. Soldiers from France's colonies and Black American soldiers were met with comparatively much more favorable treatment, and their experiences, especially those of Black Americans, furthered the idea of a racially tolerant France.¹² In historian Tyler Stovall's book, *Paris Noir*, a sex worker is said to have beaten a man for his ghastly reaction to the idea of her taking on a Black client. During the encounter and while beating up the racist, she was recorded to have shouted, "After all, the Senegalese fought for us!"¹³ Elsewhere in *Paris Noir*, a common Parisian phrase of the time was "*soldat noir, tres gentil, tres polis*," which translates to "black soldier, very nice, very polite."¹⁴

As previously stated, tales from Black American soldiers made their way back to America. Myths of an egalitarian France would spread as a result of their speaking of incredibly respectful and even venerable treatment they received from the French. This led to French travel becoming aspirational and to Black Americans taking great pride in the success stories of Black expatriates. As historian Rachel Gillet states within "Jazz and the Evolution of Black American Cosmopolitan in Interwar Paris," however, Black Americans were so widely accepted in France because,¹⁵ unlike French

¹¹ Aaron O'Neill, "First World War: Fatalities Per Country 1914-1918," Statista, 9 August 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1208625/first-world-war-fatalities-per-country/>.

¹² Tyler Stovall, "The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War." *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (1998): pp. 737–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2650570>.

¹³ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, p. 41.

¹⁴ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Rachel Gillet, "Jazz and the Evolution of Black American Cosmopolitanism in Interwar Paris." *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): pp. 471–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40985026>

immigrants,¹⁶ the French believed, “They ultimately presented no threat to French colonial power and thus could be embraced with few repercussions.”¹⁷

The Black American expatriates settled in Montmartre, a historically popular, diverse district with an abundance of opportunities for aspiring musicians. Prior to the arrival of the expatriates, there was already a Black community in the area. A staple in Montmartre life was found in popular dance venues such as the Moulin Rouge. In 1924, the expatriates in the area totaled about 20-30 people, most of whom were male and aspiring musicians.¹⁸ A notable exception was Bricktop, a widely successful singer, dancer, and nightclub owner. Ada “Bricktop” Smith earned her nickname from her fiery red hair and cemented her legacy as an incredibly influential entertainer and business owner after her immigration to France in 1924.¹⁹ At this time, she was the first Black American woman to settle in Paris.²⁰ Another major exception was found in prolific singer, dancer, actress, activist, philanthropist, and spy: Baker.²¹

Risks and Rewards

French citizens were obsessed with jazz and remained so into the 1970s. Even during the Great Depression, jazz musicians, who were only hired if they were Black, had the potential to make about \$300 per week through their performances.²² One of the most talented of these jazz stars was Joséphine Baker. Known predominantly for her iconic stage presence, Baker was beloved by the French. With her signature crossed eyes, high energy movements, and beaming smile, Baker graced stage after stage with her signature humor and unabashed talent. One of her most famous performances was when she arrived on stage topless in *Revue Nigre*, with only a small skirt of bananas covering her lower half. In

¹⁶ Stovall, “The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War.” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (1998): pp. 737–69.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2650570>.

¹⁷ Gillet, “Jazz and the Evolution of Black American Cosmopolitanism in Interwar Paris.” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 471–95.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40985026>.

¹⁸ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁹ Tamara J. Walker, “At Her Globe-Spanning Nightclubs, This Black Entertainer Hosted a ‘whos Who’ of the 20th Century,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 30 April 2024,

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/at-her-globe-spanning-nightclubs-this-black-entertainer-hosted-whos-whos-20th-century-180984224/>.

²⁰ Gillet, “Jazz and the Evolution of Black American Cosmopolitanism in Interwar Paris.” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): pp. 471–95.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40985026>.

²¹ Library of Congress “A Resource Guide: Joséphine Baker.”

²² Stovall, *Paris Noir*, p. 38.

this case, the banana skirt was intended as a satire of the stereotypes of Africans in France,²³ but Baker was placed into roles that played on her African heritage for years after this, nonetheless, in spite of her being from St. Louis, Missouri.²⁴

Born on 3 June 1906 as Freda Joséphine McDonald, Baker's childhood was incredibly tumultuous, having lived through the East St. Louis race war. Over the course of three days, from 1-3 July 1917, East St. Louis saw the confirmed deaths of about fifty people. Although some estimate there were about one hundred Black residents who lost their lives during the duration of the race war.²⁵ Given the horrors Baker had experienced so young, it is not a shock that she would dedicate much of her future life to activism. As Baker became a preteen, she also developed a fondness for a skill she would dedicate much of her future life to: dance. Baker eventually joined a travelling theater troupe, the Booker Washington Theater Company,²⁶ and left her home behind to become a star. On the road, she was briefly married to a man named William Baker, whose last name she kept.

Baker found great success in theater and was eventually scouted for the Broadway play, *Shuffle Along*, which premiered in 1921.²⁷ The play itself made history as the first Broadway production to incorporate African American dance in its program.²⁸ *Shuffle Along* helped not only in desegregating performance halls, but also was so popular that police changed 63rd Street to be a one-way thoroughfare due to the sheer amount of traffic jams that occurred during curtain calls.²⁹ After seeing Baker's performance, prolific author Ernest Hemingway described her as "the most sensational woman anyone ever saw." Her electric stage presence and great sense of humor made her one of the most memorable parts of the play, even if she was relegated to the chorus line. The show was incredibly

²³ "Joséphine Baker," Le Château et jardins des Milandes, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://www.milandes.com/en/Joséphine-baker/>.

²⁴ Cheng, "Second Skin."

²⁵ Allison Keyes, "The East St. Louis Race Riot Left Dozens Dead, Devastating a Community on the Rise," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/east-st-louis-race-riot-left-dozens-dead-devastating-community-on-the-rise-180963885/>.

²⁶ Le Château et jardins des Milandes, "Joséphine Baker".

²⁷ "Remembering a Milestone in Entertainment History | National Museum of African American History and Culture," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed 28 January 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/remembering-milestone-entertainment-history>.

²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "Joséphine Baker: From Poverty to Stardom to Espionage," 27 March 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/Joséphine-baker-from-poverty-to-stardom-to-espionage/>.

²⁹ National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Remembering a Milestone in Entertainment History."

successful and proved to be Baker's "big break" into mainstream entertainment. A popular rumor that circulated at the time was that Baker had received over 1,000 marriage proposals by the end of her time in the production. After her roaring success in the play, Baker found yet another major opportunity: the play was shuffling along to Paris next.³⁰

Kitt also found her initial success through dance. Young, spry, and determined, Kitt became a member of Katherine Dunham's dance troupe in 1946.³¹ Despite their opulent personas, both stars came from humble beginnings. Kitt was born in South Carolina on 17 January 1927.³² Kitt's parents were sharecroppers³³ and Kitt's mother put her in the care of various relatives. After an abusive foster home experience,³⁴ Kitt was adopted and taken to New York City.³⁵ There, Kitt found a bright opportunity after being scouted for Katherine Dunham's dance troupe in the 1940s. However, her true success occurred after she was kicked out of the travelling troupe. This was because, when Katherine Dunham's dance troupe arrived in France, Kitt was offered an opportunity to pursue a solo career there, performing in French cabarets. She was scouted from one of her performances, and decided to pursue the fruitful risk.³⁶

Success, Duress, and The Color Yellow

Likewise, critics and other performers alike believed Baker had undeniable star potential, and when she was offered another job in Paris, she was quick to accept. This opportunity for a musical called *Revue Nigre* required the talents of her and other Harlem stars to grace France with their performances. Insecure for the bulk of her life about what she referred to as her "yellow" complexion, "egg-shaped"

³⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "Joséphine Baker."

³¹ *Katherine Dunham Timeline, 1909-2006*. Special presentation. From the Library of Congress, The Katherine Dunham Collection.

³² Greg McKeivitt, "'We Had to Eat Whatever We Could Dig out of the Ground': How Eartha Kitt Rose from 'Extreme Poverty' to Superstardom," BBC News, 13 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20250109-eartha-kitt-from-extreme-poverty-to-stardom>.

³³ Library of Congress, "Research Guides: Eartha Kitt: Topics in Chronicling America: Introduction," Introduction - Eartha Kitt: Topics in Chronicling America - Research Guides at Library of Congress, 2026, <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-eartha-kitt/introduction>.

³⁴ Greg McKeivitt, "'We Had to Eat Whatever We Could Dig out of the Ground': How Eartha Kitt Rose from 'Extreme Poverty' to Superstardom," BBC News, 13 January 2025,

³⁵ Library of Congress, "Research Guides: Eartha Kitt: Topics in Chronicling America: Introduction," Introduction - Eartha Kitt: Topics in Chronicling America - Research Guides at Library of Congress, 2026, <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-eartha-kitt/introduction>.

³⁶ Library of Congress, "Research Guides: Eartha Kitt."

face, and “grasshopper” build, her insecurity melted away as she became more immersed in the French entertainment world. The largest shock was the expectation that she would pose nude for a portrait and poster promoting her first big performance in Paris at *Revue Nigre*.

Baker was deeply uncomfortable with the idea of being drawn nude at first, but after posing for a few sessions and seeing the work of the artist, Paul Colin, she was soon relieved. Baker’s initial discomfort had lifted when she realized he only saw her as a subject to draw, and nothing more. For the first time in her life, she felt beautiful.³⁷ She had money, independence, and an audience of adoring fans. Baker was beloved by the French.³⁸ A business owner several times over, a singer, an actress, a dancer, a philanthropist, and later a spy in the Second World War, Baker was a jack-of-all-trades.³⁹

Minutes before the curtain call at her first solo show in France, Kitt’s director slashed her floor-length gown so that there was a slit up to her thigh, which sparked the beginning of Kitt’s femme fatale persona.⁴⁰ On stage, she had severe anxiety, which she played off as what would become her signature seductive whisper.⁴¹ Kitt’s stage presence propelled her European career forward. She started her life being too poor to recognize a banana, to beluga caviar being her favorite treat.⁴² Kitt had ups and downs in France in the 1950s-1960s, often encountering snide comments about her mixed-race status. These obstacles only served to propel Kitt forward to be more outspoken in her advocacy for women and people of color. Kitt was not one to hold her tongue where it counted. Like Baker, Kitt stood up for what she believed in. She was even an outspoken supporter of the LGBTQIA+ community.⁴³ However, one obstacle she could not so easily overcome was a death in the family. Family was incredibly important to Kitt, especially as someone who had not known a complete one growing up. Therefore, when she received news of the passing of the woman who had adopted her in the 1960s, she promptly moved back to the United States to be with the family she had.

Baker opened her acclaimed performance venue/restaurant, Chez Joséphine, in 1926 with the help of her former manager and fiancé, Pepito. However, there were rumors that Baker tended to be cold toward many other Black American celebrities. To them, it felt as though she was trying too hard to “be white,” despite the fact that her fame was rooted in her Blackness. Qualms about Baker deepened when she moved her beloved Chez Joséphine into a part of the city predominantly inhabited

³⁷ Baker and Bouillon, *Joséphine*, pp. 49-50.

³⁸ Library of Congress, “A Resource Guide: Joséphine Baker.”

³⁹ Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, (1991), p. xiii.

⁴⁰ Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, p. 68.

⁴¹ (Jackson, Miss.), 21 June 1952, Library of Congress.

⁴² Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, p. 56.

⁴³ Shapiro and Levy, *Eartha & Kitt: A Daughter’s Love Story in Black and White*, Pegasus Books, p. 109.

by white people. However, Baker was simply fighting to succeed in a white-dominated culture.⁴⁴ Kitt would receive similar criticism in *Ebony Magazine*. In 1954, an issue of *Ebony Magazine* titled “Why Negroes Don’t Like Eartha Kitt” was published, addressing complaints from Black Americans that Kitt surrounded herself with too many white people in Hollywood. Entertainer Lena Waithe, *Ebony Magazine* looked at this criticism with surprise. “I didn’t know there was ever a time when Black people didn’t like Eartha Kitt. I’m glad things have changed.”⁴⁵

The French were fond of Black American expatriates, but were at the same time willing to inflict damaging stereotypes on Black people, which was indicative of the roles Baker played in her popular performances: an African woman who has to choose between her “beautifully savage” culture or being French was a popular one often ascribed to her.⁴⁶ In the French film *La Sirene des Tropiques* (1927), she was cast as a “seductive native.” Meanwhile, in the French film *ZouZou* (1934), she played the twin of a white man. Although the film *ZouZou* marked the first time that a Black woman starred in a major motion picture.⁴⁷ There was also the prevalent issue of colorism in Baker’s casting. Similar to Kitt, Baker was a light-skinned Black woman, which simultaneously gave her opportunity and grief in a Eurocentric country.⁴⁸ According to Baker, she was often considered “too dark” for “African” roles and “too yellow” for white roles.⁴⁹ “Yellow” or “yella” was a derogatory term used to denote mixed-race Black people in the past. Kitt was also subjected to this term, often being referred to as a “yella gal.”⁵⁰

Due to Baker’s racial ambiguity, the American literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng notes that Baker was simultaneously subjected to both orientalism and primitivism. Baker was draped in jewels and exposed. To the French, she represented the idea of something that was “wild,” but had the propensity to be “tamed” by the sensibilities of Westerners. The French public viewed her as a glimpse into a more “primitive” world, as her race also represented an idealized “simplistic” charm to them. This preconception continued to permeate, despite the fact that she was only ever a citizen of the United States and France.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Ronda Penrice, “Lena Waithe Takes A Look Back at Some of Our Most Iconic Ebony Covers,” *Ebony Magazine*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.ebony.com/lena-waithe-talks-ebony-covers/>.

⁴⁶ Cheng, “Second Skin”.

⁴⁷ Johns Hopkins University, “Collection: Johns Hopkins University Joséphine Baker Collection | Johns Hopkins University Libraries Archives Public Interface, accessed 29 January 2026, <https://space.library.jhu.edu/repositories/3/resources/712>.

⁴⁸ Eartha Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, pp. 66-71.

⁴⁹ Cheng, “Second Skin”.

⁵⁰ Eartha Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Cheng, “Second Skin”.

However, Baker promptly renounced her United States citizenship after her return to the country in 1936. Following her great success in France, Baker had grown determined to perform back in her home country once more. Therefore, she decided to perform in the Broadway production, *Zigfield Follies*. Unfortunately, this decision proved to be its own folly, as Baker was accosted by vitriolic, racist reviews of her performance. Afterward, Baker claimed France to be her one and only home. She had found more respect, fame, and wealth there than she ever had in her home country and intended to stay.⁵²

In spite of Baker's preference for living in France, she did not entirely leave the United States behind. She still carried fondness for her home country, and wanted to assist in quelling the prevalence of racial discrimination and would continue advocacy work for American Civil Rights through working to desegregate concert halls,⁵³ which Kitt also advocated for through her refusal to perform at white-only venues.⁵⁴ Another large intersection of activism between the two women was seen with the March on Washington in 1963, an event that Kitt would assist in the planning of and that Baker played a major role in.⁵⁵

Women and War

Another one of Baker's more unconventional hobbies was revolution. She was also vehemently anti-fascist and eagerly assisted deGaulle in espionage work during the Second World War.⁵⁶ Baker's time as a spy began with the act of hiding refugees in her French chateau when the country fell to the Nazi regime. She also used it as a hub for freedom fighters. She had already been raising money for the French army with her performances. As a celebrity, she could travel more easily than the average French citizen. Weaponizing her charm, Baker easily manipulated German, Japanese, and Italian operatives into revealing classified information about the war. She played on the individual weaknesses each man exhibited in conversation. Soon, the Nazis became suspicious of her behavior and investigated her chateau for signs of refugees. Baker had learned to fly a plane to move refugees out of the country, but by employing her acting skills, she successfully dispelled the investigators' suspicions. Soon after this, Baker left the country under the guise of a world tour, smuggling documents disguised as sheet music.

During this "world tour," Baker obtained classified information from loose-lipped soldiers in North Africa and Portugal. In Casablanca, Baker became ill, but her sickbed became a point where contacts could reach her to exchange information. Baker had smuggled documents from France, writing information she gathered in invisible ink on sheet music. In 1941, fake news spread of her

⁵² Central Intelligence Agency, "Joséphine Baker."

⁵³ Library of Congress, "A Resource Guide: Joséphine Baker," Joséphine Baker."

⁵⁴ Library of Congress, "Eartha Kitt."

⁵⁵ Library of Congress, "A Resource Guide: Joséphine Baker," Joséphine Baker."

⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Joséphine Baker."

death by the French government to ease any suspicions of her spy work.⁵⁷ The information she collected directly supported Operation Torch, the Allied forces' attack on the Axis powers occupying North Africa in November 1942.

When the star returned to France after D-Day, she began selling her jewelry to help feed French citizens struggling after the war. For her exceptional espionage, Charles deGaulle personally awarded Baker three prestigious medals in 1945: the *Rosette de la Resistance*, the *Croix de Guerre*, and the *Chevalier de Legion*, the last of which is the highest military honor that can be bestowed in France.⁵⁸

Luncheons and Legacies

"It was to a place called France. . . I must tell you, ladies and gentlemen, in that country I never feared. It was like a fairyland." ⁵⁹ - Joséphine Baker

Although Kitt had to leave France abruptly due to a death in her family, she returned in 1968 after a tumultuous luncheon with First Lady Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson. Fifty white and Black female celebrities were invited to form a panel to discuss the best method of quelling the youth uprising and the increase in drug use as a result of the Vietnam War. During the luncheon, several subtly racist comments were made, blaming impoverished Americans of color for influencing the white suburban youth.⁶⁰ Kitt had brought her daughter to this luncheon, who sat idly and wide-eyed on her lap as the women spoke.

When subtly racist comments were not being made, placid, reassuring comments to "Lady Bird" were sprinkled about. After a while, Kitt had had enough. She berated Johnson for skirting around the real issue that the youths faced: the potential of dying in Vietnam. She proceeded to give a speech condemning the platitudes that were being offered and the racist remarks towards Black youth. Kitt was appalled that many of the women, including "Lady Bird," were so quick to blame Black youth for the prevalence of drugs, rather than the youth's unrest stemming from the potential loss of life they faced for themselves and or their loved ones.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Lauren Michele Jackson, "Joséphine Baker Was the Star France Wanted-and the Spy It Needed," *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2022.

⁵⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "Joséphine Baker."

⁵⁹ BlackPast, "(1963) Joséphine Baker, 'Speech at the March on Washington'" 23 September 2019, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-Joséphine-baker-speech-march-washington/>.

⁶⁰ Kitt, *I'm Still Here*, pp. 231-233.

⁶¹ United Press International. 1968/01/19/. "Eartha Kitt Denounces War Policy to Mrs. Johnson" *New York Times*. 19 January 1968. <https://ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/eartha-kitt-denounces-war-policy-mrs-johnson/docview/118370248/se-2>.

The next day, the papers were ablaze with headlines about Kitt making “Lady Bird” cry. As a result, Kitt faced intense public outrage and an FBI investigation. Kitt later learned that the only “incriminating” evidence they could muster about her was that she was an alleged “nymphomaniac”⁶² because she had more than one boyfriend in her life. This assertion by the FBI was not only mortifying but infuriating to the star.⁶³

Like Baker’s early persona, Kitt’s stage persona differed from her personal life. In reality, Kitt was down-to-earth, rarely wore makeup, and preferred not to have men in her life. Kitt was also very fond of gardening, nicknamed “Down To Eartha” by her daughter, Kitt Shapiro, for her grassroots approach to life. Her daughter found amusement in the idea that her mother, the “sex kitten,” would find such fascination with the spiders in her garden, or hobbies such as needlepoint.⁶⁴

In response to the outrage regarding Kitt’s comments at the luncheon, she was quoted in *Essence Magazine*, saying:

“The thing that hurts, that became anger, was when I realized that if you tell the truth -- in a country that says you’re entitled to tell the truth -- you get your face slapped and you get put out of work.”⁶⁵

After her roles dried up in Hollywood post-luncheon, Kitt’s role as Catwoman in the Adam West *Batman* show helped to pay the bills, but it was not enough to keep her afloat. It would soon be clear that Johnson had triggered a nationwide blacklist for the star. Prior to the lifting of the blacklist, the vitriol against Kitt was so intense that her close confidante, Martin Luther King Jr., had elicited the Black Panthers’ help to allow her to leave the country safely.⁶⁶

A woman of many talents, Baker did more than dance, sing, act, advocate, and engage in espionage; she was also a philanthropist. Bouillon also assisted Baker in her philanthropy, with her dream regarding Le Château et jardins de Les Milandes. The Château was a castle located in the Dogondes region of France, purchased for Baker’s “Rainbow Children” or “Rainbow Tribe.” Baker, with a goal to foster racial tolerance, adopted twelve orphans from different ethnic backgrounds and

⁶² Seymour Hersh, “C.I.A. in ‘68 Gave Secret Service a Report Containing Gothe country safelyssip About Eartha Kitt After White House Incident,” *The New York Times*, 3 January 1975.

⁶³ Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, pp. 240-241.

⁶⁴ Shapiro and Levy, *Eartha & Kitt*, pp. 95-105.

⁶⁵ Chicago Tribune, “Eartha Kitt: The Patriot Who Was Right All Along,” Chicago Tribune, 22 August 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2008/12/29/eartha-kitt-the-patriot-who-was-right-all-along/>.

⁶⁶ Kitt, *I’m Still Here*, p. 234.

sought to house them into adulthood in the castle.⁶⁷ She had pooled a good deal of money into her philanthropy and gave the children luxurious lives. Baker, however, also wanted to give the children in the surrounding area more opportunities and created a school catchment. Unfortunately, Baker's well-intentioned endeavor left her in significant debt and in conflict with her husband.

Their dire financial situation led Bouillon to ultimately leave Baker and travel to Argentina, where some of the Rainbow Tribe eventually followed him. The Château went up for auction for the first time in 1964, but financial assistance from Brigitte Bardot held off its eventual sale in 1968. Baker, devastated, locked herself in the Château and suffered a mental breakdown, which led her to be hospitalized after the new owner evicted her from the property. Baker claimed that France had failed her.

Through Princess Grace of Monaco, Baker began performing to help pay off her debts. Unfortunately, she passed from a cerebral hemorrhage soon after. When news of Baker's death reached her late husband, through Bouillon's brother, he and the remaining eleven Rainbow Children reunited for the funeral and paid their respects. After her death, Les Milandes was reopened as a museum and serves as a loving memorial to her unwavering commitment to universal peace.⁶⁸

After the Black Panthers helped Kitt leave the United States, she travelled throughout Europe, constantly performing. During this time, Kitt found refuge in France once more. She spent years travelling with her daughter throughout Europe until, at her daughter's request to live a normal teenage life, they returned to the United States and settled in Connecticut. Shapiro and her mother remained each other's best friends until Kitt's death on Christmas Day in 2008.⁶⁹

In 2021, the same year Kitt Shapiro's biography about her mother was published, Baker was honored in the French Pantheon. Baker was simultaneously the first American and the first Black woman to be inducted into The Pantheon, joining the likes of Marie Curie. The Pantheon is a hall of heroes, where Baker was recognized not only for her cultural impact on France, and her espionage during the Second World War, but also for her opening words to Kitt's friend, Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963.⁷⁰

Friends and brothers and sisters, that is how it went. And when I screamed loud enough, they started to open that door just a little bit, and we all started to be able to squeeze through it. Now I am not going to stand in front of all of you today and take credit for what is happening now. I cannot do

⁶⁷ Le Château et jardins des Milandes, "Joséphine Baker," accessed 29 January 2026, <https://www.milandes.com/en/Joséphine-baker/>.

⁶⁸ Le Château et jardins des Milandes, "Joséphine Baker."

⁶⁹ Shapiro and Levy, *Eartha & Kitt*, pp. 293-301.

⁷⁰ Roger Cohen, "Joséphine Baker Becomes First Black Woman Inducted into France's Tomb of Heroes," *New York Times*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/world/europe/Joséphine-baker-buried-pantheon.html>.

that. But I want to take credit for telling you how to do the same thing, and when you scream, friends, I know you will be heard.⁷¹

Conclusion

Both Baker and Kitt were famous Black American expatriates who found great success in France, and each woman was a product of the era in which she lived. Baker did what she had to do to survive, and Kitt did what she had to do to thrive. Baker and other Black expatriates, such as Bricktop,⁷² paved the way for Kitt and others to have an easier time in France than they had. However, both of their careers had been kick-started by their status as sex symbols; each used that to their advantage as they navigated both the difficulties of the entertainment world and the tumultuous socio-political landscapes across two continents.

Today, France proclaims itself progressive on race. However, there remain issues in terms of reaching anti-racism. As expressed in *Paris Noir*, though the French were content to consume Black art and appreciative of Black participation in blue-collar labor, there was pushback when Black French people achieved financial success. The Haynes restaurant, opened by Leroy Haynes, remains a Black center of Paris. The first Parisian soul-food restaurant serves as a hub for the Black community and remains popular among white French people. Sisters, an advocacy group for Black American women in France, held the first Juneteenth celebration at Haynes in 1994.⁷³

This divergence from France's claimed progressivism can be seen in examples mentioned prior: in the hypocritical treatments of two women, between soldiers and workers, between immigrants and expatriates⁷⁴, but it can also be seen in tensions among the French and Muslim immigrants. Recently, the French government banned its Olympians from wearing hijabs during sporting events, sparking considerable controversy. In France's attempt to be progressive, some believe that they are simultaneously stripping women of their rights.⁷⁵ This can also be seen in the case of a star who performed at the 2024 Summer Olympics. When Aya Nakamura was announced to be performing, there was extreme racist backlash from pockets of far-right French extremists on account of feeling insulted by "being represented" by someone of African descent. The backlash Nakamura endured was

⁷¹ BlackPast, "(1963) Joséphine Baker, 'Speech at the March on Washington' 23 September 2019, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-Joséphine-e-baker-speech-march-washington/>.

⁷² Walker, "At Her Globe-Spanning Nightclubs."

⁷³ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, pp. 320-326.

⁷⁴ Stovall, "The Color Line behind the Lines."

⁷⁵ "France: Hijab Ban during Sports, 'discriminatory and Must Be Reversed', Say Experts | UN News," United Nations, accessed 31 October 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1156226>.

so vitriolic that French officials were summoned to investigate and quell the cyber attacks. The organizers of the Paris Olympics commented on the discriminatory behavior by saying, “We were very shocked by the racist attacks against Nakamura in recent days. We offer our full support to the most listened-to French artist in the world.” Nakamura performed despite the backlash and received worldwide acclaim. However, she was understandably perturbed by the racism she was subjected to.⁷⁶

Baker herself remains a staple of modern pop culture. Many celebrities have referenced Baker’s iconic banana dress. Beyonce, for example, paid tribute to the star on her 100th birthday by wearing a Chanel-made tribute dress during a performance of her song, “Deja Vu.” As Beyoncé stated on ABC News, “I wanted to be more like Joséphine Baker, because she seemed like she just was possessed and it seemed like she just danced from her...heart, and everything was so free.”⁷⁷ Regarding Kitt’s acting career, after her time as Cat Woman ended, there was a gap in the portrayal of Cat Woman as a Black character in film. However, there have been subtle shifts back to the idea of a Black Cat Woman since. Halle Berry took on the role in 2004 and was heavily criticized for it. It was not because of her race, but because the movie was infamously terrible. Recently, however, in media such as the animated *The Harley Quinn Show* (starring Sanaa Lathan) and the newest live-action *The Batman* movie (starring Zoe Kravitz), Catwoman has been portrayed by a Black woman.⁷⁸

Near the end of Kitt’s life, she also played Yzma in the animated Disney movie *The Emperor’s New Groove*, released in 2000. At her granddaughter’s birthday party, Kitt performed as Yzma for starry-eyed children. Yzma, unfortunately, was one of Kitt’s final roles.⁷⁹ This birthday party occurred a few years prior to the end of Kitt’s life, and she passed from natural causes on Christmas Day, 2008. For the first years after Kitt’s passing, Shapiro dreaded going out in public during Christmas, constantly reminded of her death by Kitt’s famous Christmas song, “Santa Baby,” playing wherever she went. Kitt’s passing was devastating for Shapiro, who pored over Kitt’s old letters and possessions, trying to absorb any part of Kitt she could. One night, Shapiro found herself mindlessly channel surfing, wrought with grief. She paused the television when she heard her mother’s voice, however. Kitt’s words rang out from a movie’s rerun, and she was overcome with emotion:

⁷⁶ Gabrielle Nolin and David Arkin, “French Officials Investigate Racist Attacks on Pop Star Aya Nakamura,” NBCNews.com, 15 March 2024.

⁷⁷ ABC News GMA, “Beyonce Hits Milestone,” ABC News, 7 September 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/SummerConcert/story?id=2404367&page=1>.

⁷⁸ Stephanie Harper, “These Memorable Black Women Have All Played Catwoman,” Black Girl Nerds, 4 November 2021. <https://blackgirlnerds.com/these-memorable-black-women-have-all-played-catwoman/>.

⁷⁹ Shapiro and Levy, *Eartha & Kitt*, p. 321.

The irony is not lost on me that my mother died on Christmas Day, when “Santa Baby,” the song written for her...is being played throughout the world. I guess she wanted to make her mark, and she would never be forgotten. Thank you for being my mother. Thank you for being the unique, original, and extraordinary woman that you were. Thank you for becoming—no—for *making yourself* so much more than ‘just a poor cotton picker from the south.’ Thank you, Mom, for being you and teaching me to be me.⁸⁰

Both Baker and Kitt were stars, through and through. These women were icons who left a mark on two continents and the world at large. Through their incredible talent, glamor, and activism, both women have undoubtedly and thoroughly imprinted themselves on popular culture: French and American, past and present.

⁸⁰ Shapiro and Levy, *Eartha & Kitt*, pp. 322-333.