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# Second Skin: Josephine Baker & The Modern Surface



## Synopsis

Through the figure of Josephine Baker, *Second Skin* tells the story of an unexpected yet enduring intimacy between the invention of a modernist style and the theatricalization of black skin at the turn of the twentieth century. Stepping outside of the platitudes surrounding this iconic figure, Anne A. Cheng argues that Baker's famous nakedness must be understood within larger philosophic and aesthetic debates about, and desire for, 'pure surface' that crystallized at the convergence of modern art, architecture, machinery, and philosophy. Through Cheng's analysis, Baker emerges as a central artist whose work engages with and impacts various modes of modernist display such as film, photography, art, and even the modern house.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A playful, insanely ambitious text that seeks to rethink standard assumptions about Modernism, race and Josephine Baker in less than 200 pages . . . The book performs the admirable service of making Josephine Baker, the world she inhabited, and the skin that inhabited her seem stranger and more complex than they did before."--cinespect.com "Opening up an entirely original line of inquiry that connects the architectural surfaces of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier to the shimmering allure of Josephine Baker's skin, this far-reaching study gives us a unique model of cross-cultural modernity in which psychoanalysis has a major role to play. With wit, verve, and precision, Anne Cheng's insights ensure that our understanding of early Modernism will never be the same and that our notions of phantasy and identification in art, film, and performance will be radically transformed."--Kobena Mercer, author of *Welcome to the Jungle* "Anne Cheng's *Second Skin* offers

an innovative, surprising, deeply transdisciplinary archaeology of aesthetic Modernism's relationship to race and its performances. Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Picasso, Paul Valéry, and Freud's psychoanalysis become partners in the dizzying theoretical and historical analysis, where Cheng reveals how buildings, fashion, photographs, paintings, and dances express as well as construct our shared legacy of racial formations."--Andrzej Lepecki, author of *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*"In a bravura meditation on the surfaces at the core of Modernism--skin, costume, canvas screen, ornament, pattern--Anne Anlin Cheng tracks the vicissitudes of visual pleasure in the encounter between Europe and its others. La Baker was not simply a lightning rod for exotic stereotypes, Cheng suggests, but instead a 'dynamic fulcrum' whose performances captivated because they staged the crosscurrents that define Modernist style, its dangerous intimacies between primitive and civilized, animal and machine, organic and plastic."--Brent Hayes Edwards, author of *The Practice of Diaspora*"This brilliant, provocative, eye-opening work provides a powerful account of racial fetishism and its centrality to the development of Modernist style, thus forwarding a stunning new theory of Modernism in its entirety."--Sianne Ngai, author of *Ugly Feelings*

Anne Anlin Cheng is Professor of English and African American Literature at Princeton University and the author of *The Melancholy of Race: Assimilation, Psychoanalysis, and Hidden Grief*.

Cheng's revision of Modernism is a delight. She gives full credence to those scholars who have criticized the way Modernist architecture and art invented a self-serving ideology of "primitivism" that was the foil for their own claim to be the avant-garde of humanity. But she wants to rethink the relationship between Modernism and the racialized fetishism that it created. Modernists like Picasso, Corbusier, and Adolph Loos clearly had a fascination with Josephine Baker's sensual performances and her play with primitivist signifiers (animal skins, choreographic excess, stylized nudity). Much of their reaction to her fell in line with the mixture of aversion and desire that defines fetishism. But Cheng asks whether Modernist artists *actually* *and*, indeed, Baker herself *actually* *were* really concerned with expressing an essence ("civilization," "modernity," or "black femininity"), and instead may have been experimenting with formal ways to design a "second skin," a surface on which to create a palimpsest of contradictory identifications. To put it more schematically, Cheng wants to move away from a simple opposition between Modernist abstraction and Primitive ornamentation. She wants to think instead about how the idea of "skin" *both* the unadorned architectural surfaces of

Modernism and Baker's performance of nudity. This can be a site of where different kinds of persons (white European men, women and people of color) tried to enact ways of being other than the "essence" assigned to them by colonial ideologies. This is a complicated but exhilarating thought experiment that combines history, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural histories of modern art and architecture. Cheng's clear and lively prose makes it a pleasure to follow her in this revisionary approach to race and primitivism within Modernist culture.

Intelligent, perceptive new look at the Josephine Baker story, with none of the old cliches.

Beautifully written. Even better than her first, *The Melancholy of Race*.

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