



2016

Afterlife

Matthew Pratt Guterl

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Guterl, Matthew Pratt. "Afterlife." *The Iowa Review* 46.1 (2016): 144-155. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7709>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Afterlife



Jean-Claude Baker photographed in front of a mural of his mother, Josephine Baker, at Chez Josephine. Getty Images.

The news of his suicide reached me within hours.

Jean-Claude Baker, adopted son of singer, dancer, and expatriate Josephine Baker, and legendary proprietor of the Broadway bistro Chez Josephine, had killed himself at his Hamptons beach house. I remembered the house, of course. I'd been summoned there four years before his death—given only twenty-four hours' notice, via a hasty phone call, that Jean-Claude's younger brother, Koffi, would be in town from Buenos Aires. The short notice was typical—it seemed to be the way that Jean-Claude operated: breathlessly, ambitiously, always at the center of the room, always requiring rapid responses from everyone around him.

Of course, I dutifully booked a ticket to LaGuardia, rented the smallest car I have ever driven, and hurled myself down the Long Island Expressway. What I found was what I expected. A house that was modern, quirky, and fantastic, right down to the funky industrial rub-

ber floors. Jean-Claude greeted me in the driveway—he was always so welcoming—and we entered the house through the garage. The same garage, sadly, that he would close off in January of 2015, sealing it up tight and running his Mercedes until the exhaust fumes rendered him unconscious, until he asphyxiated and died.

Jean-Claude's tragic suicide highlights for me the transnational work of celebrity. Jean-Claude presented himself as the well-known adopted son of Josephine Baker, an extraordinarily famous performer, and his life and her life, intertwined at the roots, moved back and forth across the Atlantic in the late twentieth century. My willingness to jet off to the Hamptons—and, at considerable expense, to enter a social world quite distinct from the small college town where I was then living—was a consequence of my attempt to understand how celebrity worked, what kind of power it had, and where it had limits.

It is a difficult thing to work in the contemporary moment, and to historicize something or someone as internationally elusive as celebrity, because every single source—every room full of actors, confidence men, and hangers-on—is hustling you. There is no fixed point of sincerity. Only the swirl of manic imaginings, in which every person you meet is skillfully, convincingly presenting him or herself as the only “true” and “faithful” friend of Josephine, and there is no way to do more than trust your gut, to trust the evidence squirreled away in more traditional archives.

If there is a lesson in all of this—this intertwining of Jean-Claude's story and that of his mother, and his terrible ending—it is that the lives of the rich and the famous never really end, because their celebrity ensures a certain kind of afterlife. The same should be true, I think, of the biographies we write about them. Or, really, of the biographies we write about anyone.

When the news reached me of Jean-Claude's suicide, I'd recently published a life of his mother. And, to be frank, the notion that he was gone forever put me in a tailspin. His absence revealed the existential stakes of our work as writers and clarified, I thought, the professional responsibility of a biographer as head curator of another's life. But it also left me feeling rather alone, because the book I'd written had been, in many ways, a product of our collaboration.

Baker's lifelong sojourn in France was, in a word, wild. Rich and famous before she was twenty, the woman nicknamed the “Black Pearl” went onto become a major film star in the interwar years, then a hero of the Resistance, then a civil and human rights activist, and, finally, the

mother of twelve adopted children assembled into something she called the “Rainbow Tribe.”

I was particularly interested in this last act, this domestic creation of a multiracial, international platoon of children, staged on the grounds of a medieval castle and intended as the centerpiece of a for-profit theme park.

After returning to the United States in the early 1950s, where she staged some dramatic protests against Jim Crow, and after spending six months in Juan Perón’s Buenos Aires, where she ran, as a symbolic figurehead, the *Fundación Eva Perón*, Baker imagined her Rainbow Tribe as a sort of Disneyland-in-the-Dordogne. She used the children she’d collected from around the world to dramatize the role of race, nation, and gender at her *nouvelle* home. Defining the children as idealized racial types and often dressing them in stereotypical costume, she invited her publics to watch them grow up in a paradise she defined as antiracist and as the embodiment of French hospitality.

What I found, at the start of my research, was that Baker had no real place in the literature. She had scads of biographies, of course, most of them of the Andrew-Morton-Hollywood-tabloid variety. In the American context, Baker was one of the departed, one of those who escaped Jim Crow by simply leaving, never really to return. In the French context, she was an outlier, a brash foreigner who was always slightly offbeat, or *risqué*, or different. There was no body of work one could rely on to understand her movements, her returns, and her repeated invocation of things not easily assigned to one national context or another. Her archive was scattered, disorganized, and private.

I also found that she was everywhere, and linked to all sorts of social movements, hobnobbing with the spokesmen of the nonaligned movement, working outside of the U.S./Soviet binary. A global superstar who crossed political genres, she strategized with Cheddi Jagan or Fidel Castro in one moment, chatted about literature with fellow exile James Baldwin in the next, and with Ghana’s postcolonial leader Kwame Nkrumah in another. And then, on another day, she might be dining with Hollywood royal Grace Kelly and millionaire socialite Gloria Vanderbilt. This wasn’t just a busy social calendar; it reflected her commitment to political projects that weren’t intrinsically connected, and to a life that strayed far from the ways we periodize our history-writing.

Trying to plot out her life, I came to conclude that she was a progressive civil rights activist—indeed, a visionary heroine of the 1950s and 1960s—but that ordinary people paid a price for her courage. Ordinary people like the children she adopted whimsically, and whom she deco-

rated and presented to her public as political objects. Ordinary people like her mother, whom she brought over to France to parent the children while she traveled, and who lies today in an unmarked grave just down the road from the castle where Josephine raised the Rainbow Tribe. The cause was just, but its consequences were brutal, because these ordinary people were routinely ground up. “This is what happens,” I wrote at the biography’s close, “when celebrity goes to war.”

A very small handful of books had taken her seriously: Phyllis Rose’s 1990 biography, *Jazz Cleopatra*; the more recent scholarly portraits by Bennetta Jules-Rosette and Anne Anlin Cheng; and of course Jean-Claude’s mammoth portrait, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*, first published in 1993.

In many ways, Josephine Baker was a lifelong performer, who—in making her intimacies a part of her stagecraft—obliterated the divide between public and private. Finding the “real” Baker, I knew from the start of my work, was always going to be difficult, because she was always on stage. But also because she left an archive curated by untrustworthy stakeholders, an international cast of characters whose relation to the emerging text and the life of Josephine was dynamic—and confusing.

Jean-Claude, a flamboyant, melodramatic, theatrical human being, was one of these stakeholders. His biography (coauthored with Chris Chase) vexed me from the start because it was so intellectually confounding, so emotionally intimate, and so self-reflexive. It was, I told him, two books in one: a comprehensive, cradle-to-the-grave-and-beyond biography and a sentimental, confessional memoir. As such, it was hard to know exactly how to use it.

In a way, Jean-Claude was Josephine Baker’s chief curator. The owner of midtown’s Chez Josephine, a restaurant devoted to the memory of his mother, Jean-Claude ran afoul of the postal service in 2007 when he tried to send 15,000 postcards, each emblazoned with a naked image of Josephine, to friends and supporters of the restaurant. The post office refused, branding the cards as “pornographic advertising.” Undaunted, Jean-Claude placed a “Censored” banner over Josephine’s breasts and mailed out the postcard anyhow.

“You have to meet Jean-Claude,” a friend told me early on, after learning of my interest in the Rainbow Tribe. He insisted that we head straightaway to Chez Josephine for dinner. After greeting me at the door in his customary Chinese silk, Jean-Claude came to sit at our table and spent hours talking about his mother, his brothers and sisters, and the experiment at Les Milandes, her château-cum-amusement park in rural France. He was, of course, unsparingly candid and graphic, and we all

blushed. After the dinner, when my wife and I were on our way back to Queens, we blushed some more and laughed and laughed about his outrageous stories and his great satirical timing. Years later, my graduate assistant, listening to the interview, blushed too.

Jean-Claude and I met many times over the next few years. During a long pause in a subsequent interview, when it was just the two of us seated at a small table in the front window, I asked him about the restaurant. He was most proud, he said, of the politics of Chez Josephine, of its establishment in the midst of the HIV-AIDS crisis as a welcoming space. When almost no one else wanted anything to do with the LGTBQ community, Jean-Claude opened his restaurant for a decidedly queer Valentine's Day celebration, a reflection of his lifelong commitment to the HIV-AIDS struggle and the gay community. Accounts of his passing describe Chez Josephine as a "New York institution," at home amidst the foreign tourists and booming theater district of the present—but it was also rooted in the pre-history of the glittering present, before Times Square became a neon tourist destination, before the city became a dreamland for the one percent, when it was harder to be openly gay and out, when cityscapes were grittier, more dangerous.

Jean-Claude was also my primary point of contact with Baker's other children. He shared phone numbers and e-mail addresses, most of which panned out. He put me in touch with reclusive family members, even if some of Josephine's children were tired of talking about the Rainbow Tribe.

I still remember that day in the Hamptons, where I met Jean-Claude's brother, Koffi, a soft-spoken visitor from the Palermo Hollywood neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Our host had served radishes with sea salt as a snack and salmon for lunch. The conversation was in mostly in Spanish and French, with a smattering of English. Throughout, Koffi conversed gently, quietly, urgently, while Jean-Claude listened in from the kitchen, animatedly annotating his brother's stories, making sure I understood the significance of the details, as he saw them. Jean-Claude was always doing that—always underlining, boldfacing, highlighting. It was exhausting and exhilarating, and Koffi agreed, at the close, to spend some time with me in Buenos Aires the following fall and talk a little more about the years after his mother's death in 1975, when he and his younger siblings were dispatched to Argentina.

Of course, the thing is, Jean-Claude wasn't actually Josephine Baker's son. A young French teen working in a hotel she'd visited, he'd grabbed hold of her coattails, took her last name, and proclaimed himself the thirteenth child in her family. He repeated the claim so often—and so

loudly—that most people just let it go. Some of her adopted children obliged him; others refused.

Jean-Claude's legendary candor—which the clever performer shared with me over dinner at his restaurant or at lunch in the Hamptons—was meant to make me blush, to make me feel like he'd shared something with me, to coax me into writing a sort of sequel to his own “mommy dearest” biography. All of his underlining, highlighting, and boldfacing had a distinct purpose. “My publisher trimmed everything interesting,” he told me, leaning in with a stage whisper. Having read *Josephine* so closely over the years, though, I can't imagine this is true.

Over time, I came to think of the restaurant as a global switching point, a sort of transnational contact zone in which the younger members of the Rainbow Tribe were sometimes literally present. I heard four languages spoken there, and people were always coming and going from other, similarly situated nodes in the worldwide network. There was the racial camp of the place, too, which was also a part of Jean-Claude's tremendous appeal, his performance of outrageousness, an echo of his mother. Here was a white Frenchman, semi-famous abroad as a television personality and nightclub host, who audaciously proclaimed himself “the thirteenth Baker” after having attached his life to Josephine in her declining years. He became the stateside guardian of her legacy, collecting materials, keeping her in the public eye, writing a searching memoir of her life, and, in the end, making it possible for others to write on the same subject.

In this, Chez Josephine was like Josephine's Château des Milandes, the restored castle that sat at the heart of the weird and wonderful theme park she devoted to her children. Disrupting nation time, it offered its visitors a different reality—an offbeat sense of time and place.

Jean-Claude routinely sat down with me over long lunches at his restaurant—feeding me without a second thought—to talk, on the record, about his muse, his mother, his *raison d'être*. Each time, he plied me with rich cognac, fantastic white wine, and a “just remembered” story of Josephine. More than once after these briefer visits, I had to race to take notes on our conversations, hoping to catch the details before the alcohol hit me. Jean-Claude was always so wonderfully Gallic, speaking casually about the electric histories of sex and race and celebrity with a deep French accent. When I finished the book, he proofed the whole thing, sending me hasty, encouraging e-mails about typos or inaccuracies. “Bravo encore,” he wrote at the end of his list of corrections. “You can be very proud of yourself.”

Just a few months before his suicide, Jean-Claude insisted that he host a party celebrating the publication of the book. Charging not a dime, he handled half of the guest list, brought in roughly two hundred people—French journalists or radio personalities, an African documentary producer, two Hollywood types, and what seemed like five or six amateur photographers. And, of course, more than a few B-list Broadway stars.



Jean-Claude Baker with the author at Chez Josephine in April of 2014. Photo by Ozier Muhammad.

As the party wound down, Jean-Claude grabbed my arm and brought me to the front of the restaurant. LuAnn de Lesseps had arrived. Known to many as “The Countess,” she is a featured personality on the hit Bravo reality show, *The Real Housewives of New York City*. Claiming European and distant Algonquin heritage, LuAnn also presents herself as ambiguously royal, a gesture to her marriage to French entrepreneur and royal peer Alexandre de Lesseps—a marriage (his fourth) that ended when he purportedly had an affair with an Ethiopian princess. The Countess is the faux royal of a television show devoted to fakery and hustling, in which every personality is working an angle, trying to capitalize on her fame to become a brand, a nouveau riche version of Oprah or Martha Stewart. LuAnn had published a book on good manners—*Class with the Countess*—a book accompanied, predictably, by the release of her first single, “Money Can’t Buy You Class.”

When Jean-Claude introduced me to her at the bar, she asked me to call her The Countess, not LuAnn. “I don’t know why I’m here,” she said to me, looking around. “Jean-Claude told me I should buy this book and have you sign it. Did you write it? What is it about?” Dutifully, I gestured to the title and the image on the cover and signed it, then watched her leave with an entourage, walking out into Hell’s Kitchen in four-inch heels, her daughter in tow.



The entrance to Les Milandes, summer of 2007. Photo by the author.

I took this picture in 2007.

At the time, this grand mosaic of gilded faces was attached to the side of an old chapel at the main entrance of Les Milandes. A half-century before my visit, Baker had raised her twelve adopted children in the castle that lay just beyond the chapel. The sign had invited visitors to watch a mixed-race and mixed-nation family at play, a public spectatorship of private life orchestrated by a celebrity mother.

I was attracted to the mosaic’s still-bright background (gold-colored, of course), to the prominence of Josephine’s visage, and to the surrounding ring of smaller tiles depicting the children who embodied the experiment of the “Village du Monde,” and I found myself moved by the decay of the tiles and the sense of loss that accompanied the failure of

the great experiment. The chipping paint and the missing tiles captured, in miniature, the pockmarked chapel, the faded glory of the château, the layered ending of so many dreams.

Returning two years later, I found that tiles were gone. Put into deep storage. The coming and going of these tiles—installed in the heyday of Les Milandes, removed long after Josephine’s death, peeling and deteriorating in the interim—has me thinking about the way that work, texts, and images move and circulate. The way that long-lost things find a way to come back. Here we are, discussing Josephine’s tile mosaic, long after it was taken down.

This essay is part of her afterlife, in a way. Her global afterlife. It is also part of the afterlife of Jean-Claude’s book. And my own. And the books of many others. Our work has an afterlife—the books and essays and short pieces we draft and redraft and write and sometimes publish. They circulate, too. Circulate, I mean, like the individuals we aim to uncover, the lives we hope to spotlight. And their circulation isn’t static—it adds and subtracts all sorts of things along its tortured route.

The Baker I wrote about—circulating well beyond my control—has started to return. An e-mail here. A letter there. A comment made in conversation elsewhere. “I read your book, and....” “You know, I saw her perform....” This entirely unsurprising return has reminded me that writers and readers share a responsibility to curate objects publicly and collaboratively and to encourage conversation across communities, long after the book is published or the exhibit is closed. Attending to the life of Josephine—the dancer and hustler—requires that one also attend to the postlife of *Josephine and the Rainbow Tribe*, the book.

And that, I believe, is what Jean-Claude was doing every night at Chez Josephine. Every time he sat down with some new guest to gossip about Josephine. Every time he rang me up to share some new tidbit. He kept copies of his book out on the bar not just as a hustle, not just as a reminder that the restaurant was a reflection of his hard-earned expertise, but also as a provocation, to get people talking, to see what else could be revealed.

It wasn’t so much, then, that I was including all of the material details and plot points that Jean-Claude’s publisher had encouraged him to drop. We never discussed those specifically, and I never once asked him (and he never volunteered) to share any of his archive, his old outlines and drafts. Instead, it was very likely the case (in his mind) that I was revising his work, adjusting its meaning after decades of contemplation and deeper learning. He let my book live, breathe, and become what it needed to be.

We should all do this. Engage in a constant revision and reimagination of our own work. Help those who come after us. And be prepared for what comes next.

An example:

Josephine went to South Africa in October of 1974. It was a brief visit, and like almost everything else she did, it was meant to make her a little money—to expand the global reach of her brand of celebrity. But it was primarily meant to give her a view of the racial politics of the place. Sandwiched between a successful run in London and her final show in Paris, this brief sojourn into the politics of apartheid was a dramatic turn for the aging star. And it didn't go well. Tensions along South Africa's color line were escalating dramatically, and Baker's legendary candor in front of the microphone surely wasn't helpful. Surveying the wreckage, *Variety* described the trip as a "flop," with high-end venues only a "quarter filled," even in those rare settings where "nonwhites" were the majority. The trade magazine blamed Baker's inopportune "delving into politics," which may have turned audiences off. Gene Robertson of the *Sun Reporter* suggested that Baker was troubled by the easy integration of performers onstage and the strict segregation of the audience.

For me, this trip wasn't terribly important, given the story on which I was focused, because it came well after the Rainbow Tribe's dissolution, and it repeated themes that had been covered earlier in my own telling (namely, Josephine's attempted integration of high-end venues and her flamboyant use of the media). From her own correspondence I knew that she'd visited South Africa very briefly, had been dismissive of the black South Africans she encountered, had found the country's culture to be worrisomely flat, and had written off the increasingly militarized apartheid-era nation-state as nothing more than a "money factory."

The visit revealed, I thought, the endurance of Baker's idiosyncratic sentiments about race and reform and reminded me that her political mind was still probingly engaged in the mid-1970s. Here she was, after all, a famous black celebrity, sojourning in a white supremacist node, playing to white audiences, and expressing shock at the discovery of segregation. Speaking to reporters, Baker enthused that she would be "proud to be thrown out of South Africa" and concluded that the apartheid state "must be sick to allow what is happening."

And so this, in the end, is how I wrote about it—as a brief, modestly revealing trip, a sidebar to her life's ending. It occupies nine lines of text. Then the book was "released," set adrift upon the flows of culture and commerce, and it returned back to me.

One reader, who'd stumbled across a review of the book and subsequently ordered it for his Kindle, wrote to share his memories of Baker's stay in Cape Town, where he'd lived as a child. He shared with me his letters to his American parents. In the first, sent in October of 1974, he called attention to Baker's proposed stop—during her tour of the country—at a home and school for physically disabled African children. There would be a tea “with reporters and photographers,” so that there might be more money for the school—“for us,” he wondered (or hoped), “not for her?” A good plan, it seemed. Then it all fell apart. In a November postmortem, he revealed that Baker, while in Durban, had “invited some black friends to attend one of her performances and they were turned away at the door.” Nothing unusual for a racially tense South Africa, but it was more than Baker could stomach. By the time she got to Cape Town, she was “in a very wrought-up state.” And then she backed out of her planned visit to the cash-strapped school. “Why African and not just handicapped children?” she'd asked. The chanteuse, a civil rights heroine and champion of the most intimate sorts of integration, certainly wasn't going to “look at little African children like animals in a cage.” The small committee charged with welcoming her watched their carefully planned tea (with photographers) fall apart, a victim of segregation's ubiquity and a diva's principled grandstanding.

Once she was back in France, my correspondent remembered, Baker's agents complained that the tour had been a washout, a consequence of her faded celebrity.

Knowing the history of her adoptive family and their display as brightly colored objects for public viewing, I find there is a terrible irony in her withdrawal from the public relations side trip, in her critique of “little African children like animals in a cage,” and in the lost cash that might have made a few children's lives a little better.

Still another reader from South Africa received a copy of the book from her daughter in New York. She remembers the same tour, if somewhat differently. “It was at a very low point in her life,” she writes, noting that Baker's health had declined quite rapidly in the 1970s. Her husband, a local physician, had served as a sort of medical attendant to Josephine, worrying over “her carrying on with her performances” and attending the performances “in case she needed urgent medical attention.” During the day, when Baker wasn't touring or meeting people, she'd spend time in the doctor's garden. “We became close to her,” his wife remembers, “and I would fetch her every morning, and she would spend the day with us, in the garden, speaking to my late Mother.” Ever concerned about finances, Baker would have her young attendant secret

her to the bank so that she could deposit her paychecks without having them nicked by debt collectors. This, too, seems like classic Josephine Baker: extending great kindness to people she'd only just met, but worriedly hiding her payments from distant, abstract threats.

I'm grateful for these new details—and committed to sharing them, of course—even if they fall well outside the purview of the story I was telling. They are, I suspect, part of a different story, one yet to be scripted. And in that plot, there are many things we simply don't know. Did Josephine meet any writers from the black South African magazine *DRUM*? Did she perform with any local musicians? What did she see of apartheid? And with whom? Who, on the ground, arranged the details of the trip? Baker says that she was brought to South Africa by an "advanced liberal," but her personal letters and her fragmentary autobiography are mute on the details.

Someone else will figure this out, and I hope to be a part of their story, their own revision of my work, of Jean-Claude's, because, in the end, we incur a great debt with every word we write. This set of enduring afterlives—our obligations and responsibilities to the subject, to the public, to one's self, long after the book appears as if by magic at a store or online—is, I think, why we imagine writing as a professional commitment and not merely as a pleasurable hobby.

It is why we obsess over periods and commas, and comb through our notes over and over again.

It is why we begin every book with an index of our debts to others.

It is why I continue to find, scattered around my house and my office, envelopes stuffed with photocopies and personal notes from Jean-Claude, annotated in his florid script, on his classic *Chez Josephine* stationery adorned with a stylized image of Josephine and her pet cheetah. He wanted to share material that never made it into his biography. Things he'd learned since it had been published.

It is why, in the wake of his suicide, I was moved to write this essay.

We are never "done." If we need to work harder to revise the timelines of our transnational plots—to challenge, as Josephine Baker's life does, the orthodoxy of "the Cold War" or "the Civil Rights Era" as a meaningful backdrop for stories that seem to spill all over the place—we also need to mess around with the timelines of our own work, which is never truly finished. We owe it to our friends, allies, and collaborators to do more than that: we have to be willing to question ourselves, too, and to share what we learn.

We have to let the book live.