

The Migration of African Americans to France after World War I

By Sue Perry

This paper shall explore the various reasons that Paris became a haven for African Americans, including an escape from racism, freedom of expression, and establishment of a richer life. Unlike white Americans that migrated to Paris, the migration of African Americans is viewed, by themselves and others, as a “commentary on race.” (Stovall, xiii) Some African Americans left the United States to escape oppression and racism. Others came for employment opportunities, adventure, or to serve during the war.

When African Americans arrived in Paris, they shared similar experiences: white people treated them with love and respect. Many African Americans began to believe a colorblind society was possible. “ The perceived difference between racial attitudes in France and the United States has given a singular political dimension to the history of African Americans in Paris that distinguishes it sharply from the experience of white expatriates” (Stovall, xiii)

The painful concept of White supremacy has been at the heart of the discussion of race in the United States. This European racial thought overcame the idea of all men being created equal. Only White Europeans were welcomed, with Native Americans, Mexicans, Africans, and Asians not welcome. This view emerged within immigration and citizenship laws. To be an American one had to be Anglo-Saxon. The Declaration of Independence’s statement for equality was only for the Anglo-Saxon men with property. The country was viewed as a White,

European, Protestant society. Anyone not considered White Anglo-Saxon was considered inferior. (Wardle, 2013)

After the Civil War and the freeing of African Americans, Jim Crow laws were created. These laws established African Americans as second-class citizens, through rules that kept them from voting, having equal educational opportunities, and accessing public and private facilities. (Wardle, 2013) By the nineteenth century, the belief in the superiority of the White race was well established within United States social and scientific doctrines. (Wardle, 2013)

These attitudes of White superiority continued into the twentieth century even as many laws brought more rights to African Americans. Despite these laws, there were many unsaid rules which prevented African Americans from experiencing the freedom they desired. They were prevented from living in certain areas, having certain occupations, and marrying whom they desired. Many feared for the futures of their children and generations. Within this backdrop, African Americans began to seek freedom in other ways and in other areas. At the close of World War I, African Americans looked to France in order to create a life of freedom for themselves and their future generations (Wardle, 2013)

What was the attraction Paris, France held for African Americans in the aftermath of World War I?

“In short, Paris possesses a magic that is hard to resist. The city today retains all its glamor, combining the dynamism of a world capital with the rich charms of tradition and a storied past...It is both the capital of France and a city of unparalleled cosmopolitanism, and those who spend time there can easily feel themselves to be at the center of the world.” (Stovall, xii-xiii)

The migration of African Americans to Paris had as much to do with conditions in the United States as it did the conditions in France. African Americans in Paris were able to achieve levels of success unachievable to African Americans in the United States. African Americans in Paris were able to form their own community and culture, creating their own institutions and traditions. In Paris, African Americans could leave racism behind without leaving behind African American culture. Their community was based on positive relationships and experiences instead of limitations imposed by segregation. “The African American community in Paris symbolizes the potential of African American life in general once it is fully liberated from the shackles of racism.”(Stovall, p. xvi)

In contrast, African American life in the United States was far from positive. Two generations after slavery, African Americans remained trapped by racism and poverty. Racism was especially prevalent in the South, where most African Americans lived. Most lived as sharecroppers owning no land of their own. Racist policies caused African Americans to remain in bondage. For every \$10 dollars spent to educate a white child, only \$3 dollars were spent for each African American child. “This discrepancy resulted in shockingly high illiteracy rates among blacks; one in three Southern blacks could not read in 1910, as opposed to one in thirty Southern whites.”(Stovall, p. 2)

In 1914 African Americans lived in a nation determined to prevent their every effort to achieve equality or respect. Although citizens of the United States, African Americans could not exercise their right to vote. “In 1916, fifty-four blacks (including one woman) were lynched in the South, their silenced bodies eloquently testifying to the dank climate of racist terror enshrouding the former confederacy.” (Stovall, p.2)

There was a steady migration of African Americans to the North especially after 1914. Some 400,000 African Americans migrated north between 1910 and 1920 (Stovall, p.3).The North offered better jobs and an improved racial atmosphere. In the North other means were used to keep African Americans subordinate. They were forced to live in the worst neighborhoods and attend the

worst schools. "Flight to the North certainly brought some changes for the better, but it could not erase the fact that, from Mississippi to Manhattan, blacks remained a victimized, oppressed caste excluded from the mainstream of American life."(Stovall, p.3)

In 1917 seventy African Americans were lynched. (Stovall, p.4) There was also an increase of racial violence in the North. Race riots took place in many major cities in the north In East Saint Louis whites killed more than one hundred men, women, and children. Eleven year old Josephine Baker, a leading African American entertainer who later migrated to France, witnessed this first hand (Stovall, p. 5)

In contrast, France had gained a reputation for equal treatment for other races of people. This was based on accounts of famous African American visitors such as Ira Aldridge, Bishop Daniel Payne, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglas, and W.E.B. DuBois. (Stovall, p. 3)

Eugene Jacques Bullard was told by his father of the equality African Americans enjoyed in France. He left home at the age of seven, after a lynch mob forced his family from Columbus, Ohio. At age ten, hoping to reach France, he became a stowaway on a ship. He stayed in England and became a boxer. At age nineteen he reached France. Within the outbreak of war he joined the French

foreign legion. In 1916 he transferred to the French Air Service. He earned the Black Swallow of Death award for his heroism. (Stovall, p.4)

However, many whites in the United States opposed the drafting of African American soldiers. Whites did not relish the fact of arming African Americans and allowing them to shoot whites. Whites also considered serving in the military was a position requiring intelligence and courage, both qualities believed to be lacking in African American men. Many African Americans who volunteered to fight in the war in 1917 were denied. Eventually, due to the need for more men to serve in the war effort, African Americans were recruited and put on the front lines. More than 400,000 African Americans in the United States served in the armed forces during World War I. They were forced to serve in menial positions and in segregated units. African American soldiers were treated with contempt by their white counterparts. Racial slurs were common. (Stovall, p. 5)

Conditions for African American soldiers were inferior to those of whites. Many worked long hours outside wearing summer clothing in the winter. Those situations along with overcrowded living conditions, inadequate food, and poor hygiene caused the death of many African Americans before they arrived at the battlefield. (Stovall, p.6)

African American soldiers were the first to go to France in great numbers. They discovered, in France that they did not, for the most part, have to face the discrimination they had faced in the United States. This situation set the stage for the African American community that would become established after the war.

The first group of recruits to be sent to France during the war, was the 369th Infantry Regiment of New York, the most celebrated group of African American soldiers in World War I. Known as the Harlem Hell fighters, they were shipped to France in 1917 in order to avoid their angry reactions towards the racism they faced in the United States. The Harlem Hell fighters spent more time on the front lines than any other American army in the war. In France, they were highly lauded for their sacrifice receiving more medals than any other group of fighters. When they arrived back in the United States, they were cheered in a New York victory parade. Yet despite their achievements, they were not granted civil rights. They, along with all other African Americans, were attacked by lynching mobs in their communities. These soldiers looked with fondness on their stay in Paris. (Stovall, p. 11)

One of the most famous members of the Hell fighters was James Reese. He was the first African American to command troops in war. In 1916, he joined the National Guard as an Infantry officer. He later became the leading African American orchestra leader, starting the Clef Club, which performed at Carnegie

Hall. He traveled over two thousand miles throughout France, establishing a strong African American presence in France. He was widely lauded in that country.

Eugene Bullard, another famous war hero in France, was the first African American pilot to fight in combat. He was interracially married to a French native woman. In 1924 he managed a club called the Grand Duke. This club established a haven for many African American artists such as Cole Porter, Alberta Hunter, and Langston Hughes. This opened the door for the introduction of African American music to Paris. (Stovall, p.4)

Jazz music was introduced in Paris after World War I. Sidney Bechet, the Father of Jazz, came to Paris in 1925. Discovering Paris to be racially open, he and his business partner, Claude Luter developed a successful band, which acquired countrywide fame. La Fontaine, was the most influential jazz area in France. The French not only had a craze for African American culture, but they also viewed jazz music as a symbol of prestige. African Americans saw the jazz scene as a source of employment. They also discovered the lack of segregation that was present among the aristocrats that frequented the clubs. In the United States, in New York and even Harlem, African Americans entertained only whites. It was in Paris that mixed audiences were entertained. There was freedom to date interracially, something that was denied in the United States. (Burke)

Not only did African American music take center stage in Paris, but during the 1920's -30's, African American art was also prevalent. African American artists experienced equality among all other nationalities. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet lived in poverty for twelve years in the United States. She was prevented from showing her works in the United States. She had created many sculptures and upon arriving in Paris, she was able to show them. In 1931, at the Colonial Exposition, she displayed her artwork based on the aristocracy in Africa. She was well beloved in Paris. (Burke)

Augusta Savage, who applied to an art program in the United States, was denied acceptance because of her race. She arrived in France, and later Paris in the 1920's. Her most famous sculptures, entitled *The Call* and *Freedom II*, became famous in Paris. (Burke)

Lois Mailou Jones attempted to enter one of her paintings at a museum in Washington D.C. Because African Americans were denied the entrance of their paintings in the museum, she asked a French friend to enter the painting under her name. The painting won the Robert Woods Bliss Award. It was years later when Jones finally revealed herself as the artist. (Burke)

African American writers also found refuge in Paris during the 1920's and 30's. It was here writers found full self-expression and freedom to pursue their

dreams without the limitations of race. Langston Hughes was the first African American writer who came to Paris during 1923-24. Many others followed, making Paris the international meeting place for African Americans, Caribbeans, Africans, and intellectuals. African Americans were able to create an identity within the acceptance they had experienced. Writers expressed African American history and created a unity within the culture. Some also spoke out against the inequality that existed in the United States (Stovall, p.233)

Two such writers were Sidney Bechet and Richard Wright, who both died within a year and a half of each other. These two great men represented the ability of African Americans to achieve fame in France. Both died in France, representing their decisions to renounce life in the United States and even commit themselves to exile. With their passing, though during the Civil Rights Movement, many African Americans continued to remain in Paris. The city, at this time, represented a more settled quality, attracting the young as well as retaining the older immigrants who were concerned with developing careers and making better lives for their families. Paris became even more diverse than it had been in the 1950's. Paris became and even is now an example of equality to other areas of the world. (Stovall, p. 221-222).

The importance of community, of a multitude of connections between individuals, continues to be part of the African American experience in Paris

today. Yet the African American community is not restrictive. The African American community embraces many people of other races as well. This also includes non-African American spouses and romantic partners. The presence of other races does not detract from African American culture and experience. This multicultural integration represents all that Paris offers a, a freedom from racism, a principle that the United States could and should adopt. (Stovall, p.325)

After exploring the various reasons that African Americans viewed Paris as a haven, an escape from racism, and an opportunity for freedom of expression, I feel the United States could learn many lessons from France. These principles, if embraced could transform this country in countless ways. This transformation would require a renewed mindset. This may be difficult, considering the history America retains with slavery. Unfortunately many, even in this present time, continue to hold a slavery mindset towards African Americans.

Along with close consistent contact with African Americans, white people may realize the commonality that exists between the races. It is within these scenarios that the attitudes of white people may be transformed and African Americans may be embraced as equal. France has provided this example to the entire world, it is now the world's responsibility to embrace it and put it into practice.

References

1. Burke, Joanne. *When African Americans Came to Paris*. 2012. Video.
2. Burke, Joanne. *When African Americans Came to Paris Part Two: The Stars*. 2014. Video.
3. Cawley, Janet. "The Black Pearl: The Electrifying, Scandalous Life of Josephine Baker." *Biography Magazine* (2000): 94-99. Web.
4. Papich, Stephen. *Remembering Josephine*. 1976. Print.
5. Stovall, Tyler Edward. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. Print.
6. Whitaker, Charles. "The Real-Life Josephine Baker: What the Movie Didn't Tell You. despite Vivid Performances, No Medium Has Captured the Essence of Legendary Star's Life." *Ebony* 1 June 1991. Print.