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African Americans in Paris
Spring 2007

A city that played a part in the foundations of freedom for the United States of America also embodies that same freedom to the droves of African Americans that visited it throughout the early 1900s, even until today. Indeed Paris, France was the city in which the Declaration of Independence was signed, as well as the Treaty of Versailles which resolved World War I. Therefore, it is fitting that it serve as a haven for expatriate Black Americans along with notable Black entertainers, writers, political figures and artists from the late 19th century even until today (Allman-Baldwin, 2007, p.30). They found in Paris a place to move about freely, explore their innermost feelings and desires, and a solace from their racist American homeland. Likewise, they discovered Paris to be a place to voice their concerns about the racial tension in America and many, like Vivian Mason, asked for French intervention and consul in dealing with the civil rights issues within the U.S. (Padmore, 1946, p.13).

From my studies in France, it appears that African Americans that lived or visited this magical city underwent a psychological identity crisis. Black Americans in France had to adjust to the absence of race-based discrimination instituted in France while also identifying themselves in relation to other individuals of African descent. Likewise, French cultural norms, such as cigarette smoking, may have affected the physical health of Black in Paris. In all, however, the shifts in self-identity and self-perception play a more important role in the overall health and welfare of the Blacks that explored Paris and eventually called it their home. It is my opinion that their health was affected positively overall due to the removal of the highly stressful racial tension they left behind in America and the advantage of being an American citizen abroad.

Paris served as an enticing reward for former slaves and slavery abolitionists during the time of the American Civil War. William Wells Brown referred to Paris as a place that, “you could look out over a city where you are finally free even from bounty hunters and fugitive slave laws (Davis, 2003).” Indeed during those times, America was a harsh land for slaves. Due to the Southern dependence on slaves for cheap physical labor, it was a commodity for one to own slaves and their freedom was non-negotiable. Oftentimes slaves were kept in harsh living conditions with small food rations, grueling physical labor, and inadequate physical healthcare (Hine et al, 2003, 139). It therefore comes as no surprise that former slaves and abolitionists considered Paris a haven for Blacks. Parisian citizens were described as hospitable towards Black American soldiers during the two World Wars and welcomed them to the city of light as if they were novelties (Shack, 2001, p. xiii).

With the hospitable nature of the French citizens towards the influx of African Americans to the city, many Blacks began entrepreneurial adventures as was evident in *Harlem in Montmartre* by William Shack. This ease associated with the sense of ownership for African Americans provided an alternative to the repressive environment found in the U.S. during the early 1900s. Many Blacks ran successful restaurants and nightclubs in the Montmartre area. For example, Josephine Baker became a nightclub entrepreneur with the opening of many establishments, including Le Frontenac, in Paris;

a venture an African American woman in the U.S. would have found nearly impossible (Shack, 2001, p.97). Likewise, artists and political leaders followed in attempts to express themselves freely without the constraints of the American society.

The French government of modern-day Paris continues to welcome Black American citizens by creating a more welcoming atmosphere for the presence of people of color. "In the past year, the government has quietly taken steps to open more doors for people of color. The nearly half-million black immigrants from French and West Indies countries view this as an affirmation of their welcome in Paris (1)." Many Black soldiers during the Great Wars loved Paris so much that the thought of returning to American saddened them. "Contrasting with the experience of being brigaded with French troops of the 16th Division, who from the very first had treated black soldiers in terms of equality and brotherhood, the specter of returning to the land of Jim Crow dampened the soldier's enthusiasm for the voyage home (Shack, 2001, p.22)."

Along with the notion of a free society in Paris, even literary figures, such as Eden from *Black Girl in Paris*, also experienced a change in her perception of the world. She cut her hair before going to Paris in attempts to be "open to all possibilities (Youngblood, 2000, p.3)." She also saw her journey through Paris as an opportunity to retrace the steps of her "literary Godfathers" in a place where her blackness would not impede upon her success (Youngblood, 2000, p.4).

It is important to note the psychological implications of fair treatment by the French government towards African American expatriates and visitors. In America as well as many other Western nations, the history of race-based discrimination haunts African Americans and creates, "excessive difficulty in achieving success in black men's actions in the world, and in their interpersonal relations (De Maynard, 2006, p.4)." Studies also show that unequal treatment in a societal context predisposes Blacks to mental and psychological illnesses at a greater instance than with white counterparts. It has also been found that there is a strong correlation between perceived discrimination on an everyday basis among Black Americans and increased risk for anxiety and depression (Banks et al, 2006, 555). Furthermore, Black Americans inability to express their feelings of anger towards whites due to their discriminatory actions increases the likelihood of hypertension psychological distress (Neighbors et al, 1996, p.9).

Paris also allows for Blacks to feel appreciated. "Many African Americans receive a level of appreciation here that they lacked at home (Lee, 1997)." A high level of appreciation reduces stress, which in turn lowers the risk of physical distress, increases self esteem and lowers the perception of negative stressors in the environment (Seráfica et al, 1990, p. 6). In these regards, it is fair to assume that African Americans living in Paris did not experience the elevated levels of anxiety and stress as Blacks living in America experience, which in turn allows for an elevated quality of life.

It is interesting to note that while France does not have formal laws that discriminate based upon race, there have been clear distinctions in treatment among African Americans and other people of African decent in its past. While there has always been an African presence in France due to the proximity of the European and African continents, the treatment of Africans was not always fair. France, like America, has a history of African slavery; however, they abolished their institution of slavery before America and had laws that allowed more opportunities for ex-slaves to advance within the society (Stevenson, 2007).

According to Jake Lamar, an African American expatriate that lives in Paris, there are subtle differences in the ways Black Americans and Africans are treated in Paris. Rather than overt racism, as is customary in America, there are more institutionalized forms of racism to block Africans from gaining entrance and promotion within universities and corporations in Paris (Lamar, 2007). There are instances to note where being an African American has advantages over being of African descent. In *Black Girl in Paris*, Olu Christophe was targeted and arrested by the French police because he was Black and Haitian. Using the excuse of his not having his passport on him, he was deported and abused by the French officials back to Haiti. In explaining to Eden the circumstances that Olu Christophe would face, Ving says, "The French like their immigrants to come with degrees, money, and white skins, if at all (Youngblood, 2000, p.182)." Eden and Ving were spared because they were English speaking American citizens as opposed to Olu Christophe, a Haitian immigrant. This relates to the notion that French imperialism still has its mark on modern day society as well as the notable reversion to racism due to the post Nazi occupation of the French government (Stevenson, 2007).

As an African American, however, Blacks are treated better because of the addition of the American identity to oneself. "To the French," said Carol Mongo, a black American writer who has lived in Paris for five years, "black Americans are Americans first and blacks second. And that is exactly the way black Africans look at us. Our tastes are different. Our ways of looking at things are different. It's a little like saying that just because we're black, we're the same. But we're not (Duka, 1984, p. A16)."

Even in fictional Paris, Eden was greeted with English by the clerk of her hotel as well as the French friends of her host, Delphine upon her arrival in the city to better accommodate her during her visit (Youngblood, 2000, p.13, 63-65). From my own experiences, I felt that I was treated as an American first rather than a person of color while venturing through Paris. I was able to escape my identity as a Black man for a while and better appreciate the perks associated with American citizenship. From the personnel at the local bakery shops sputtering with broken English to the friendly and helpful citizens that guided me during my periods of confusion, I felt that the French people went out of their way to accommodate me because I was an American citizen. To further add to the identity struggle among people of color in Paris, I felt a disconnection from the other Black people walking about. In America, there is a sense of connection between Black people because of a shared history of racial discrimination. However, while in France, the connection was not as clear. While the histories may have been similar, the experiences as a result in the greater society are not the same which created a sense of isolation of myself as an American in France from the other Blacks of varying descent.

It is important to note that people of African descent made significant contributions to the welfare of the French society. Africans that settled in Paris helped the country to develop rice crops; staples of the French diet (Davis, 2003). Likewise, professor May Day exclaimed that many of the French colonists from Haiti settled in flocked to Paris "to do work the French didn't want to do (Youngblood, 2000, 175)." This allowed for the immigrants to comprise the blue collar working-class of baby-sitters, street sweepers and domestics. African Americans also brought their own food and

culture to Paris. Along with jazz they brought soul food as a representative of American cuisine to Paris (Lottman, 1968, p.BR6).

Once the immigrant population began to swell and the children were born French citizens, this became an issue for the French. Max Yergen, a Black world traveler, thought of France as an imperialistic government that “exploited the colored people of the West Indies and Africa (Shack, 2001, 105)”. Once the immigrant population began to swell to be too large, the French enacted immigration laws specifically targeting people of African decent living in Paris and thus would have them deported back to their home country (Youngblood, 2000, 175-176). This created a sense of tension among the immigrant community because in France they had opportunities to advance, but once their numbers grew too large, they were victims of the harsh French deportation laws. “In contrast, the French viewed colonial workers as competitors for jobs and women, and some argued that they only freed up more Frenchmen for slaughter in the trenches of the western front. Colonials often encountered a hostility that, while not usually as vicious as White American treatment of blacks, certainly called the idea of color-blind France into question (Nelson, 1997, 31).” The psychological and physiological effects of such treatment relates to elevated levels of stress; similar to those experienced by Blacks in America.

Social inequality in America is directly correlated to the lag in healthcare among African Americans in the U.S. “From the perspective of discrimination models, the causal mechanism linking racial/ethnic minority status and health disadvantage is thought to lie in the harmful effects of chronic experiences with race-based discrimination, both actual and perceived. These experiences are thought to set into motion a process of physiological responses (e.g., elevated blood pressure and heart rate, production of biochemical reactions, hypervigilance) that eventually result in disease and mortality (Mays, et al, p.204).”

This being said, the absence of such discrimination in Paris against Black Americans, suggests that their healthcare there should be more readily available and the overall quality of health of these individuals should be improved. There are examples of such treatment found in the management of the Black soldiers fighting in the Great Wars. During World War II, Jacques Bullard, an African American expatriate, was sent to the Loire River to load machine guns for the French when he was wounded. He was sent to a French hospital and was treated for his wound and was immediately sent home for recovery (Shack, 2001, p.110). Had he been with an American regime, not only would he have been segregated from participating in the fight, he also would have been subject to improper or denied healthcare since the American armed forces were not integrated fully until after the 1940s (Hine et al, 2003 p.487). Likewise, Black soldiers in France had the opportunity to prove their man-hood and assert themselves in ways they could not otherwise in the U.S. (Whalan, 2005).

A more overt health issue that deals with the psychology of immersion into the culture deals with cigarette smoking. While in Paris, I experienced first-hand the intense connection the Parisian society has with cigarettes. From smoking at the Metro stops to the thick smoke that filled the restaurants, cigarettes filled Paris. To the French, it is a cultural norm that begins as early as puberty (Kerjean, 561, 2005.). Shay Youngblood describes her character Eden as taking her first and last puffs on a cigarette while in Paris in order to be immersed in the Parisian bohemian culture (Youngblood, 2000, p.236). It is

interesting to note that a study was conducted that showed African Americans “suffer smoking-related morbidity and mortality at a significantly higher rate than whites (Landrine et al, 2000, p.213).” This suggests that Blacks in Paris that assimilate into the smoking culture would actually experience a decline in health faster than white counterparts due to an inherent disadvantage due to the effects of cigarettes; an idea that contrasts the notion of better health quality among Blacks living in Paris.

Despite some instances of selective discrimination based upon race, “there is far less racial tension in Paris than in the U.S. urban areas (Lee, 1997, E01).” This being said, African Americans that visit this wonderful city experience a psychological change due to the relief of racial tension in comparison to the U.S. and therefore experience health benefits as a result. It is important to note that the experience of African Americans is not the experience of French-African colonists that immigrate to Paris of hopes of forging a better life. They, unlike African Americans are subject to arrest and deportation by French officials if their papers are not in order. In all, the African American psycholgocial experience while visiting Paris directly correlates to an elevated level of health marked with reduced risk of stress and hypertension.

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