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La France Noire, Black France!

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I have often thought that one way to increase the enrollment in French language is by recruiting more African American students. After all, as of 2007, more than 115 million African people in 31 francophone African countries speak French. But more importantly the French always welcomed and honored many African American artists who came to perform or visit France to flee from racism.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L296xH398/richard_wright-716697-c84f5-3e283.jpg

It is interesting to note that at present there are at least three tours in Paris of famous African Americans or of "la France Noire" (Black France). Ricki Stevenson started 'Black Paris Tours' in 1998 with a focus on Josephine Baker, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Leroy Haynes and Gordon Parks, the photographer. Another tour is "Black Paris Divas" as well as the 'Discover Paris' tour with Tom and Monique Wells who also design individual tours according to the tourist's wishes. A description of these tours is given in the April 2008 issue of Ebony in Lester Sloan's article "April in Paris."

Black Americans have been living in Paris for at least two centuries in fact. The Arc du Triomphe was where former American slaves in the 1800s would come to feel the freedom that they couldn't experience in the US. William Wells Brown, a former slave who became an abolitionist, prayed with white people at La Madeleine Church and he never forgot that experience! The well known 19th century French author of *The Count of Montecristo*, Alexandre Dumas, was part Haitian and his statue is situated on the right bank. The 369th Regiment from World War I was all black, the Harlem Hellfighters. After World War I over 200,000 black Americans came to fight. Just south of the famous hill Montmartre the first African American community was born after the war- the area which so many artists still frequent today.

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The most famous African American woman was Josephine Baker who came to Paris in 1925 and made her debut as a cabaret entertainer at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées. 12 years later she started her own club, Chez Josephine. The jazz age had come to Paris and some American words were even adopted in the French language like up to date, un jazz band, un cocktail, le jazz hot. The new dances were the Charleston and the Shimmy and black cabarets like Le Bal Nègre became the chic places to go. Josephine had unrestrained very sensual dance movements (sometimes she would dance half nude or with a tutu made of bananas!), and people admired her pet leopard Chiquita whose collar often matched her costume; they would take walks along the Champs-Élysées. Her pet snake, Kiki, was often around her neck. She also had gold painted finger nails! In the southwest of France, in Dordogne, she eventually bought a chateau where she lived with the twelve multi-ethnic orphans that she adopted and where her work is now displayed. Josephine Baker, it should be noted, also greatly assisted the Resistance movement against the Nazis in France and she was a civil rights activist in the States. Indeed she was so honored by the French government that when she died she was given a state funeral. Furthermore, she is the only African American woman who has a place in Paris named after her: Place Joséphine in Montparnasse.

Another famous pianist was Henry Crowder who came to Paris and had worked in Washington DC and had been part of the jazz quartet The Alabamians. In 1928 he met the famous heiress to the Cunard Line, a white woman Nancy Cunard who was the archetypal Twenties woman and who introduced him to many artists. There were other famous Americans including W.E.B. DuBois who had hosted the Pan African Congress in 1919 in a luxurious hotel in Paris and Sidney Bechet who had come with his big band in the 20s and stayed a long time in Paris.

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Many artists of the Harlem Renaissance came to France after World War I also: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes in the 5th and 6th districts, for example. The writer Richard Wright lived in the Latin quarter near St.

Germain des Près. He wrote "Why I Chose Exile " in Paris. James Baldwin lived on the sixth floor in a very simple apartment with only cold water. Chester Himes, famous for his Harlem detective novels, won France's Grand Prix de Littérature Policière in 1958 and he lived permanently in Paris at that time. The poet Langston Hughes lived in Montmartre in 1924 and worked in a popular nightclub in Paris. Many of these great writers came to escape racism and they were well received by the French. These artists kept coming to Paris till the 70s in fact. In the 60s many French West Indians came to Paris and they once had their own radio station Media Tropical.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L260xH397/chester_Himes-4b5e3.jpg

There are also many sites in Paris of interest. At the Louvre you can find Henry O'Turner's works. He had lived in Paris for over five years and the French government had bought his remarkable painting Resurrection of Lazarus. At the Musée du quai Branly there is a display of African art, masks, musical instruments and textiles. The Musée d'Orsay and the Picasso museum also have African collections (Picasso was greatly influenced by African art). The little known Musée Dapper (Arts d'Afrique, les Caraïbes et leurs Diasporas) in the 16th district is entirely devoted to African art.

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At the Chateau Rouge metro stop there is a lively and colorful African market called Déjean Market. Still today the African quarter in Paris is near Sacré Coeur and the Moulin Rouge. In the 18th district one can dine at the famous La Goutte d'Or restaurant for a taste of North African food. Belleville also has an African quarter with many fine North African restaurants. In the Latin quarter one can enjoy New Orleans jazz at Le Caveau de la Huchette (which was the first jazz club after World War I where Sidney Bechet's had his jam sessions) or the Biblioquart, which Langston Hughes loved, for a jazz ambiance of the 1930s.

So next time you go to Paris, look up the France Noire tours, and tell your students about them too. Why, you can play American jazz in the French classroom and then explain why you are doing so! Maybe we can get more students to take French now!

Post-scriptum :

Christine Hoppe is a French teacher.