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In 1996, a decade after Michel Fabre's seminal work, *La Rive noire: de Harlem à la Seine*,¹ Tyler Stovall, a professor of French History at University of California at Berkeley published *Paris Noir, African Americans in the City of Light*.² Fabre, the founder of African American studies in France, described Stovall's book as "the first comprehensive chronicle of the changing yet steady presence of African American creators of culture in France during our century."³ *Paris Noir* unfolds as a chronological journey through the destinies of African Americans who left their native land to come to France. The reader discovers the drafted soldiers, traveling artists and exiled intellectuals who, from the Great War and early twenties to the close of the twentieth century, have built the story - perhaps the myth - of a Black Paris.

African American performers famously flocked to enjoy the carefree Jazz Age in Montmartre and most Harlem Renaissance artists dwelled in the French capital. In the post-World War II era, political exiles haunted the cafés of existentialist Saint Germain des Prés. Yet beyond the iconic figures of Josephine Baker and Richard Wright, Stovall uncovers more invisible characters and unheard voices, starting his narrative of *Paris Noir* with World War I veterans, ending his thorough study with contemporary testimonies of professional achievers, lawyers or corporate executives, and including his own vision as a Fulbright student in the 1980s.

Stovall's *Paris Noir* is thus more than a portrait of the artists and quaint scenery of La Butte Montmartre and the Left Bank of the Seine for the numerous interviews offer a variety of experiences. This vast and multifaceted representation interrogates the very notion of a cohesive black community, not so much to deny it but to redefine it. Departing from the usual focus on a buoyant art scene and exploring economic success and political concerns as well, Stovall argues that Black Paris has fostered empowerment and agency for individual blacks while cementing a

¹ Michel Fabre, *La Rive noire: de Harlem à la Seine* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1985).

² Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir, African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

³ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, Praise for Paris Noir.

community over “positive affinities and experience”⁴ instead of a common past of slavery and shared life of segregation. He compellingly shows how visitors and expatriates, being welcomed and considered primarily as Americans, interacting with French Africans, first fulfilled an African American identity that was to be acknowledged in America much later. This, in turn, influenced the African American community's self-vision and identity on US soil. There is no understanding of the significance of Black Paris, of the edifying encounter with the French sense of freedom and France’s own colonial racism without the backdrop of home.

Indeed Stovall reads the centennial vividness of *Paris Noir* as a subversive American success story where self-realization stems from the departure from the land of opportunity and offers a critical reappraisal of French racial history. Stovall's last chapters raise the question of France's claimed colorblindness, a question that he interestingly explores in the recent *Black France/France Noire*⁵ through the lens of a French-American collaborative perspective.

Black France is a welcome counterpart to *Paris Noir*, further evidencing that the African American experience of Paris reveals just as much about France's interrogations over race as it does about America's history. The *Black France* collection of essays echoes the repeated narratives by African Americans in Paris that they personally experienced the colorblindness of French society while being the witnesses of how flawed the ideal turned out when it came to other blacks. James Baldwin's realization that he could not immediately relate to the Africans he met in Paris⁶ or Jake Lamar's sense of his privileged status upon showing his US passport when being controlled by French cops⁷ could be the starting point of the ambitious and powerful study that editors Trica D. Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Tyler Stovall have put together.

The distance allowed by the American design of the essays offers a insightful account of the French “conundrum”.⁸ *Black France* raises the vexed question of the definition of blackness in France in a context where race is not officially recognized and offers an American perspective to help grasp its complexity. The presence of African Americans in Paris, and the ongoing exchanges it fostered, are reflected by the prominent scholars, writers and intellectuals who provide a rich and cross-pollinated discussion on race, racial identity and racial discourse in France. The editors aptly frame the discussion within the French paradox: France's egalitarianism forbids the administrative

⁴ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, xv.

⁵ Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyle Stovall, eds., *Black France / France Noire, The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁶ James Baldwin, “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown”, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984 [1955]).

⁷ Keaton et al., *Black France*, 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

but also discursive recognition of racial minorities and identities to protect the French ideal of colorblindness. The multiple points of views offer a crafted balance between distanced position and intimate knowledge of the French specific way of considering - or ignoring - race and contemporary concerns that reveal the sensitivity of the issue: the 2007 outcry following President Sarkozy's Dakar speech on the merits of colonization and the Africans' "responsibility for their own unhappiness",⁹ for example or the 2009 controversial debate on national identity. The rage unleashed contradicts the supposed absence of race in French historical and identity constructions in the advocated Republican model and points out the urgency of such a study.

Such is the contribution of *Black France* with its wide-ranging inputs: personal narratives by African Americans, discussions by celebrated writers and activists on the workings of a black identity in France, useful contributions by scholars focusing on a more discursive examination of blackness, on the exploration of the colonial past and memory of slavery, and on the cultural nexus "France-America" to bring forth a much needed conceptual and historical depth to the more personal and nonetheless acute testimonies.¹⁰

In an interesting twist, both *Paris Noir* and *Black France* travel through time and cross the Atlantic from the dark times of American segregation and French colonialism that triggered different diasporas to reach out to the present. They finely combine the encounters of two opposite yet dialectic visions of race on the Paris scene. Upon this dialogue, a community of French and American scholars has thrived, drawing from the past to illuminate today's challenge of embracing diversity. *Black France* is dedicated, among others, to Michel Fabre.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰ A more chronological account of black history in France but also visual history through popular representations, cultural artifacts, photographs, and reproductions of official documents is available in the beautifully illustrated work by Pascal Blanchard, Sylvie Chalaye, Éric Deroo, Dominic Thomas, and Mahamet Timera eds., *La France noire, Présences et migrations des Afriques, des Amériques et de l'océan Indien en France* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011). Several of the book's contributors also wrote in *Black France*. A paperback version of the texts, without the illustrations was published in 2012.