

Why France Remains a Moveable Feast



James Baldwin photographed along the Seine in Paris, 1972.

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AMERICANS HAVE BEEN COMING TO FRANCE FOR CENTURIES, DRAWN BY ITS REPUTATION AS A CENTER FOR ART, FASHION AND FREEDOM. FROM THOMAS JEFFERSON AND JOHN ADAMS TO JAMES BALDWIN, JOSEPHINE BAKER AND CREATIVE TREND-SETTERS TODAY, WE LOOK AT WHAT BRINGS AMERICANS TO FRANCE, HOW THEY HAVE PERPETUATED THE MYTH THAT ATTRACTED THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE – AND WHAT KEEPS THE LOVE AFFAIR BURNING.

There's a moment in the recent Netflix comic drama *The Chair* where Ji-Yoon and Bill, professors of English literature played by Sandra Oh and Jay Duplass, discuss the prospect of leaving the United States, flush with a handsome settlement in a textbook cancel-culture-era lawsuit. "I could go to Paris ... and produce great works of literature!" says Bill, half-jokingly. With an eye roll, Ji-Yoon shuts down the idea: "Oh, that's a total cliché."

If the idea of dropping everything and moving to Paris, or anywhere in France, has reached peak cliché, it's due to a long line of Americans who have been lured in before them. The motivating factors vary according

to generation, but since Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were first seduced by France, before returning home to reinforce a litany of stereotypes about the culture that remain prevalent today – a reverence for intellectualism and the arts, pleasure above all else – the country has occupied a distinct space in the collective American imagination. Cultural curiosity is part of the draw, says the historian Laura Lee Downs. The lack of French settlers in America, relative to the massive waves of Germans, Dutch, Irish and English who brought their traditions and religious beliefs to the New World, contributed to a certain fascination with the country, "a tendency for 'France' to represent elite and bourgeois culture in American

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discourse,” says Downs. “France thus floats more freely in the American imagination, a movie screen onto which fantasies both positive and negative are often and easily projected.”

If Daniel Roseberry, the 35-year-old American couturier appointed creative director of Schiaparelli in 2019, even vaguely entertained the idea of moving his life and career to France, it’s thanks in part to that legacy. “In fashion, when you are dreaming up your career, working in Paris once in your life is almost a nonnegotiable,” he says. “It’s one of the most intimidating, arrogant and beautiful places, and the experience of being able to conquer this city for someone who comes from Plano, Texas, is a chance of a lifetime.”

By some accounts, excelling professionally and socially (or ascending, depending on how you look at it) by way of France was the original American Dream, one that made journeys like Roseberry’s possible. Beginning in the post-Civil War years, American painters, sculptors, architects and writers were a particularly visible expat contingent in Paris. The art world was shaped by the migration of young Americans who enrolled in the *École des Beaux Arts* and private academies in an effort to be at the center of Europe’s thriving artistic cradle. It was a crucial move to stay relevant: they needed “to compete with French artists, especially the academics whose works were being snatched up by wealthy American collectors,” writes H. Barbara Weinberg, art historian and curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in an essay. Intrigued both by the penniless bohemian and the insouciant flaneur, painters and writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries set the foundation for an artistic character, depicted in their work, that would instill generations of Americans with the belief that France is the home of creative emancipation.

That soft power continued in the lead-up to and following World War II, driving American performers, musicians and writers, including Lost Generation matriarch Gertrude Stein, to build their own vibrant cultural enclaves on Paris’s Left Bank and in the northern neighborhoods. But it was Josephine Baker, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, among the best-known Americans in Europe, who created the narrative establishing

France as an indefatigable capital of liberty. Chased away from the United States by racial segregation, they found not only creative recognition abroad but also freedom from discrimination and the social injustices plaguing American society. France was a safe haven, “where the laws of segregation didn’t exist, where there was no lynching and where it was possible to speak to a white woman without being threatened or killed,” said the French poet and writer Daniel Maximin in the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper. “Paris was a second New York, a Black and Caribbean capital where Anglophones, Francophones and Hispanophones came together in an incredible cultural effervescence.”

Contemporary writers and thinkers share the sentiment. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s dispatches from his time in Paris with his family probed the age-old idea of leaving home to see oneself anew, although what he discovered mostly revealed what America wasn’t allowing him. “My body feels like it is my own and no longer performing for my tribe and its enemies,” he wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2013. “I perform for myself here. Because I have no tribe here (yet) and the blood feuds feel so very distant from me.” Being Black wasn’t his single most defining feature in Paris, and that fact meant he could exist in a sort of freeing state of anonymity. “You play a lot of roles as a black man in America,” he wrote. “But ‘Stranger’ isn’t one of them. You feel too marked – not even marked for ill treatment, but just marked.”

Yet both Baldwin and Coates quickly observed that France conferred a social privilege to Black Americans that it did not offer to citizens and residents of African, Asian or Maghreb descent. They had traded the posturing of freedom in their home country for one of color-blind equality in France, the source of much fomenting turmoil during the past several years. Panacea though France may not be, the further fracturing of American society – with its ideological intensity, widening divisions, broken health-care system and now virus-related inequities – means those looking to move or set on staying have a vast pool of reasons to draw from.

For Ajiri Aki, a Nigerian-American who initially came to France to study decorative arts, worked in fashion and later founded an online boutique

for antique homewares called Madame de la Maison, it’s the pace of life that keeps her firmly anchored in France. “French culture doesn’t really promote or reward getting rich quick nor conspicuous consumption,” she says. “While I might have complained about this initially, I realize it is something that frees me to focus on creating and living as opposed to socioeconomic ladder-climbing.” She adds that a slowed-down life, a foil to America’s ethos of ever bigger and faster, is the central conceit of the lifestyle book she’s writing.

Political exodus is just as compelling now as it was throughout the 20th century. Philip Andelman, a director and photographer entwined in an admittedly love-hate dynamic with France, reconfirmed his commitment to the country (at least temporarily) as a result of the mounting and “exhausting” hysteria he observes on regular return trips to the U.S. “The French have a certain levelheadedness that is refreshing,” he says. “They can see both sides of most arguments, and day-to-day life is not lived under a constant barrage of all-caps headlines and fear-mongering.” He acknowledges the Yellow Vest movement of 2018-2019 was more than a little disruptive but adds that strikes have been a marker and measure of the culture since the French Revolution. “With the exception of a couple of climactic, intense months two years ago,” he says, “it’s just another *c’est la vie* moment endured in a country that doesn’t live on a two-party political system meant to resemble professional football playoffs. People truly can relax here if they want.”

With the recent diplomatic kerfuffle between France and AUKUS (the awkward trilateral pact between Australia, the U.K. and the U.S.), resulting in a botched submarine deal, the media is once again asking if France has completely lost its relevance in the world. It may continue to struggle to become the global power it dreams it can be, but it is plenty rich in the kind of soft power that it needs to remain a permanent draw for the foreign mind. “France isn’t simply a place or a nation or even a state of mind,” says Sudeep Rangi, an American social entrepreneur and consultant who came to France to study and work in bioethics. “It’s an entire mythology. And myths don’t expire.” 🍷