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PARIS-NEW YORK: VENUES OF MIGRATION AND  
THE EXPORTATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
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BY THOMAS N. HAMMOND

President's Address Delivered at the Fifty-Seventh Annual  
Convention and Sixtieth Anniversary of the CLA in Atlanta,  
Georgia, April 18, 1997

To the distinguished representatives of the great city of Atlanta, to representatives of the administration of Spelman College and other universities and colleges in the Atlanta University complex, to faculty and staff of these fine institutions, to students and guests of the College Language Association, to members of the CLA family, ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon. It is indeed a tremendous honor for me to address this illustrious gathering of professors, scholars, researchers, administrators, and students who have come from many corners of the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe for this annual gathering of CLA. This year marks the Fifty-seventh Annual Convention and Sixtieth Anniversary of the founding of the College Language Association in 1937 by

Dr. Hugh Gloster, who was a young teacher of English at Lemoyne College in Tennessee at that time. I have just recently been in contact with Dr. Gloster and I am personally delighted that he will be participating in this convention.

There are a number of persons who have worked many long hours to make this conference a reality. On behalf of the CLA membership, I express sincere thanks to our local hosts, Dr. Akiba Harper and Dr. Anne B. Warner and their staff at Spelman College. I also express my personal thanks and that of the CLA family for the generous financial support given by Dr. Johnetta Cole and the administration of Spelman College. We also thank the administration, faculty, students and staff of other institutions in the greater Atlanta area for their contributions. It is because of all of your collective efforts that we look forward to a most rewarding and inspiring conference this year.

As President of CLA, it is my honor and privilege to address the annual conference. My predecessors have challenged us to maintain the traditions and ideals of Dr. Gloster and the other pioneers in CLA. In recent years, Dolan Hubbard has inspired the membership to understand and to apply technology in our teaching, research, and scholarship.

I would like to spend a few minutes reflecting with you on the theme of this year's conference: "Literature in Migration: City, Country, World." I think that what this theme infers is that the traditional boundaries which have divided us geographically, and thereby have been largely responsible for the creation of certain cultural properties, are less likely to be so rigid in the future. What I would like to suggest is that perhaps those cultural boundaries were never so well defined as one might have imagined. I want to reflect on displacement and migration to Paris and New York and their development as venues of black culture in the early 1920s and 1930s. The

convergence of black people from Africa and the diaspora into these two metropolitan cities forged new personal identities and perspectives on the black experience.

The emergence of major black enclaves in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York from 1910 through the 1920s is familiar to all of us. In the 1920s, Harlem, a section of uptown New York, became the geographic space of an unlikely new vogue: a cultural rebirth in the black community. The decade marked the beginning of an optimism which would lead to a period of unprecedented cultural and social growth called by some the "Harlem Renaissance," by others the "Negro Renaissance." From across the United States black artists, musicians, writers and others, both young and old, converged on Harlem. It became, for them, a kind of Mecca. It is perhaps one of Langston Hughes' most famous creations, Jesse B. Simple, who best defines and positions Harlem in the context of the 1920s, and I quote:

I like Harlem 'cause it belongs to me. I would not go back down South, not even to Baltimore. I am in Harlem to stay. . . . From Central Park to 179th Street, from river to river, Harlem is mine.

It was this appropriation of Harlem as a kind of personalized turf, a sacred intellectual, moral, and creative space which would be responsible in large measure for some of the most important creative productions in African-American cultural history. Literary groups formed, and in the streets each artist could be seen with an eager face and a manuscript under his arm. Alain Locke coined the term "New Negro" to describe the period's youth, but we can think of these young men and women as modern-day pilgrims, making their way toward the new artistic and cultural capital of black life in the United States.

This migration to the North and the cultural revolution which resulted were products of a distinct social and political climate at the beginning of this century. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

had been founded in 1909 and was instrumental in the struggle of black people for equality and justice. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 precipitated more migration to the industrial North and changes in the lives of the black masses. It was, in fact, because of the war that blacks were able to move into the American marketplace and enjoy social and economic mobility. And I would argue that it was because of this era of "greater expectations" that creative genius reached its maximum potential.

Thematically, black art of the 1920s expressed the hopes and aspirations of a people. During this critical period in black literary and artistic history, black creative production expressed the duality of life in America. Writers like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling Brown, to name just a few, gave new poetic and dramatic expression to the hopes of the young immigrant from the South who flocked to the North in search of a better life.

The migration of black people during World War I, however, was not limited to the large industrial states of the North. Many young blacks were sent to war on foreign soil. Black soldiers experienced a new sense of liberty and personal freedom in the war zones of Europe. Upon their return to the United States many settled in Harlem and became increasingly more vocal in their objection to American racism and discrimination. They challenged the integrity of President Theodore Roosevelt, who maintained that he was sending young soldiers to Europe, both black and white, to fight for the American ideal of liberty and justice for all.

In spite of their subjection to the racism of white American military personnel in Europe, black American soldiers fought with distinction and won the praise and admiration of people around the world, especially the French. I would argue that the migration of large num-

bers of black Americans to France in the 1930s owes much to the admiration and appreciation of the French people for the fighting spirit of men like those in the 369th Infantry Regiment of New York, the most celebrated group of black soldiers in World War I.

If Harlem, as we have argued, was the cultural capital of African-American life in the 1920s, the postwar years of the 1930s would bring about a migration of cultural capital and productivity across the Atlantic to Paris. In the minds of many of the American soldiers whose journey for freedom took them from Harlem to the battlefields of Europe, the prospect of America widening the umbrella of equal opportunities to embrace all of her citizens soon became what Langston Hughes labeled "dreams deferred." Unlike the racism of postwar America, many black soldiers had very positive experiences in France. Some married French women and decided to raise their families in Europe rather than face the debilitating effects of discrimination and racism at home. Many of the soldiers earned a living by playing in jazz bands in Paris. The public reception of soldiers and their music in France was warm and represented a new kind of existential relationship based on a perceived equality of the black man with his white counterpart. Black musicians, in particular, were so seduced by the lack of daily contact with racial oppression that there developed among these expatriates "a myth of the color-blind society in France." W. E. B. Du Bois published a landmark article, "The Black Man in the Revolution of 1914-18," in *The Crisis*. Du Bois argued that "the black soldier saved civilization" during the war years. He noted the kind and humane reception given the ex-soldier in France and prophesied that "They will ever love France." This love for France among black soldiers and the French people's love for American Jazz would usher in what can be called the Jazz Age in Paris. Montmartre and the surrounding areas of Pigalle, the Sacre-Coeur, became the focal point

of jazz and black American life in Paris. Jazz musicians and tourists to Paris made their way to the heart of the black community in the city. Jazz soon emerged as the premiere American export to postwar France. With jazz musicians came the jazz singers. Most notable among the early jazz singers were, of course, Josephine Baker and Ada Louise Smith from West Virginia. Ada Louise Smith was born in 1894 and was later nicknamed Bricktop. She grew up in Chicago. After difficult years in New York, Ada Louise Smith moved to France and soon earned a name as a singer in the night clubs of Montmartre. She was greatly admired by another expatriate, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and his wife Zelda, who frequented the Jazz Club "Le Grand Duo," to hear Bricktop sing. Fitzgerald once stated, "My greatest claim to fame is that I discovered Bricktop before Cole Porter." Of course, it was the legendary Josephine Baker who would seduce Paris and all of Europe. Josephine Baker's career in France and her disillusionment with America is well known. Her endearment to France was enhanced by the role she played in the Resistance to German Occupation of France. The love affair which French people have had over the years with Josephine Baker and American jazz is legendary. As the contemporary saxophone player Johnny Griffin puts it, "Sometimes I think French people reckon they invented jazz. They love Louis Armstrong, they love Sidney Bechet. And in Paris the people hanging out in clubs are like a family; they all know each other."

More than music, literature, or any other art form, painting and sculpture symbolized French creative genius in the interwar years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Paris was the world center of modern art. The impressionist works of artists like Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh, and Claude Monet had created a revolutionary artistic movement called Impressionism. Artistic movements like dadaism, cubism and surrealism attracted both white and black Americans to Paris for study.

In the 1930s artists like Palmer Hayden, Aaron Douglas, William Johnson, Hale Woodruff, and Henry O. Tanner migrated to France to perfect their craft. The impact of the Parisian experience on these artists is clearly evident in their new subject matter, styles, and artistic techniques. American creative writers soon joined the transatlantic voyage of discovery and fulfillment to Paris. Disillusioned with life in America, they packed their gear and migrated to Europe, especially to France. A whole generation of writers—Gertrude Stein, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway—were a vital part of what was later called the Lost Generation. Like their white counterparts, many black musicians, artists, and writers such as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay transported the Harlem Renaissance to Europe. It is estimated that hundreds of black musicians, ex-soldiers, writers, artists, and other creative persons would leave this country for Europe. It was in Paris that young creative artists from the United States met other cultural nomads from Africa and the Caribbean. Despite their birth in different geographic locales, black students, travelers, and the few permanent residents of the French capital began to understand their common historical and political experiences. And it is through the prism of a racial identity forged on a foreign soil that the new Movement of Negritude, or black identity, and consciousness was born. The impact of the transplanted Harlem Renaissance is clearly evident.

It was in Paris that early writings in Francophone literature were published by *Presence Africaine*. It was in Paris that African-American creative talent met its African and Caribbean counterparts. The West Indian poet René Menil wrote that “les poemes des negres d’Amerique touchent le monde entier” (The poems of black America touch the entire world). The founders of the Negritude Movement—Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Leon Damas of French

Guiana—acknowledged that during the 1930s and 1940s African and West Indian students residing in Paris were in constant contact with black writers like Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen. It was in the years 1929-34 that the contact between expatriates in Paris was most pervasive. Thanks to the efforts of Mademoiselle Andree Nardal and a Haitian doctor, Doctor Sajou, many black students were able to meet. In the tradition of the literary salon of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, Mlle. Nardal and Dr. Sajou brought together African students, West Indians, and black Americans to discuss the political, economic, and social evils facing them in France and back home. Doctor Sajou founded *La Revue du monde noir* (*The Journal of the Black World*), a journal in which aspiring artists could publish their work. Much later, the eminent scholar, teacher, and writer René Maran from the West Indies and Mercer Cook, chair of the Department of Modern Foreign Languages at Howard for many years and the first United States Ambassador to Senegal, facilitated contacts between a large number of black intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora whose lives were transformed by the migration of the cultural and political exchanges in Paris. It was because of the initiatives of René Maran, Mercer Cook, Langston Hughes, and others, that Paris in the early part of the twentieth century became the preeminent venue of black cultural capital in Europe.

The Depression brought about a slow decline in the exportation of black cultural capital to France. However, in the late 1930s there was a resurgence of the transatlantic voyage of self-discovery and cultural affirmation. Like other expatriates, African-American artists of this era flocked to the Banks of the Seine as well. Included among them were women like Lois Mailou Jones, who lived in France from 1937 to 1938. The stories go that at one point Jones was told, “Go to Paris, if you want to es-

tablish yourself as an artist.” According to Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, “The year Lois Jones spent in Paris was most fruitful in terms of productivity and development of her artistic personality.” Lois Mailou Jones once said this about the impact of Paris on her artistic productivity: “I painted from morning until night; I can’t tell you how much I was working. The studio was so beautiful—it was really a wonderful place to work.” Lois Mailou Jones had found the geographic space in Paris which allowed her to create art without the concerns for the mundane realities of segregation and racism. Later, black cultural nomads such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes would also prosper from the artistic environment of Paris in the 1950s and would usher in what might be called the Golden Age of African-American Literature in Paris.

The 1950s in Paris belonged to Richard Wright, James Baldwin, William Gardner Smith, and Chester Himes. Richard Wright left the United States for France in 1946, shortly after the publication of his novel *Native Son*; James Baldwin in 1948; William Gardner Smith in 1951; and Chester Himes in 1953. Like Jones’ experience, the Parisian *sejour* of these giants in African-American letters was transformative. Each was changed and molded based on his own personality and temperament. Wright was attracted to France because of his desire to escape American racism, but he did not abandon his commitment to racial justice for his black brothers and sisters in the United States. I would argue that Wright’s passion and social consciousness were heightened by the more politicized environment in France. In Paris he wrote even more forcefully on the evils and contradictions of racism in the United States in such articles as “American Negroes in France,” “The Shame of Chicago,” and “The American Problem.”

Unlike Wright, James Baldwin never felt completely connected to life in Paris. His struggle with his own ra-

cial and sexual identities can be seen in his novel *Giovanni's Room*, written during the Paris years. The Parisian cafe became the venue for hours of meditation and casual acquaintances for James Baldwin. As a matter of fact, I met Baldwin for the first time in a cafe in the Quartier Latin in spring 1970 or spring 1973, when I was a student. Baldwin would leave Paris and travel back to Harlem frequently during the 1950s. These voyages between Paris and New York were that of a kind of cultural nomad. I see nomadism as a positive experience, one which is both transformative and redemptive. Baldwin's more committed life of the 1960s is a good example.

When I talk about the transformative nature of the Parisian experience for Baldwin, Wright, and Jones, and other expatriates, I understand the nature of this transformation based on personal experience. I went to Paris as a student for the first time in 1968 during the height of what some call the modern French Revolution. It was a time of tremendous social unrest and strikes by workers and students, and I remember vividly the impact of political debates at the university on my life and career. The expectation of many of my fellow students was that everyone was obliged in some way to be engaged in the political activism of the late 1960s in the United States and in France. It was in Paris that I had my first encounter with student activism and tear gas in the Latin Quarter on July 14, Independence Day in France, in 1968. It was during the 1969-70 school year that I lived at the Cité Universitaire, took courses in French and Francophone literature at the Sorbonne, and got to know many students from all over the world, students whose lives, like mine, would never be the same because of the transformation and redemption of many hours of reflection and intellectual exchanges in the classroom, cafes, dorm rooms, parks, etc., of Paris. As was the case with Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and countless others, Paris became for me the Gateway to Africa. Much later,

during 1992-94, I taught and did research as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the National University of the Ivory Coast.

In closing, I would point out that in the 1990s the transatlantic cultural voyage between America and Europe seems to be moving in the opposite direction: Paris to New York. In November 1996 the Department of French and Romance Philology, La Maison Française, and the Institute for Research in African-American Studies of Columbia University in the City of New York organized a conference with the title "Paris-New York: Migrations of Identities." Many well-known scholars and luminaries in African and African-American literature and African-American Studies, such as Skip Gates, Maryse Conde, Michel Fabre of France, Manning Marable, and Anthony Appiah, were in attendance in New York. The keynote address, "Richard Wright and the Presence Africaine Circle," was given by Manthia Diawara, Director of Africana Studies at New York University. He is also an outstanding critic of African cinema. This conference focused on the importance of New York as the capital of black cultural activities. Like Harlem in the 1920s and Paris in the 1930s, Manhattan was described as the venue of black cultural migration in the 1990s. One of the principal themes of the conference was the impact of migration on the forging of a new cultural self and identity. Like the black migrant from the rural South in the early part of this century, the new pilgrim to New York in the 1990s is transformed into a new hybrid, a kind of different and distinct cultural personality.

During the next few days the CLA family will engage the theme of "Literature in Migration: City, Country, World." We will no doubt have presentations covering many literary periods where the theme of migration of identity will be the focus. We will engage the problem of identity from different perspectives, such as literary genre, philosophy, historical and political texts,

postcolonialism; and postmodernism. I hope that you will leave this, the 1997 CLA conference, with new perspectives on the nature of identity formation and the fluidity of identities and cultural property. Maybe the cultural capital of black intellectual life in the future will be neither Paris nor New York, but the world. Have a tremendous conference and thank you very much.

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