

RHAE LYNN BARNES

SOJOURNERS: MAPPING BLACK AMERICAN CULTURE IN PARIS

S03

W 1:30-4:20

An Immersive Digital Humanities History Course on Paris Noir*

Journalist Isabel Wilkerson wrote that the 6 million African Americans who migrated from the Jim Crow South to the urban North, West, and Europe after emancipation “did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done. They *left*.” Migration, movement, captivity, and travel are central to the history of the African Diaspora in the black Atlantic and conceptions of “freedom” and protest in the United States. They are also central to the creation, rise, and circulation of black popular culture globally to articulate revolutionary thought and communicate competing visions for a racially equal and just future historical actors and artists tried to will into being during slavery and Jim Crow eras. Richard Wright, famed author of *Native Son* hand-wrote a poem reflecting his own motivations for leaving Rucker’s Plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, for Chicago, New York, and ultimately, like many black revolutionaries and artists, for Paris. “I was leaving the South/ To fling myself into the unknown.../ I was taking a part of the South/ To transplant in alien soil, / To See if I could grow differently/ If I could drink of new and cool rains/ Bend in strange winds/ Respond to the warmth of other suns./ And, perhaps, to bloom.”

This course examines (and then requires students to digitally archive) the artistic and institutional representations of the forced and elective migration of African American life, freedom fighters, artists, and intellectuals in Paris from Sally Hemings and the Haitian Revolution to Beyoncé and Barack Obama in global perspective. By analyzing historical monuments, slave narratives, literature, art, photography, film, and objects this course analyzes the use of movement, immobility, captivity, and forced dislocations from family and culture from a myriad of viewpoints: slaves like Sally Hemings, who accompanied master Thomas Jefferson to Paris, to abolitionist writers like William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass who were all traveling between Paris, London, and the United States. The second half of the course will look at black travel and its representations by intellectuals and artists like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Brick Top as a manifestation of protest, as a major theme in black music and film, as a form of economic opportunity, and freedom as a way to try and bring forth a utopian vision of an interracial future abroad in Paris that was not possible in the United States.

* No prior experience with digital history or humanities is required.

Why Paris instead of New York, New Orleans, or Chicago?

To African American historical subjects like James Baldwin or Josephine Baker, Paris provided the unparalleled freedom to work and the invaluable opportunity to learn in a way that was not accessible in the United States. We will do the same, while researching how and why this happened.

Unlike American cities that were segregated, understanding Paris is crucial to mastering black cultural history and the particular spatial dynamics of Paris' urban landscape that allowed black Americans to be culturally productive. In Paris, class and race were delineated vertically in architecture and in urban spirals differently from the United States' rigid "class line" system of segregation. Such a system allowed for unique forms of cohabitation of races and sites of artistic development. As a class, we will be interrogating and analyzing what specifically about this place in different historical moments allowed this to happen and then we will digitally map this process, conducting original research in archives at Princeton University, to create an online exhibit of black cultural life. By digitally mapping black American life in Paris, students will gain valuable skills in close reading texts, the urban landscape, using digital humanities to create research-based content for the general public, and advanced research methodologies.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will:

- Learn hands-on digital humanities research methodologies and work with technologically innovative tools to collaboratively build a research-based website that can be used by other scholars and the general public. You will leave this class with a tangible product of what you learned to show future employers or as part of a research portfolio for graduate or professional schools
- Engage with a variety of media dedicated to preserving, memorializing, or even forgetting past events and people related to black Paris as part of the broader cultural landscape
- Identify and explore the defining material, spatial, political, and cultural features of "Paris Noir"
- Acquire and be able to write about American race relations and cultural history in a dynamic and global perspective
- Assess how historical sites contribute to the production or contestation of shared cultural ideas that developed between America and France (i.e. patriotism, citizenship, public history, memory, race, national identity, civil rights, human rights, war) and consider their significance in the broader history of racial ideology
- Develop close reading and analysis skills that can be applied to texts, objects, the digital world, and physical spaces

Sample Required Books

- Himes, Chester, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go: A Novel* (De Capo Press, Reprint Edition 2002, originally 1945).
- Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2009).
- Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008)
- Catel & Bocquet, *Josephine Baker* (2017).
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015).