

It girl: Josephine Baker, a Harlem dancer (main picture), was the darling of 20s Paris, achieving fame that would have been unattainable had she remained in the US. Likewise, champion boxer

Jack Johnson (bottom) found France more welcoming than home: white America tended at best to patronise the black population. Here a couple teach a group of caddies the Charleston

# D INFATUATION



In the 20s, Bohemian Paris fell in love with black artists, jazz musicians, boxers and writers. It was a point of pride among the avant-garde. Today, there is a renewed passion for black culture, argues Petrine Archer-Straw — but it is just as ambivalent as was that first wave of 'negrophilia'





## A DOUBLE-EDGED INFATUATION

Rich pickings: Shipping heiress Nancy Cunard (below), an ex-pat in Paris, epitomised the 20s negrophile — one of the Bohemian set who revelled in black culture. Unusually, in Cunard's case her interest was

not a passing fad but a lifelong commitment. Enthusiasm for 'exotic' performers in the Josephine Baker tradition was revived, first by Eartha Kitt (below left) and then Grace Jones (bottom)

For almost 20 years, I have considered myself a student of "negrophilia". This means that I spend much of my time scrutinising how white and black people relate to each other, trying especially to understand their attraction to each other. My scrutiny can be quite personal, focusing on how I, as a black woman, interact with others around me, particularly when I am working in England; but my exploration is also often stimulated by my time in Jamaica, where the legacy of colonialism has ensured that race relations are a constant touchstone of Caribbean existence. Sometimes, my interests are voyeuristic, and I find myself spying on mixed-race couples and wondering how they perceive each other; at other times, I have a more critical attitude, trying to grasp why, and how, European history has often, implicitly or explicitly, tended to denigrate the image and psyche of black people.

My initial interest in negrophilia grew out of my studies in art history. I came to the subject via what modern artists in the early decades of the 20th century called "primitivism". The term "negrophilia" itself describes the craze for black culture that was prevalent among avant-garde artists and bohemian types in 20s Paris, when to collect African art, to listen to black music and to dance with black people was a sign of being modern and fashionable. In the same way that, today, aspects of black culture such as hip hop, reggae, gangsta rap, locks and Afro hairstyles proliferate, in the 20s the craze was for dances such as the charleston, the lindy hop and the black bottom, for Bakerfix hair paste, and for wearing African-inspired clothes and accessories. This passion for black culture and a "primitivised" existence flourished in the aftermath of the first world war, when artists yearned for a simpler, idyllic lifestyle to counter modern life's mechanistic violence.

But, even as the "negrophiles" of 20s Paris affirmed a love of black people, their relationships with them demonstrated, at least covertly, sentiments closer to fear — sentiments that still persist to this day. Black personalities were either lionised or demonised in a manner that denied normality. I felt that an examination of these mood swings from negrophilia to negrophobia might be a useful way to see how black people have historically become objects of affection or derision, and continue to be. Negrophilia is thus about western culture exploring its perceptions of difference in such a way that best reflects white people rather than their exoticised subjects. Such reflections are often highlighted in sport, the arts and popular entertainment, but they are particularly evident in boxing, a sport of extremes where, historically, whites and blacks have chosen controlled abuse to deal with each other. Fights between white and black boxers create interest because they provide an arena in which the myth of black savagery can be explored and confirmed and even supported. Boxing's ritualised order makes it possible for savage and civilised to meet and to challenge each other on equal terms, and sometimes to upset the "natural" order of things.

The similarities between the career of Mike Tyson at the end of the 20th century and that of Jack Johnson, his black predecessor by almost 100 years, are remarkable and instructive, especially when used to compare attitudes and tolerance to race in America and Europe. Johnson, a Texan-born fighter, boxed his way to the heavyweight championship at a time when racial tension in the southern states of America was at its most virulent.



CORBIS



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The French interest in its colonised peoples went beyond economic consideration



CORBIS

He beat Canadian Tommy Burns in a world title fight in 1908 and followed this with victory over America's "great white hope", Jim Jeffries, in 1910. But Johnson was reviled by the American and British public alike.

His victories had brought a new racial dimension to boxing, and had roused the wrath of the white supremacists, who recognised their significance. What was still more infuriating for white Americans was Johnson's cocky attitude both inside and outside the ring. He taunted opponents with abuse and racial slurs, and also had a penchant for courting white women — in fact, he married three. This flaunting of unwritten colour codes made his victories over white men both physically and sexually humiliating to them. Despite condemnation of Johnson's street-fighter tactics and of bouts that the press called "freak shows", there was no shortage of takers for ringside seats or for tickets to see his motion pictures (the turn-of-the-century equivalent of pay-per-view). The crowd's love-hate relationship with Johnson was good for the box office, and his brawling and abusive manner, combined with white vitriol, merely added to the high-risk entertainment. When Johnson skipped a jail sentence for abducting a white woman, by escaping to Europe, the British press met him with the same vehemence bestowed on Tyson when he returned to the ring after serving time for rape, and again after biting another boxer's ear. In the cases of both Johnson and Tyson, the press demonised the fighters and, in defence of the principles of pugilism, called for them to be banned from boxing. If nothing has been learned in the 90 years that separates their careers, perhaps something can be gained from examining Johnson's experience in Paris.

Paris's reception for Jack Johnson was different. Boxing had been introduced to French culture after the 1789 Revolution through an anglophilic sporting society. Despite its English origins, the revival of "la boxe", as the French called it, came to Paris via America, and was associated with fairground and circus attractions. Black men who participated in boxing events were feted for their feats of strength and likened to their African brothers. These "bad niggers" were greeted with fascination and curiosity. Unlike America, Paris posed no restriction to their fighting with white men, and after 1900 many black boxers gravitated to the city in search of title fights. Johnson came to Paris in 1913 and participated in a number of boxing exhibitions organised by the Nouveau Cirque.

Although race difference provided the visible tensions to Johnson's fights, the invisible political and sexual tensions that his male physicality established in the ring were equally potent. In America, his flamboyant character and transgressive behaviour outside the ring roused white fears of violation and depredation. But in Paris, a city proud of its liberal race policies, the challenge to political and sexual issues was not always so blatant. In the relationship that avant-garde Paris established with black people at this time, sexuality was implicit rather than explicit. That said, the courtship of black culture by the Parisian avant-garde was an even greater slap in the face of the bourgeoisie and its values than a fist fight in the ring. Johnson was vilified by the French mainstream because he challenged its values; he was admired by the avant-garde for the same reason.

Why France should have proved more welcoming to black people than America or Britain is a complex question that necessitates an examination of its cultural and moral attitude towards them in history. Since the Revolution, the motto of "Liberté, →



## A DOUBLE-EDGED INFATUATION

Jungle fever: The French passion for 'primitivism' was apparent early on in the last century in the work of Henri Rousseau (below, *Primeval Forest With Setting Sun*, 1910). Later, in the full flood of negrophilia,

Parisian artists were falling over each other to come up with authentic-looking 'African' creations, among them Picasso, Calder and Rouault (whose *Christ*, is reproduced bottom)



égalité, fraternité" had helped to fashion a response to Africa, slavery and colonial rule that stressed an assimilation and accommodation of black culture (albeit a stifling one) within France's own sense of imperial destiny. French interest in their colonised peoples went beyond economic considerations. In addition to mainstream patronage and a colonial mission to "improve" black people, the avant-garde's admiration and borrowing of Negro forms was as much to satisfy its own need for the "exotic" and the "real" (something that was lacking in its own culture) as it was economic exploitation. The allure of black culture was that it stood for a spiritual wholeness that had been obscured in an increasingly "civilised" and mechanised environment by material development. The assimilation of black forms into Parisian subculture was remedial and therapeutic.

The artistic climate of 20s Paris was a sensitive and experimental one, mirrored in its eclectic range of styles. The first flush of African art's influence on the Parisian avant-garde in the prewar years developed after the war into a commercialised version of "all things African", a sort of blackened version of Art Deco that debuted at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925. This "black deco" cousin was soon applied decoratively to many areas of Parisian lifestyle: furniture was embellished with animal skins and African designs; clothing stressed natural textiles and jungle pelts; jewellery boasted precious metals, gems and enamelling with jazzy



The allure of black culture was that it stood for a spiritual wholeness that had been lost in an increasingly mechanised environment

contemporary designs. Black deco gradually settled into a style ripe for marketing, and black juxtaposed with white became the vogue.

But Paris's infatuation with blackness was not just about aesthetics and inanimate objects: bohemian Parisians also fell in love with "living" black individuals, who were celebrated for their entertaining remedies to the ailments of modern life. This was certainly the case for the black female entertainer, Josephine Baker, Paris's own *Vénus noire* and the predecessor of female performers such as Eartha Kitt and Grace Jones, who have also played on white fantasies of animal magnetism to further their careers. As a talented black woman, "La Bakaire" enjoyed Paris because of the increased opportunities it gave her to realise herself and her goals. Of course, she did achieve great fame, and was even awarded the *Légion d'Honneur* for her resistance work during the second world war. But despite her humanitarian concerns, she discovered that the admiration and success she gained from white society came at a cost. Even up to her death in 1975, at the age of 69, she remained typecast, singing and dancing a white man's tune.

Yet when Baker first hit Paris as a young, Harlem-based dancer mimicking the vaudeville act of "Bert & Bennie" at the Cotton Club, it seemed that within days she had all of the city's beau monde worshipping at her feet. Her cavorting and frenetic dancing quickly earned her a spotlight in André Daven's →



**Fight club:** The career of former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson (below) eerily echoes that of his predecessor, Jack Johnson (bottom), fighting Jess Willard in Cuba in the 1915 bout

that ended his seven-year reign). Johnson's open taunting of white opponents, his unabashed flaunting of his affairs with white women and a charge of kidnap earned him the wrath of the press

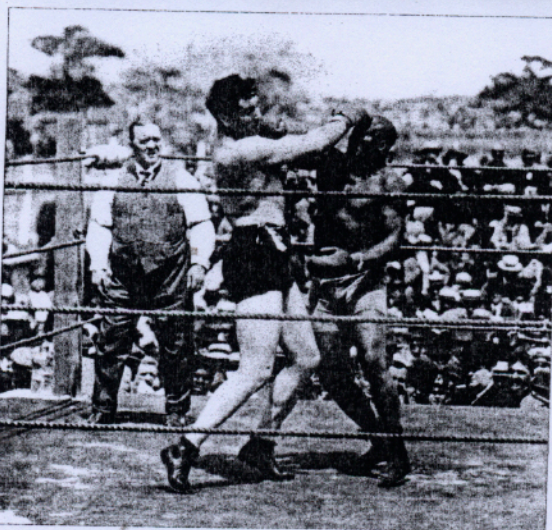
La Revue Nègre at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and her willingness to pose naked for the poster artist Paul Colin and to dance topless on stage transformed her into the mythical "black Venus". On opening night, when she was dressed solely in a ring of bananas belted across her hip, her expressive writhing, combined with drum beats, roused the audience. Her highly sexualised performance, with frenzied and exotic dancing in a duet choreographed by Daven, played upon her viewers' fantasies about Africa and black women. Despite its obvious fabrication, they were willingly seduced into accepting its authenticity.

Present in the audience on Baker's debut night were the artists Francis Picabia and Kees van Dongen and the writers Blaise Cendrars and Robert Desnos; in the following months and years, other artists and writers, including Picasso, Fougère, Henri Laurens, Georges Rouault, Marie Laurencin, Louis Aragon and Alexander Calder, and architects such as Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos would seek her out as model and muse.

For most artists, Baker was a romantic fantasy from a Gauguin or Rousseau painting come to life. Jean Dunand painted her in an exotic setting of banana and coconut trees dressed in skimpy stylised African dress and holding an African charm. Calder devoted his first completely wire-framed sculpture to a figure of Baker, the basis of a later mobile that hung from the ceiling echoing her "dance de ventre". In an era when artists were grappling with a polarised view of women that embraced both the creative and the subversive, Baker was an icon of female sexual expression. Her image was a powerful one, because she appeared to have liberated her female sexuality, and also because her blackness and the fantasy of her accessibility threw into contradiction social mores regarding both sex and race.

Animal imagery dominated Baker's personality and performances, and these were caricatures that she herself fostered. Initially, her performances were full of playful leaping, tumbling and acrobatics that her viewers associated with monkeys, kangaroos and feline creatures, but as she grew more aware of the needs of her audience, her imagery became more sophisticated and symbolic. She paraded her pet leopard, Chiquita, as though it were an extension of her wardrobe, kept a menagerie of animals in her nightclub, Chez Joséphine, and cultivated an animal-like presence to her sexuality. These signifiers were immediately apparent to viewers weaned on tales of contemporary African expeditions, such as the "La Croisière noire" mission of 1925, and notions of exotic black tribeswomen living naked in the wild. Baker's ability to actualise these fantasies made them appear real to Europeans, and merely served to perpetuate a stereotypical imagery that still today places judgments on young black women such as Venus and Serena Williams.

Like Baker, the black people who found themselves in Paris were courted for their sense of style and vitality. Some were discharged soldiers not wishing to return to North America's racial restrictions. Others were musicians and entertainers such as Baker and the Revue Noir troop who found that white interest in dances such as the Charleston, lindy hop, black bottom and shimmy could earn them a significant income, so they stayed. Ada "Bricktop" Smith, black singer and club owner whose popularity at times rivalled Baker's, made good money teaching "white bottoms" such as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway to Charleston; she



Johnson brought a new racial dimension to boxing

even tutored the Prince of Wales. No social even was complete without black musicians and dance and by the end of the decade both Montparnasse and Montmartre boasted black communities of entertainers and nightclubs.

Montmartre, which, as now, was renowned for nightlife, was the area to which most black visitors gravitated. This was the quarter for clubs such as Zelli's, Le Grand Duc, Bricktop's, Chez Florencia, Chez Joséphine, which were fronted by black staff but more regularly funded by white patrons. The boîtes featured both jazz and Latin music that, despite of rigid opening laws, still managed to party until dawn. The trend for most jazz fans was to begin revelling in one club and then to "cruise" the rest of the night in search of the hottest spots and entertainers.

The musicians who worked these clubs initially came to Europe with shows such as Arthur Lytton's Chocolate Kiddies in Berlin, and Paris's La Revue Nègre and the Blackbirds, but the demand for performers meant that they could quickly make names for themselves. Clarinet player Sidney Bechet, after recording and playing in Harlem with great performers such as Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, found fame in Paris after sailing Europe in a "cattle boat" as part of the Southern Syncopated orchestra in 1919. Within weeks of the band performing at the Royal Philharmonic Hall, he was singled out for a royal command performance to King George V at Buckingham Palace. London, however, proved too restrictive for Bechet, and he was eventually deported to New York after narrowly escaping criminal charges for molesting a "tart" Clapham. When he next returned to Europe, it was to Paris, where he achieved celebrity status.



**Wind of change:** When he arrived in Paris in 1919, clarinetist Sidney Bechet had already tried and failed to make a name for himself in London. He had more luck in France, where he achieved celebrity status

alongside others such as piano player Noble Sissle, trumpeter Tommy Ladnier, and singers Florence Mills and Adelaide Hall.

Not all blacks people in Paris were hustlers or entertainers, however. Some were privileged even before they came to Europe and pioneered the cause of a black intelligentsia in Europe. Despite Paris's reputation for modernity, some of the black artists working in the city, such as Lois Mailou Jones, Palmer Hayden and Henry O Tanner, were more inclined towards academicism. The same might also be said of African-American poets living there. Writers such as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Alain Locke may have framed their ideas about the Harlem Renaissance's New Negro within the modernist experience, but they were still remarkably conventional.

The initial presence of blacks in Paris was considered rejuvenating, particularly for the bohemian set who cultivated the shadowy world of the jazz clubs and who called themselves "negrophiles" — figures such as the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, the art dealer Paul Guillaume, the shipping heiress and publisher Nancy Cunard, and the surrealist critic Michel Leiris. A few of these were even willing to disown their European heritage altogether in favour of black culture.

Despite the negative historical implications of being called a "nigger lover", they used terms such as "negrophile" and "négrier" almost as terms of

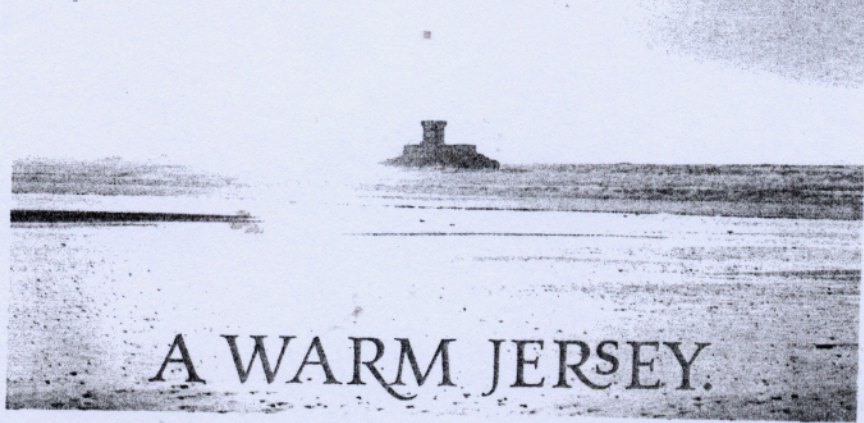


endearment to establish their status outside "civilised" society's moral boundaries. Being a negrophile within the Parisian avant-garde affirmed one's defiant craze for black culture. "Blueness" was a sign of their modernity, reflected in African sculptures that scattered their rooms alongside abstract paintings. Such orchestrated environments of tribal and modern became part of an invisible code that, rather like the decor of Dr Frazer Crane's apartment, defined their owners as cultural connoisseurs.

Nancy Cunard epitomised the negrophile of the 1920s, one of the elite who inherited the avant-garde enthusiasm for black culture. Her friendships between 1923 and 1925 with artists such as Tristan Tzara, Constantin Brancusi, Man Ray and Louis Aragon might have resulted in an approach to Africa based on the surrealists' fantasies of regression. Her commitment to authenticity, however, eventually introduced her to a network of black intellectuals and artists who ensured that her understanding of Africa was anti-colonial, if not a little transgressive. By 1926, she could write to her colleague Janet Flanner that she was leaving for Southampton "to look at African and Oceanic things — because that is the most recent and now very large interest in my life: ivory, gods, masks, fetishes".

One image of Cunard photographed by Man Ray in 1926 defines her negrophile status. Pictorially sporting bangles up to her elbows, mock leopard-print garb and eyes ringed with kohl, she exudes the

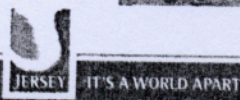
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Plus ça change: Today, black music such as hip hop, reggae and rap has wide appeal, just as in the 20s the craze was for dances such as the charleston and the lindy hop.

And media hype surrounding Zadie Smith (below) and her first novel *White Teeth* focused as much on her mixed-race upbringing and looks as it did on the quality of her work

## A DOUBLE-EDGED INFATUATION

and "octopus-like arms", demonstrate that even as black athletes are winning, they are still perceived in a particular, patronising way by white people.

When Tyson recently beat the sense out of his white Texan opponent Lou Savarese, for instance, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers alike expressed outrage at his conduct. The 38-second whipping he gave Savarese shocked those watching, as did the accidental lick which toppled the referee. But the media generally focused on the ringside interview held immediately after the fight, during which Tyson hesitatingly pieced together his view of the contest, but then, suddenly conscious of the camera, seemed to go into overdrive. He declared himself ready to fight Britain's double world champion Lewis and threatened to rip out his heart and to "eat his babies".

Repulsed, the British press called Tyson "tawdry", "mad" and ready for "the nouthouse". With his actions and words, Tyson may have exacerbated negative stereotypes of blacks, but it was revealing to see how the media, in its reaction to the outburst, drew on pervasive notions of violence and deviance that historically have been related not just to boxers but to blacks in general.

Today, in a shrinking world, black culture informs a wider, global popular culture. Black music and fashion are particularly seductive. The black image in movies, magazines, videos and computer games is now an icon of modernity. But even as it is being lucratively marketed worldwide, there is still discussion about its "negative" influences, as the Tyson case shows.

Perhaps to redress this imbalance, in Britain we are witnessing another swing of the pendulum back towards negrophilia, especially when the subject is media-friendly — the successful promotion of Zadie Smith and her novel *White Teeth*, for instance, seemed as much to do with interest in the author's mixed-race upbringing and striking good looks as the book's witty commentary about the changing face of Britain. Today's negrophilia is especially indulgent of black Britons who are willing to carry the flag in their endeavours. Perhaps as a sign of its tolerance and multiculturalism, the media has begun to look more closely at these black people as individuals. Recently, the press has adopted Lennox Lewis as one of its own and has framed him, at least in the boxing arena, as "Britain's last hope for glory". It is intriguing that Lewis is being billed as a "gentle giant" in contrast to Tyson's monstrosity, and that Lewis's relative civility in the ring is being seen as an aspect of his Britishness, rather than of his Canadian-ness or Jamaican-ness. This colouring of Britishness is a relatively new phenomenon. It will be interesting to see if the current wave of negrophilia will be sustained beyond the ring and the final count ●

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**Negrophilia, by Petrine Archer-Straw, is published by Thames & Hudson, priced £14.95. To order a copy at the special price of £11.95 (plus 99p UK p&p), freephone Guardian CultureShop on 0800 3166102.**

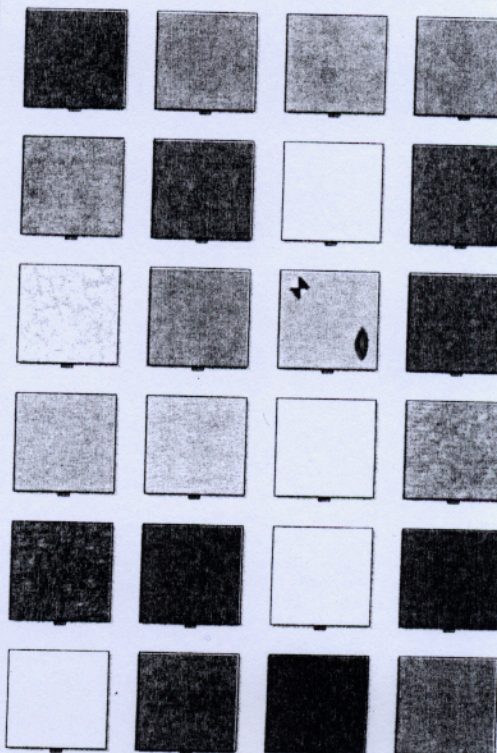


exotic. Her stylish references separate her from conventions of refinement, yet curiously her refinement is reinforced by her accessories. Read like a shorthand for the "exotic" during this period, they were intended to enhance and to compliment her whiteness. Nevertheless, Cunard's predilection for Negro forms went beyond the mere sporting of fashion accessories. By 1928 she had left her lover Aragon for the black musician Henry Crowder, an affair that was later the cause of her disinheritance and estrangement from the Cunard family. Although the press maliciously reported other casual relationships with black men such as the actor Paul Robeson, suggesting that her interest was just a "phase" rather than a real commitment, her subsequent tireless work as editor of the black anthology, *Negro*, reflected a genuine need and concern to identify with and to support black people. Significantly, Cunard's career as an activist for black causes lasted the entire negrophilia era and beyond: the eventual publication of *Negro* in 1934 coincided with the end of the craze. The anthology took years to come to fruition, but it remains one of few tangible products from an era that proved so fickle and ephemeral.

Ephemeral that period may have been, but in the world of black and white little changes, and negrophilia endures to this day. Assessment of historical relationships offers a useful guide for understanding contemporary issues, and one can often glide between past and present in a way that is frightening, but thought-provoking.

This summer has been particularly rewarding, because so many black sports stars, such as the Williams sisters, Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis, have been in the limelight, with the press dragging out all the old expressions they seem to reserve for black subjects. Sports reports describing the new Wimbledon and US Open champion Venus Williams as a "demented doe" or a "predator", along with descriptions of her "impossibly long legs"

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