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Why France became the land of the first

Negrophilia. By Petrine Archer-Straw (Thames & Hudson, £14.95).

Reviewed by
Richard Edmonds

Arriving in large numbers on French soil during World War One, black American soldiers exhaled a communal sigh of relief.

At last they had found a home in a society that was not constructed around principles of anti-black segregation and discrimination.

In France, segregation was illegal – bars, dance halls, hotels and restaurants were open to everyone regardless of race or colour. And African Americans for the first time in their lives could dance all night or make love to French women or men and no-one turned a hair. It was a kind of paradise.

But there was another side to this freedom of racial bias since everything has its opposite. France after all had its colonies in Africa and its rule overseas was predicated upon the superiority of the French. Yet in Paris, the black immigrant found a colour-blind land of the free with a high sense of tolerance.

On the streets, black Americans could live their lives openly at last in a *milieu* devoid of the Jim Crow racism which they had experienced at home.

A world of opportunity not dreamed of previously opened up to them. Some became nightclub owners such as the celebrated Bricktop who had her club in Montmartre. Then there was Josephine Baker, the dancer who came over from America with a revue and stayed on to become, in time, a celebrity and to discover what it felt like being a human being for the first time.

The French coined the word “negrophilia”. It was the term used by the French avant-garde in the 1920s and it



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covered all kinds of things from black jazz, ragtime, the cake walk and the Charleston to African sculpture, painting and writing by black authors and so on.

But above all else, as Petrine Archer-Straw demonstrates so well in this engaging and instructive book, negrophilia defined the defiant love of the negro by the European which in itself epitomised a direct challenge to bourgeois values. To engage in negrophilia was a way of being "modern" in a world – at least, a European world, where to be anything other than modern was to be fuddy-duddy.

Black boxers, poets, singers, dancers and writers or those who were simply "personalities" were cultivated for their fascinating "otherness". They were at once provocative and sexually stimulating. They typified a form of release which was cherished and those who could afford it took their excitement one stage further by collecting African sculpture or African art, they wore tribal jewellery or assimilated black forms into their work – a prime instance of inspiration in this area was Picasso who began to incorporate the African mask a few years earlier.

Whites naively considered *les noires* to be more vital, more passionate and sexual than their own ethnic group. Bricktop Baker, Eubie Blake, Elizabeth Welch (the English singer who had gone over to Paris with the original *blackbirds* revue) suddenly found themselves in demand.

When an aristocratic soirée was held by the Rothschilds, or the Prince of Wales (presumably with Wallis Simpson in tow) it was the Charleston which was danced in their huge houses and the blacks were part of a very special crowd.

It was in the Jean Cocteau, Poulenc, Poiret circle that Man Ray, the photographer, met the notorious Nancy Cunard, whose Paris lifestyle – particularly morally uncluttered – was funded by her family connections with the world-famous shipping line.

Cunard epitomised the negrophilic world of the early 1920s. She was one of the avant-garde elite, whose attitude towards the cruelties inherent in African colonialism was both transgressive and super-liberal. Cunard loved Afro-culture and she scoured Southampton and other places for anything that pronounced Africa to her.

She went in for ivories, masks, ethnic jewellery and carvings. A feature item on Cunard, which appeared in *Vogue*, mentioned her ivory shackles, the huge African ivory bracelets, which Cunard wore



Le Bal de la rue Blomet by Sem, circa 1923)

1931 with the magazine *Negro*, an anthology of black culture. Not surprisingly, Cunard violated class and ethnic taboos by taking a black live-in lover, Henry Crowder, an accomplished jazz musician who assisted Cunard in her other life as a book publisher and director of the Hours Press.

Montmartre was where the blacks congregated. In this area of Paris, visitors found latin and jazz music and clubs such as Zelli's, Chez Florence and of course Bricktop's. Most of the expat blacks were to be found around the Boulevard Clichy or the rue Pigalle. And when they were not entertaining others they entertained themselves with frenzied dancing that was notorious at the Bal Nègre in the rue Blomet.

colourful *milieu* of the theatres and the clubs and many of them were forced to accept low-paid jobs or specious careers as gigolos, newspaper boys, paid dance partners or barmen.

"If you can't play jazz or tap dance you might as well go home", one young hopeful male was told by a black resident. And for every negro who made it, a hundred fell by the wayside or went back to America. Crowder, through his association with Cunard, was able to become an icon for less fortunate immigrant blacks, but his success was something Cunard utilised to reinforce her own identity as a British radical.

But Archer-Straw contrasts the Crowder/Cunard affair with the dozens of "unmarried couples" who remained

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that some Parisian negrophiles were seen by the blacks themselves as compromising forces within their own "back to Africa" movement.

"Be more African, be more African", Crowder said to the mild-mannered, self-effacing Crowder. "But I ain't African, I'm American," said Crowder perceiving the folly of Cunard and her enthusiastic, misdirected mates. And when she proposed to travel to America with him Crowder, very wisely, stayed in Paris because he was aware that their black and white relationship might well be the cause of American race riots.

Black and white mutuality today repeats itself. White musicians wear dreadlocks, heavy metal and hip-hop performers appear together on the concert stage.