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What is an American?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Stan West  
B.A. University of Illinois, 1973  
M.A. DePaul University, 1999

May, 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

The most famous American expatriate writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Ezra Pound, and Langston Hughes lived in Madrid or Paris between World War I and World War II. They were called the “Lost Generation” first by Stein, who coined the phrase, then by literary scholars who sought a way to describe disaffected American writers who fled to Europe between the two world wars seeking a freer environment. They came from different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and political persuasions. They were rebels with perhaps good cause. They seemed to shun the seemingly homogenous White Anglo Saxon Protestantism of the United States for a more diverse European cultural and literary milieu. In this thesis, I focus on representatives of both groups of writers. I select women and writers of color in each group in this document. I write about them while also writing about myself.

I am trying to tell the story of American expatriate writers in a way that I do not think has ever been done before --- from the viewpoint of a middle-aged, African-American writer, his twin teen-age sons, and Marshall Allen, their great uncle, a pony-tailed, 82-year-old musician-composer-leader of the famous avant garde jazz Sun Ra Arkestra that played stadiums in Europe and “dives” in the States. He was one of the African-American, soldier-musicians during World War II who stayed in France after the war and introduced bebop to this jazz-starved nation. When I was a wayward youth on Chicago’s South Side writing political epithets on alley walls, Uncle Marshall was the first person extolling the virtues of the American expatriate artists of color and encouraging me to put down the paint, pick up a pen and ply my trade in Europe “where Black artists get respect, not regret.”

I have encouraged my sons to consider college in Europe where their global education could be enhanced. To test-market this idea, I took them with me in the summer to live in European college dorms while they were still in middle school. In Europe, my twin sons said they felt emancipated from most of the usual racial stereotypes felt in America. The word they used was “freer.” They said they felt comfortable in global society while also learning of the unique ways some Europeans discriminated against racial and religious minorities. While race and religion played a role in our story, I believed there were some common themes shared with White American expatriate writers such as the need to run *to*. This is the sub-text of my thesis --- that our story, the narratives by American expatriate writers of color -- is universal. This narrative is my answer to the question I shared with other American expatriate writers of all stripes. In essence, I offer a multi-generational, multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural, multi-platform perspective from the lens of an author-journalist-filmmaker-critic-educator. I have attempted to excise interesting stand-alone narratives in favor of carefully blended even-toned text that address the main question.

The main part of my journey took me to Spain, France, Holland, and Belgium, from June 2005 to August 2006. There were other trips, though, in the last two decades, during which I intersected with other scribes who also grappled with answers to the not-so-simple question. On these trips, I thought mostly about American writers of color who lived abroad, and how their stories were eclipsed by their White counterparts. I also imagined how and why writers of color and White writers connected abroad and not at home. The short answer I guessed was that the strict racial codes of the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prevented such multicultural encounters. I wondered if perhaps it could be more than that, though. I also wondered if my sons and their great-uncle might have views other than my own. In the case of my sons, I took them

with me and listened to their responses to foreign stimuli. I noticed that I was hearing them in different ways than at home. Maybe I heard them for the first time. It was as if they were maturing right before my eyes. Travel emancipated them. Me, too.

My work comes three centuries later on the historical shoulders of a famous expatriated Frenchman named J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. In “What is an American?” de Crevecoeur asks:

What then is the American, this new man? ...*He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world, Americans are the western pilgrims. (Letter III)

This new, enlightened global citizen envisioned by de Crevecoeur seemed to be borne out in my travels. This theme seems as timely in 2007 as it was in 1782. Perhaps issues of race, religion, class, gender, and sexual orientation play more of a part in my prism than in previous works on the same topic by other authors. Embedded in this chronicle are discussions of American writers, many of whom became expatriates for political and personal reasons, and their French and Spanish writer-friends.

I do not pretend to be an expert on this topic. I merely posit that my perspective is unique, and that of my sons is fresh, insightful, and entertaining. I think my sons’ viewpoints exemplify how younger American expatriates might answer the rhetorical question in the future.

I visited France in 2006 with one twin teen son, Amman. I visited Spain in 2005 with his brother, Jordan. Since my understanding of the topic improved after the first visit, I have chosen not to present the material chronologically, but instead in a thematic way.

“What is an American?” Reasonable people conclude there are no right or wrong answers, merely reflections and definitions where some sources offer more reasons and evidence than others. The thesis includes some commentary by me and my sons on our role as “witnesses to our world.” In Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction editors Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola say a witness narrative is one way “the individual provides the ultimate record” (84). This *literature of witness* appears to be one of the things connecting my sons and me. We *witnessed* phenomena. With their help, I hope I have ascertained some of the commonalities and differences in the experiences of American expatriate writers.

I use a lot of ink on a few contemporary writers who fell within my orbit. Their stories I knew and cared deeply about. There are some occasions in which where historical writers receive rather thorough examination. New or old, I try to challenge them and myself, and offer readers glimpses of how we expose “our own betrayals, uncertainties, and mistrusts,” which is how essayist Philip Lopate describes this pact with the reader in the introduction to his The Art of the Personal Essay (xxvi).

In this personal geography, I seek both emotional and factual truth, perhaps one indication of how I mediate creative nonfiction and journalism and my own ethos. Like most writers, I struggle with the difference between fact and truth. History verifies that many well-known writers from the United States lived in Paris between the two world wars, but “truth” of why they lived there is an interpretative fact. What is a truth for some is a lie for others. For my



own sanity, I ignore many of the usual experts, relying more on my sons and Uncle Marshall to help me separate fact from truth. This is what we found.

## **MONTPELLIER, FRANCE**

On the 12-hour flight from Chicago to London to Montpellier, I imagined possible thoughts American writers might have had when they took their trips. I'm guessing they were conflicted with issues of what they were leaving behind versus what they were about to encounter. I hypothesized that they found freedom in foreign places in ways they could never experience in their hometowns. It was just a hunch. I could not prove it; but I felt it in my gut.

I spent considerable flight time in the dark cabin -- in between glances at lame romantic comedies shown on the international ride -- thinking specifically about how my older relatives coped with the geo-political change. Then I wondered how my own children's perceptions of life abroad might merge with mine. Lofty thoughts indeed, but the transit state often put me in contemplative mode. Landing made me poetic.

With cool Mediterranean Sea breezes refreshing the swaying palm trees of southern France, this friendly town breathed joy. Sidewalk cafes with green Perrier umbrellas and chic shops lined the main streets. This medium-size city is nestled in the valley of small mountains, midway between Toulouse to the west and Marseilles to the east. Garlicky seafood scents drifted in waves from downtown restaurants where waiters wore black bow ties on their white shirts. Muslim "Hallal" markets bristled with energy. Gypsy musicians were heard entertaining tourists and locals at Place de Comedie, the main square. Hundreds gathered on this day to protest the Israeli bombing of Lebanon. Their protest was seen as far away as the train station blocks away.

We found a Black hair care shop near the train station as well as a lively, small neighborhood for African-born citizens of Montpellier. Shoppers sauntered while skateboarders cruised down its hilly streets. At the top of a hill, near the Roman aqueducts, was a bronze statue. Easels abounded in this pastel place that seemed as friendly to painters as it was to poets. Italian

spruce trees lined streets named after French writers Voltaire, Zola and Foucault. There was a gallery named after Picasso and a plaza named after Fellini in a pseudo-Roman section of town called “Antigone” where we viewed graffiti in French, Arabic and Euzkadi. Some of the taggers had names like “JFK,” “Dre” and “Bilal.”

Montpellier hosts a huge music and theatre festival known worldwide. This year, my friend and fellow American expatriate, Dee Dee Bridgewater, visited from her Paris home to delight residents with her sultry jazz songs. I first met Dee Dee when she was a graduate student singing with the University of Illinois Jazz Band. I was an undergrad studying journalism. Ten years later, as a Hollywood entertainment writer, I interviewed her backstage at the Grammy Awards at Los Angeles’ Shrine Auditorium. Now, two decades later, Dee Dee’s presence in Montpellier reassured me this city was a welcoming place.

Meanwhile, the *New York Times* July 28, 2006, reported a controversial theatrical production of North African plays, raising the issue of religious intolerance. This, too, made me think of our new location as a tolerant city, a spiritual zone. Some regarded Montpellier as the birthplace of Saint-Roch, patron saint of Catholic pilgrims. Some knew it as one of France’s centers of Moroccan and Algerian-born new Muslim and Jewish residents. Some revered it as a refuge for famous philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Some thought of it as the region where Moliere adopted his cool stage name. Some looked up to it as a modern commercial and industrial town. Some praised it as the place where rose wine ruled thanks to exquisite Syrah and Grenache grapes. For this American writer-teacher and his teenage son, Amman, here on a mission, it was, for one month, home. One part of the mission was to answer a burning question.

## THE QUESTION BECOMES A QUEST

The question was simple enough, “What is an American?” It was a question many outside our borders asked us. It was a question inside our borders we asked ourselves. When I asked students in my college writing classes they often said it meant, “to be White or White-like,” to which I responded, “What does that mean?” Then they got into dialogue about “cultural imperialism” or colonial conformist attitudes that they claimed were driving the English-only, Islamophobic initiative in the United States against immigrants of color, especially if they spoke Spanish or Arabic. Nobel laureate Toni Morrison explains that race functions as a metaphor necessary to the construction of Americanness in the creation of our national identity, which means “American” has been defined as “white”; or at least that’s the way Ronald T. Takaki translates it in his essay “A Different Mirror” (33).

To expand this conversation, I sought answers from American expatriate writers who often spoke Spanish, French and other languages. One of the early voices I heard was my friend, Chicago-based writer Salim Muwakkil, who once reported from Libya as an American reporter. Salim explains it this way in the online version of *The Nation*.

When it comes to immigration issues, it's useful to keep in mind that the United States of America was born as a White supremacist state. Although the ideology of White supremacy was not officially stipulated, it was an implicit assumption, made explicit by the pitiless genocide of the indigenous population and the ruthless kidnapping of enslaved Africans. The nation's first Naturalization Act, of 1790, made it official by restricting American citizenship exclusively to "free White persons." That legislation codified the disenfranchisement of the growing population of enslaved Africans and allowed the passage of the Fugitive Slave

Act, which made *illegal aliens* of slaves who escaped from so-called "slave states."

The "pitiless genocide" of my maternal American family and the "ruthless kidnapping" of my paternal side of my family framed my view as I recorded this second part of the journalistic and scholarly journey to inquire into "American" expatriate writers in Paris and Madrid. The first part took place in 2005 with a month-long visit to Spain. The question loomed. While I may not have been able to answer the question "What is an American?" in a way that totally satisfied most readers, I was hoping I might address it through my own personal geography and social mapping, showing cues and clues to the answer from the perspectives of other American expatriate writers who left home to find something else over here. After my many tours of duty as a foreign correspondent, I came back to America to fight racial, class and political battles while I raised a family. Thinking back, this was the right decision. I loved my family. They loved me. But other American writers decided to stay here in Europe. I'm fascinated by what drove the writers from throughout the Americas and the West Indies, to flee their homelands to European cities – places where they interacted with their French and Spanish writer-expatriate counterparts. My composite view was not the mainstream definition of an American. I respected critics of my definition. I even sought them out. Most people linked American with people from the United States. I, too, was interested in what attracted U.S.-born expatriate writers to places like Paris or Madrid. I have been curious to know if the ambiance of jazz, wine, food, poetry, politics, racial and sexual freedom, and the chance to commune with international writers on a world stage had anything to do with the comfort level they found in one another. After all, some were Black, some White, some Latino, some Asian, some Biracial. Some were Communists, some Fascists; some straight, some gay, some famous, some obscure.

Some of the writers were also journalists, sculptors, filmmakers, scholars, poets, actors, activists, diplomats, dope fiends and/or tea-totalers; some were healthy, and some depressed. Many were combinations of the above and seemed troubled about one thing or another. Yet, troubles aside, they were able to find common ground in each other in a strange land when they could not, or in some cases would not, do so in their own homelands. The path to common ground was often not an easy road or a direct route. Many of the American expatriate writers had diverse, oft-conflicting backgrounds with a few being racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and misogynist. Nevertheless, on an individual basis, they made links with Black, White, Asian, indigenous, Latino, gay, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Atheist, and female American expatriate writers, who back home, they'd have nothing to do with. That link was what I believed to be the driving force behind my inquiry. I also wanted to know the complicated complexities of the simplified stories previously reported by cultural observers on one heralded literary hero.

### **ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

Ernest Hemingway was to me a case in point, since he is generally considered the most famous American expatriate writer. He also had many friends of different persuasions, even though he is said by many who read his work to be homophobic, sexist, racist, and anti-Semitic. A librarian named Ann Carlson in Ernest Hemingway's high school in Oak Park, Illinois, explained it to me this way: people like Hemingway were able to make exceptions for exceptional individuals while still maintaining deep-seated beliefs about cultural groups, as she said many people seemed to have been able to do in a two-tiered way. She said making exceptions for exceptional people who are charming and fun might have been a shared understanding for American expatriate writers. Others I talked with agreed that foreign soil fertilized common ground. Along the path to finding that common ground, many of the

American expatriate writers found their own *voices*. By learning more about their voices, I rediscovered mine. Hemingway, also a former foreign correspondent, indirectly assisted me. Without question, Hemingway was the most celebrated of the American expatriates. Even my sons knew his writing and adventures. His exploits were legendary and his own memoir, A Moveable Feast, made them even more so. One supporter of Hemingway was author Bill Hazelgrove. His particular views on Hemingway and race stemmed from the short story “The Battler,” in which Hemingway refers to a character as having “long nigger legs.” “Today, this seems horribly racist but ‘negro’ and ‘nigger’ were used in quite a bit of the literature of the ‘20s, ‘30s and ‘40s to describe character traits. It has become somewhat of a trend to declare Ernest Hemingway a ‘racist, anti-Semite, misogynist, chauvinist,’ but he was none of these,” he said in a column I wrote in Oak Park’s *Wednesday Journal* for Hemingway’s centennial events (29).

Pulitzer Prize winner and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison and I saw Hemingway often characterizing Blacks in a disparaging way – a way we felt was racist. Morrison deconstructed the 1937 novel To Have and Have Not this way: “Only 10 pages into the novel we encounter the Africanist presence,” she wrote in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. She began with the main character. “Harry includes a ‘nigger’ in his crew, a man who throughout all of part one, has no name. His appearances is signaled by the sentence: ‘Just then this nigger we had getting bait comes down the dock’” (70). The Black man is not only nameless for five chapters, he is not even hired, just someone “we had getting bait.” She detailed questionable literary cues of cultural imperialism from the pen of Hemingway, pointing out that his famous work, which examines Cubans, segregates Black Cubans as “niggers” and Whites on the island as “Cubans.”

We witnessed a similar trend in The Sun Also Rises, a novel spiraling around expatriates in Paris and Pamplona. On page 77, he uses “nigger” 15 times. I mused to my wife that he used it so often that Hemingway could have brushed his teeth with the word. I located a paragraph or so with a conversation between the main character, Jake, a jaded American newspaper writer based in Paris, and Brett, a British socialite and countess:

Enormous prize-fight. Had a *nigger* in it. Remember the *nigger* perfectly. ‘Go on.’ ‘Wonderful *nigger*. Looked like Tiger Flowers, only four times as big. All of a sudden everyone started to throw things. Not me. *Nigger*’d just knocked local boy down. *Nigger* put up his glove. Wanted to make a speech. Then the local White boy hit him. Then he knocked White boy cold. Then everybody commenced to throw chairs. *Nigger* went home with us in our car. Couldn’t get his clothes. Wore my coat. Remember the whole thing now. Big sporting evening.’ ‘What happened?’ ‘Loaned the *nigger* some clothes and went around with him to try to get his money. Claimed *nigger* owed them money on account of wrecking ball’ (Italics added). (77)

#### **PATRICIA WESTHEIMER.**

Wherever I traveled in Europe, I asked local folks about their perceptions of Americans from the U.S. Everywhere I’ve visited and reported from, I was impressed that people knew more about us than we knew about them – perhaps one reason why some folks east of New York City perceived Americans as ignorant and arrogant. Our bumbling, fumbling president did little to help that stereotypical image, people told me. Patricia Westheimer, for example, an American expatriate writer in Paris and Lisbon, and a University of New Orleans MFA candidate, writes to me in an e-mail from Paris:



Despite what people say about Americans being looked down on because of Bush and the wars, life in Paris as an American is terrific. People always want to know where I am from in the U.S. and what I am doing here, and then relate wonderful talks of their times there. It's been all positive. There are numerous ex-pats here, so activities are plentiful as a well-structured support system. If you seek out the many programs, writing classes and groups among them, and people, they are all there. I live full time as an ex-pat in Portugal; I've been there for 15 years and this I know: despite the dream to integrate fully into the foreign culture, it doesn't really happen. Ultimately, my friends and classmates are Americans or other ex-pats with some natives and that's great. But the comfort and familiarity of home away from home is definitely present. I speak fluent French and Portuguese. My husband speaks neither. To me, language is a key to getting close to the essence of any culture. As a writer, my senses are continually open. I walk around with a notebook and pen. Paris is where I feel the most creative and the most alive. I look for characters, scenes, and ideas everywhere. I am a journalist, but in Paris I long to write everything.

As Westheimer points out, the war in Iraq continues to be a bone of contention between Europeans and Americans. The tension added to the American expatriate writer experience, according to interviews I conducted for my Chicago-based Clear Channel Broadcast Inc. radio station, and some I've heard on National Public Radio. American expatriate writers abroad in the post-9/11 era reported that being an American is a "humbling" experience, meaning few flouted their nationality loudly for fear of reprisals. This seemed to be a common experience. This was a

21<sup>st</sup>-century change from earlier eras in which writers from the U.S. openly announced their origins.

### **BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD**

American-born Barbara Chase-Riboud, who was knighted by the French government's Order of Arts and Letters, wrote her book about Thomas Jefferson and his mixed-race mistress, Sally Hemings' visit to Paris. It was called Sally Hemings: A Novel. It came out in 1979 causing a stir, until DNA later proved that President Jefferson did have illegitimate children with Hemings, his slave. Chase-Riboud lived in Paris. In expatriate writer Elaine Lee's web journal, Chase-Riboud posts this "Why Paris?" essay that I excerpt.

France, perhaps more than any other country in Europe, has valued its Black citizens and welcomed Black Americans. More than a hundred years ago, Paris recognized the genius of its great historical novelist, the immensely popular Black French writer Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870), famous for The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo. For more than a century, Black Americans have expatriated to Paris for political, economic, artistic, and racial reasons. The African-American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, son of a Philadelphia pastor and member of the Black bourgeoisie, lived and exhibited in Paris between 1891 and 1900, and was acclaimed and richly rewarded by the Parisians. But it was during the First World War, when more than two hundred thousand Black soldiers fought on European soil, that the first real immigration of Blacks occurred. Although they found themselves segregated in the American army, they were welcomed—and were even considered "American" rather than "Black"—by the French.

I never met Chase-Riboud. Many of my African-American artist-friends rave about her talent and style used in two disciplines because she was both a gifted writer and sculptor. Chase-Riboud resides in France where this African-American luminary is married to a European. She remains one of the more celebrated contemporary American expatriate writers.

### **KAI EL ZABAR WELCOMED US**

The least celebrated American expatriate writer might have been Los Angeles-based Kai El Zabar, who lived in both France and Spain. Unlike others, Kai did not receive international attention outside of a handful of Black travel writers. I first met Kai in the '90s in Chicago when she was editor of a Black magazine called *N'Digo*. She liked assigning me stories about faraway places. I enjoyed writing them. I wrote pieces about the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. Kai was one of the few writers in this parochial Midwestern city who appreciated my international experience. I appreciated her networking abilities. A tall, talented, woman with graying hair that framed her pretty face, Kai had a knack for walking into a room and taking over. She waxed about "colors, textures and feelings" in ways I rarely heard from the lips of journalists. When I was in Montpellier, I chatted with her online every week. It helped to connect with another discourse community of readers and writers that I was part of -- international Black writers. She was very chatty online, in print, and in person. If you asked her for a paragraph she gave you a page. She said living abroad helped make her expressive. Because she was the only writer other than author/actor/educator Bill Cosby that I knew had also lived and written from Montpellier, I asked her to give me her impressions. Because of our similar backgrounds and professional histories, I thought her views would help redefine mine.

My recollection of time spent in Montpellier and Madrid varied in that each city brings a unique sense of self with its culture as the backdrop of the life lived

through the infrastructure that supports the expression of that life. It was here in foreign lands that I felt free of the heavy burden that being ‘Black in America’ shrouds those of us who have skin the color of coffee as many of my French friends would say with love. It was never derogatory but rather a colorful way to describe, as would a poet when grasping for words to paint pictures of that which one sees... I was often described as café latté, which translates as ‘an espresso coffee with frothy steamed milk.’ It was a description that related to something of romance and sensuality a wonderful blend creating an intoxicating elixir and I liked it. Never had I been so described by a White individual as such in America. It just didn’t happen. And I stand to believe that it may never happen. Why? Because the freedom of authentic expression is missing in America. The cloak and dagger of racism, the responsibility to be politically correct, the baggage of America’s past riddled with slavery, and total disregard of Blacks as human beings weighs heavy on the souls of its people.

Since Kai emanated from virtually the same cultural community as I did, I was both struck by her comments and somewhat puzzled about her romantic portrait of Europe. I challenged some aspects of her remarks as writer-friends often did. She appreciated how I invited more context and more details to her lovely impressions. She responded by saying:

I hope that you don't think I romanticized Montpellier or Madrid, but rather I spoke of my own personal journey as it affected me internally. In Paris, I was attacked by two White Frenchmen. I had a fight with a White Frenchwoman in the launderette and a brutal verbal argument with another in the telephone center. But Montpellier was removed from the influx of ‘foreigners,’ and had yet to feel

the impact of converging cultures and ethnicities as to feel threatened. Still, in France I always felt it was about nationalism rather than my being Black. It was the American vs. French shit and the idea that I may be impeding on their turf.

You dig?

### **MILES MARSHALL LEWIS**

I did. And apparently many others did as well. For example, Miles Marshall Lewis wrote a book about his self-imposed exile from Brooklyn, Paris Noir: The Complexities of an Exile. I never met Lewis, but I felt like I had. He described what so many of us thought. On his website, Lewis writes:

Moving away and glancing back, from this side of the Atlantic I see my country in a new light. People in America look fatter than they do here: greedy, ignorant-of-nutrition, no self-discipline. Television addiction is more glaring; I find America's reality TV and its fame-at-all-costs celebrity voyeurism much more disturbing than I did when I lived there. Returning to the States at different points, the get-ahead and upward-mobility conversations I've heard while socializing seem shallower, more self-centered. At the risk of sounding brainwashed, since moving to France I've seriously had to ask myself, are Americans just sort of dumb?

### **POST-COLONIAL EXPAT THEORY**

Others recorded the western writer exile experience in equally unique ways. Guadeloupe-born Simone Schwartz-Bart wrote her first published piece in 1967 with her husband, Andre, called Un Plat de porc aux bananas verts, which was part of a seven-volume epic titled La

Mulatresse Solitude that Bentley College modern language professor Kitzie McKinney describes:

...a groundbreaking text in West Indian letters. The novel explored contemporary issues of alienation and exile from the point of view of Solitude's (fictional) great-granddaughter Mariotte, an elderly Martinician confined to a Parisian hospice for the aged. Impressive in its use of liminal quotes and textual allusions. (23)

In an essay, "Memory, Voice, and Metaphor in the Works of Simone Schwartz-Bart," McKinney points out that Schwartz-Bart's stellar novel summoned the experience of Black and Biracial peoples from pre-colonial nations better than most. As a writer of color, café au lait to be exact, it probably did not surprise readers that I often employed postcolonial theory to help me understand the works of expatriate writers. This theory challenges "the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people" is the way Brook University's John Lye explains it on the college's website. He adds that this literature "by colonized peoples... attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of the past's inevitable otherness."

Marilyn Adler Papayanis, on the other hand, author of Writing in the Margins: The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje, posits that postcolonial theory tends to discredit the endeavors of many metropolitan expatriates. Papayanis reports that they insist on a more ethical discourse. According to a prepared statement from her publisher, "... she argues that the desire to decenter oneself, as these writers sought to do, is not necessarily a dishonorable one and that certain expatriate narratives actually interrogate the mythologies and the modes of thought that inspire them" (2). All of the metropolitan writers mentioned in the press release were White. I

was never clear how and why White metropolitan American expatriate writers were more or less “ethical” than non-White metropolitan American expatriate writers as I kept looking for reasons why all of them left America for the lovely locales of Paris and Madrid. I kept thinking there were colonial assumptions implicit in Papayanis’ worldview. When I mentioned how I used post-colonial theory to help me better understand texts, Amman asked if I could explain. I simply told him that post-colonial referred to after independence, after slavery or freedom from imperial powers.

“Slavery was bogus,” he said.

### **SAMUEL E. BOYNES, JR.**

Of all the aforementioned American expatriate writers, the one who I understood the best was Samuel E. Boynes, Jr., the late author of The Name Is the Game: An African-American Odyssey. “Mr. Boynes” as I knew him, was my neighbor on the South Side of Chicago. We lived in a working-class neighborhood of Park Manor/Chatham in the ‘60s when the Civil Rights era and the bevy of jobs and opportunities seemed to give all of us hope for a better future. Despite his blue-collar job, Boynes had entrepreneurial dreams, even then. “I’m going to own my own business, and so will you one day,” he once told me. He was a mailman with a swagger. When he didn’t have his blue uniform on, he dressed really sharp. He was a surrogate father to many of the boys in the neighborhood, taking us to Little League baseball games, or to Springfield Stables where he owned a horse, or threatening to kick our butts if we broke another window. He and the other fathers would chat about parenting, baseball, and race relations. Later, he took a manager’s job at a nearby Black-owned hotel. He was soon hired as a manager at the Playboy Towers Hotel in downtown Chicago. This ultimately led to an assignment in the Caribbean where he bought his own hotel, coincidentally named L’Hotel Boynes as his French ancestors

named their “L’Hotel Boynes” on rue d’Antin where Josephine and Napoleon were married. Boynes posed below the plaque on the site where Napoleon and Josephine were wed.

Sam Boynes’ four sons -- Lemont, Corbiere, Jeffron, and Tony -- were my best friends. Thinking about how Corbiere and I played army as kids, Amman and I visited the fort-city of Carcassonne in an area called Corbiere where centuries ago Muslims and Christians fought for power, we thought about Boynes during our stay in France in 2006. Amman and I recently reflected on Corbiere and Carcassonne watching Robin Hood: King of Thieves that was filmed there. As kids, Tony and I took drum lessons together. Tony played drums at my dad’s funeral in 2004. My dad once played drums. Amman also played drums. Tony invited Amman to play at the funeral, too, but Amman was too grief-stricken to perform. Tony died of cancer about four months later. Boynes died in 1994 before I could visit his great Virgin Islands hotel that my friends in the National Association of Black Journalists would rave about. Boynes’ book chronicled how a former ghetto “gang banger” became a successful Caribbean hotelier. He retraced his roots to Haiti, the Virgin Islands, Indian Ocean islands, Dominican Republic, and finally to French royalty in the palace of Versailles.

On the book’s front cover was a shot of Boynes in front of a sign marking a French town with his last name. On the back of the book was a picture of the smartly-dressed Boynes with his long lost relative, Marquis Pierre Jean Bourgeois de Boynes, in front of the gardens at the palace at Versailles where their respective relative centuries ago designed this famous landscaping landmark. Inside the book was a literary road map of the people and places Sam Boynes found enroute to finding his ancestors. Along the way, he ran into a boat captain in the West Indies that he discovered was a long lost relative. He took a wild ride in Haitian dictator Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s Italian roadster along the route to another family connection. He had a long talk



with Alex Haley, author of Roots, about the need to rediscover one's ancestry, often through oral history. And he enjoyed a formal dinner with French royalty, his relatives. There were stops in villages in Haiti, Dominican Republic, France, and an island in the Indian Ocean, all with people who shared Boynes' family name. Boynes and the Marquis were connected to Napoleon's wife, Josephine (who was born in Martinique on a slave plantation), whose Haitian-born relative, Charlotte-Louise Desgot, married Pierre-Etienne Bourgeois de Boynes in 1763, according to a page from The Grand Armorial of France, which Boynes used to document the Bourgeois de Boynes genealogy (53). There was a painting of Pierre. Boynes writes: "The islands of Boynes in the Indian Ocean were named for one of their three sons, Amand-Louis Bourgeois de Boynes. One of their daughters, Elizabeth-Louise Bourgeois de Boynes, married the Count of Bourbon-Busset in 1778" (54).

#### **DR. GERALD HONIGSBLOM**

Like a father and son detective team Amman and I tracked down the Boynes story in France. First I contacted through e-mail, Dr. Gerald Honigsblum, the former University of Chicago scholar and translator who helped Boynes through the French bureaucratic red tape and later wrote the introduction to Boynes' book. Honigsblum was now resident director of Boston University's Paris Internship Program. Boynes' wife, Lorraine, told me on June 20, 2006, "Be sure and give Gerry our love." In his preface, Boynes affectionately referred to his partnership with Honigsblum as the "biscuit and bagel brotherhood" (vi). In the e-mail, Honigsblum said he was working on the Florida chapter of a book on the French in America – 1564 Fort Caroline -- which he said was modern-day Jacksonville.

Amman and I visited Honigsblum in his swank condo near the Eiffel Tower and Ecole Militaire, a touristy place where both our respective families joined 400,000 others the night

before celebrating Bastille Day fireworks. Amman and I felt proud being able to navigate through the Metro to his stop, La Motte Picquet Grenelle. A graying man with pale skin and thick glasses greeted us warmly. Then he served us tasty hot appetizers and cool drinks. Honigsblum insisted I call him “Gerry” as Sam Boynes once did. He said I reminded him of Boynes. He told me my visit reconnecting him with his American and French past helped remind him of his life as an infant in Boston, as a schoolkid in Paris, and as an adult teaching in both Chicago and Paris. He explained how that trans-Atlantic experience shaped him into the person he was this day – a middle-aged scholar. He suggested his experience mirrored other American expatriate writers. He introduced us to exchange students from Florida who he said might learn a little about life from Amman and me. I got the feeling he wanted to college kids to reconnect with me sometime later in life. One of them was a preppy White guy. The other was a cosmopolitan Latino. They were both from Jacksonville, a place Honigsblum had business interests. He introduced us to his wife, Olga, a witty Russian intellectual, who helped us understand how Russian expats, many of them Jewish writers and filmmakers, migrated to Paris’s Montparnasse in an area known as “Le Roche” (the Beehive). The Honigsblums explained how many of the Russian Jewish filmmakers who came to Paris and Los Angeles “went out of their way to hire Blacks in the film business.” They raved about a humanism emanating from living and working abroad.

“What is it about the American expatriate writers, that they could find common ground with each other and their European counterparts here?” I asked.

“Expatriation for them and for me equaled emancipation,” Honigsblum said.

That one sentence crystallized a year of research into a sound bite. It was an epiphany.

That one summary statement elucidated dozens of books I had read and scores of interviews I had conducted. It illuminated hours of muddled reflection. I begged for more details.

“They found freedom here to commune with each other in wonderful, unexpected ways. This freedom was liberating. Paris has a way of doing that for American expatriates like me,” he said. When he spoke, I saw beside him two books published that showcased his early work as a translator: American, African, and Old Europe Mythologies and Asian Mythologies.

Reaching across a large piano, the proud centerpiece of this designer flat with a view, he pulled out a copy of “Poulenc.” As he handed me the 20-page manuscript of his creative nonfiction essay, taking a moment to tickle the piano keys, he wove a vivid tale about how in helping Sam Boynes rediscover his roots, Honigsblum rediscovered his own roots. “Sam and I were tracking down leads to verify his connection to the Napoleon’s Josephine and other members of the French side of the Boynes family when we visited a gravesite. Now, while we didn’t find the name we initially were looking for, what we did uncover was the gravesite of my former piano teacher here in Paris. His name was Poulenc. This is his story, our story.” In September 2006, a 30-minute interview with me and Honigsblum was broadcast on WNUA 95.5 FM. Lorraine Boynes heard the early morning program.

“It was beautiful to hear Gerry speaking about Sam’s book with you. It made me cry with joy,” she said, elated with the memory of her beloved.

## **MEMORY AND METAPHOR**

It was the stirring stories of these wonderful writers that powered my trip. In my reflections, often I tapped into a spiritual reservoir that emboldened my search. The spirituality was not a religious experience as much an emotional, humanistic one. I felt tuned into something bigger than self. I felt like an internal light came on illuminating my own history. I came from a

long line of seers, seekers and storytellers. The old folks said I had a “gift.” My life experience was as a writer of color who drew upon the collective unconscious of oppressed indigenous paternal African and maternal Native American ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic in a way some might have labeled *memory and metaphor* and others might have called *spirits and secrets*. In 1988, both sides of my heritage came together when the San Francisco-based International Indian Treaty Council, a United Nations-sanctioned, non-governmental agency devoted to “sovereignty” issues, invited me to represent the Cherokee Nation at the Red Peoples Conference of the Americas in, of all places, Libya. Indians from mostly Central and South America conferred with their North American counterparts, but not without controversy over colonial attitudes swirling around some Indians from North America. The Indians from South and Central America claimed North American Indians were “White-like.” Nearly two decades later, as I analyzed this, I was reminded of the mystery of “What is an American?” with similar comments from my students, and even my own kids.

This homogenized “American” notion lurked in my unconscious. In 2006, I was given an “Ambassador Award,” which meant I was supposed to help represent the University of New Orleans during our stay in Montpellier. It came with a small cash stipend, which was great since I was one of the most poverty-stricken students here, perhaps the oldest, and the only one with a child. I didn’t want to screw up. I felt like I was representing “American” interests abroad. I tried not to second guess why American students were cautioned against straying off the main roads into the areas where African immigrants lived. Quietly and cautiously, I did stray. I had to. The African immigrants and French-born progeny looked like me and Amman. Speaking to them in Arabic, French and English, they welcomed us. They told me they were “proud” of what we

doing and why we were doing it. They loved the fact I brought my son. Family is at the center of African culture. They loved the fact his name was Amman.

“Doors will open wide for you, Amman, because you have such a powerful name,” said one Algerian man in Montpellier. “It means faith,” he said. The man asked me to tell the immigrants’ story as I told my own and those narratives of the other American expatriate writers. I nodded yes. He said, “In sha’Allah,” which translates, “With God’s help it shall be.”

## **FRENCH AUTHORS**

As I journeyed with my faithful son, I thought about the Algerian man and his neighbors on his quiet block as I reflected on the months of preparation leading up to the magical moments I’d encounter on French streets. I read quite a few French authors. Just for starters, I read Moliere. His real name was Jean Baptiste Poquelin. The father of French comedy lived in the Montpellier area just like me and Amman, who is quite funny, too.

I read Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, who despite his delightful narrative brilliance in Candide -- perhaps my favorite French novel -- still found time to disparage Negroes, Moors, “half-breeds,” Jews, and Jesuits (28, 39, 48). This was a trend with many of the legendary French writers.

I read Antoine de St. Exupery. I mentioned to Amman as we saw a poster in Paris for a theatrical production of this work that I struggled to read in French, his Le Petite Prince, as a kid.

I read Charles Baudelaire. He translated Edgar Allan Poe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in between his own controversial poems to his mulatto (Jeanne Duval) and Jewish (Louchette) mistresses that appeared in his Flowers of Evil. Like most who read Baudelaire, I loved his lyrical voice. Yet I wondered about Baudelaire’s racial/religious bias, and also that of Flowers of Evil translator/editor, James Laver, who writes:

Left to herself, Jeanne Duval, led by the imperious desires of her own blood with its strong Negro admixture, might have lived a simple and comparatively innocent life on the borders of Parisian prostitution. Goaded by Baudelaire and goading him in her turn, she descended with him into the hell which his imagination created. (xxii)

It was during one of these explorations that he fell in with Sarah, the girl he called 'Louchette' because she squinted. The 'frightful Jewess' inspired one of the most sinister and celebrated poems, and it was probably from her that he contracted syphilis, the disease, which was to pursue him for the rest of his life. (xvii-xviii)

I read Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was a Swiss-born intellectual whose philosophical classic, Social Contract, became a moral compass for the West and for radicals in the French Revolution. Rousseau's Confessions became the second autobiography. The Confessions of St. Augustine, a fourth century work written by the Algerian-born bishop and rhetorician, was the first. Rousseau's Confessions was written while in refuge as an expatriate on the island of St. Pierre on the Lake of Biene after his literary attacks on Voltaire and controversial views on the government raised eyebrows. Like so many other French writers, Rousseau found words in Confessions, to lambaste "Jews and Moors" as "villains" (54). He labeled one Moor a "bandit" (60). The character was one of two likeable thieves is the way I read the passage. According to a website devoted to this Enlightenment leader "Rousseau's most famous quote: 'Man was/is born free; and everywhere else he is in chains'"(131).

I read Gustave Flaubert. He inspired Amman and me to seek "the faith in France" by his philosophical and spiritual questions that perplexed us. We traveled to sacred sites along the path to Santiago de Compestella, Spain, though we did not cross the western French frontier. We did

visit French cathedrals, shrines, and even a Gypsy bull ranch in Camargue looking for a sign of the faithful. We discovered faith in the wonderful way French people revered life and love, which in part helped us find the faith in ourselves. When I mentioned Flaubert's influence on our journey to Amman, he said, "Dad, one day I will read Flaubert, faithfully." To which I responded, "Amman, that's B.S. But it's good B.S." Amman smiled approvingly.

Flaubert, through his meticulous study of manners amid a backdrop of moral hand wringing influenced us to seek the ethos of this nation. On that search, we discovered American expatriate writers had something to teach us about the faith they have for artistic and personal freedom. Then Flaubert's Madame Bovary took me by surprise with its racial epithets. Chapter 6 begins:

She had read Paul and Virginia, she had dreamed of the little bamboo house, of Domingo the nigger, Fidelio the dog, and especially of some devoted little brother who runs off to find you nice red fruit in trees as high as church steeples, or races bare-foot along the sand with a bird's nest for you in his hand. (35)

'A mere song,' he answered, 'a mere song. And there's no hurry. Whenever it suits you. There's nothing of the *Jew* about us.' (103)

I explained to Amman that even the most gifted French writers occasionally found time to put down Blacks, Jews and Muslims. I explained to him that while my findings of discrimination among some of the great French authors was not totally a surprise given other surveys of colonial nation literatures, I feared a backlash among scholars who might discount my findings.

"Too bad if they don't like the truth you find, Dad," he said. We pressed on.

## MARTINICAN WRITERS

Just when I felt there was a trend of literary put-downs of racial and religious minorities by French authors, I read a White Frenchman named Jean-Paul-Sartre, who embraced the Black expatriate writers in Paris like Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor. Sartre wrote the introduction to "Orphée Noir" (Black Orpheus), in the Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache, edited by Leopold Sedar Senghor. A Senegalese poet, Senghor went on to lead his African nation to independence, becoming its first president in 1961, which was the year Sartre wrote the foreword to Franz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth. Fanon was a student of another Martinican writer-poet, Aime Cesaire who many credit as the co-creator with Leopold Senghor of *Negritude*, a literary cultural critique that boasts the uniqueness and universality of Blackness. Cesaire wrote a book-length epic poem, Return to My Native Land that was loaned to me by a poet named Kay Murphy, who taught a writers workshop to MFA candidates like me in Montpellier. Kay loved the way the poet describes his "turnaround" toward the end of this poignant poem. Aime Cesaire, whose name means "love Caesar" in French, made a dramatic, even lovable, transformation from hate for the colonial French and self-loathing for his own ethnic group to self-love and communal love for a powerful, lyrical people who had overcome overwhelming obstacles with survival and courage. Today, some might liken Cesaire's transformation to Nelson Mandela's historic transformation following his walk from the jailhouse to the state house. Cesaire went on to become a high-ranking member of Martinique's post-colonial government. Fanon went on become one of the theoreticians behind the Algerian independence movement not long after he started practicing psychiatry in working-class Algerian clinics. Fanon and Cesaire were not from North America. But because they were Black and from the West with similar histories connected with slavery and colonialism, they linked



with other Black expatriate writers to the progressive French writers who adored them. Their impact was broad and noteworthy. I first read Fanon as a teen because it was compulsory reading for Black Panthers and their sympathizers like me.

Another famous White French writer-critic who embraced the Black American expatriate writers was Michel Fabre, who wrote *Harlem, Left Bank*. Fabre described how Dashiell Hammett and Ernest Hemingway inspired Chester Himes' hard-boiled detective novels.

## **EPIC POEMS**

I spent a month studying the anonymous author(s) of the epic poem *Song of Roland* – and its Spanish counterpart, *The Lay of El Cid* -- Christian imperialism anthems that told a remarkable tale about heroic pre-Inquisition religious battles that seem to be still going on in France, Spain and the United States. Epic poems often told long stories of heroes returning back home. In this particular epic poem, about a Spanish military man banished from his home during a period in which Muslim soldiers occupied parts of Spain, were epithets about “sons of slaves.” The text painted Black evil. This appeared to be the order of today, too, Amman thought. While reading aloud a section of this epic poem, Amman reacted strongly to its language as he was watching televised a European soccer match where a White player called Black player derogatory names.

“That’s racist!” Amman said, adding that as a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, he would challenge White kids in his class if they were to slur him the same way. Amman played the midfielder position and said he related this soccer situation to his own life. “I hate the way the White player on the Italian team puts down the North African player on the French team,” Amman said.

## CHANSON DE ROLAND

We used our collective unconscious reading “a Norman twelfth-century manuscript of an eleventh-century text about an eighth-century Carolingian event,” according to a University of New Orleans handout that has a 20<sup>th</sup> century translation. This handout explained, “Scholars have suggested the that the Chanson de Roland was partly created and propagated by Cluniac monks along the Compostela route who sang it to these pilgrims journeying to Santiago di Compostela thereby encouraging the Reconquista.” This site, where St. James was allegedly buried, was the third holiest Christian city. Jerusalem and Rome were first and second respectively. The *Reconquest* of Spain/France was comprised of a series of Christian military battles to re-take land that had been conquered by Muslims between the years 718, the year the Crusades were launched, and 1492, which marked the official beginning of the slave trade in the so-called New World. It also marked the expulsion of Jews from Spain. It seldom occurred to me, a deadline journalist, who usually reported only on current news events, that looking backward might be instructive. Yet, as one of the students assigned to de-code these epic poems that contrasted north against the south and east against west, I did think about how the *Global Color Line* -- to paraphrase W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous phrase -- existed today in literature and life here in 21<sup>st</sup>-century France and Spain just as it did during the Reconquista. It continued to be the north against the south, the east against the west, the rich against the poor, the White against the non-White, and especially the Christian against the Muslim, though my polished French colleagues preferred that I was not so candid in reporting their religious intolerance in this place made famous by its historic emancipatory slogan, “liberte, egalite and fraternite.”

As Amman and I retraced the steps of the Reconquista, visiting centuries-old cathedral-forts in Aignes-Mortes, Avignon, Camargue, Pavalas, Montpellier, Carcassonne and Paris where

he bought a red prayer rug from a young Moroccan merchant in its Chateau Rouge district, we were torn between rooting for the French who later enslaved our West African ancestors or the Muslim Saracens who were the intermediaries in the Trans-Sahara and Trans-Red Sea slave trades. We also thought about the African co-conspirators. According to Honigsblum, Nantes, a city with a broad institutional apparatus in memory of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century slave trade, had a celebrated exhibition, “Les anneaux de la memoire.”

### **BLACK FRENCH AUTHORS**

As descendants of slaves, African-American expatriate writers and I often felt like existential heroes in a psychodrama. We were simultaneously victors and victims in a perpetual battle in which we were outnumbered and outgunned, to paraphrase my writer-friend, Walter Moseley. We constantly asked ourselves, outside of technology, what’s really changed since Frederick Douglass sought literary refuge in France and England? We constantly asked what was that something that drove American expatriate writers away from our locations and to cities like Paris and Madrid. Were those cities racial respites? Could answering that be what was driving my inquiry? Could this unconscious suggestion that American means White or White-like be seeping through my conscious thoughts? Answering those rhetorical questions, I looked rather closely at French authors of color. I began with Alexandre Dumas, a complex and colorful man with a Haitian grandmother and a French nobleman grandfather who wrote obscure nonfiction in Spain and famous fiction in France, like The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo, two books I used to read aloud to my sons when they were very young. Dumas became the first French person to write serial novels. He had a flair for the outrageous, so outrageous he chose to flee creditors in France in a self-imposed exile to Italy, Belgium and Russia rather than pay his debts.

“In a shorter work, Georges (1843, George), Dumas examined the question of race and colonialism. The main character, a half-French mulatto, left Mauritius to be educated in France, and returned to avenge himself to the affronts he had suffered as a boy,” according to a Literature Network website on Dumas.

I did not pretend to be an expert on French literature; but I did appreciate its beauty, depth, passion and shortcomings, particularly the way it clumsily answered colonial race and class questions, and failed to adequately address domestic religious intolerance. In my journey with Amman, I probed through literature, France’s history of class conflict, civil disorder and theological warfare as a way to explain the historical literary context for the arrival of American writers. Using verse, from 900-year-old The Song of Roland to the African-flavored Monsieur R raps heard on today’s French radio that some said triggered recent social unrest, certain themes kept popping up as I recorded words of this journey – epithets against Gypsies, Jews, Muslims and Blacks -- groups some made to feel like “outsiders.” I knew a little bit about being made to feel like an outsider. I thought most American expatriate writers did, too. I felt I could feel their alienation as I traveled many miles through France with my son, a cute, nerdy, rice cake-eating, 8<sup>th</sup> grader studying French at his middle school in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Hemingway’s birthplace. Home was a place where my son said he sometimes felt like an outsider. Ironically, in France, he felt welcome. He enjoyed meeting new people riding the speedy trains in Europe.

## **BULLET TRAIN**

A “bullet” train pulled off one summer day loaded with Americans of every hue on board. Amman sat next to me playing “Medal of Honor” on his computer. It was a World War II game. Today’s game session began in southern France, as did our trip. We were departing from

Montpellier to Paris. We were part of three dozen students and teachers headed to the City of Light for a wild weekend. It was Bastille Day, France's Independence Day.

The fastest train in the world flashed past cornfields, wheat fields and country churches so quickly they almost appeared as dots in our window. Rural landscapes seemed like jump cuts from French New Wave films. To my left, on this high-speed train, were two other African-American students. Sam was a fun-loving film student. With a large round face and a pleasant demeanor, he was loquacious and wacky. Most students seemed to enjoy his company. Sam worshipped "the eternal now." He wanted quick wealth. Sitting next him and closest to me was LaTanya, a charming art major with a warm disposition and a spiritual aura. She possessed a kind of inner strength. She was looking for "the hereafter." She sought religious bounty. I was somewhere in the middle. I was a middle-aged, balding, writer-teacher here with Amman looking for faith and fun.

Ten kilometers down the road was Nimes, a medieval town named after a knight. We stopped in Nimes. I told Sam and LaTanya my assignment was to write a journey story on a train patterned after Hemingway's "A Canary of One." Hemingway's piece was about a train ride from Palermo to Paris. Sam and LaTanya agreed to be my subjects. I told them the theme of the piece was stereotypes, a familiar subject with American Blacks and other racial minorities. It was also a familiar subject for the French who said Americans often hold stereotypical views of them and vice versa. I hinted the story chronicled a journey on another track. To assure trust, I invited them both to listen to the story being workshopped. I got the feeling Sam could care less, but LaTanya seemed rather intrigued by the idea. The train whizzed past a red barn. Cows gazed at the fast-moving locomotive.

I asked Sam if he was ready for “Popeye’s” (fried chicken) and a “40 ounce” (malt liquor). He was teasing me about my “KFC” story that I read out loud earlier that week in Montpellier. It focused on how Blacks from all over the globe converge on this one chicken wing restaurant in Paris’ “Chateau Rouge” area to eat, greet and meet.

“When the conductor come to collect the tickets, he is going to find chicken bones and Colt 45 cans all over the aisle,” Sam said.

“Now, that’s ghetto!” LaTanya countered rather loudly, looking out of the train window.

“We be loud. We be ghetto,” I said, paraphrasing Gwendolyn Brooks’ famous poem, “We Real Cool.” I gave our ride with mostly Whites to Paris a distinctive African-American flavor to help us feel at home away from home, so I switched to Ebonics, a Creole unique to Black Americans.

“We be stupid, LaTanya,” I said.

“Now that’s real ghetto,” she replied.

Most of us Blacks were bicultural and bilingual. We sometimes used Ebonics when talking to one another as part of our code-switching linguistics. Some Whites used it, too. Whites listened closely to our chat, leaning over, cupping their hands to their ears, and laughing when we said goofy stuff. Waving our arms to jump in, we made sure they felt welcome to join in at any time. Surprisingly, none did. One explanation was if Whites joined in speaking Ebonics it could be interpreted by Blacks as mimicking them. Another explanation could be they were comfortable listening to the unique way that Blacks talk to Blacks whether or not Whites are talking.

We heard the train whistle. LaTanya, with her huge cap turned sideways and wearing earphones, appeared to be enjoying some sounds. I automatically assumed it must be rap.

“That must be hip hop you’re getting your groove on to, right?” I asked.

“No, I’m listening to morning devotional tapes,” she said.

“Isn’t that how stereotypes often begin, with people assuming things about other people without any information?” I said, somewhat embarrassed.

“Now, that’s ghetto!” said Amman, mimicking LaTanya, who smiled.

I wrote all of this great stuff down on a pad. Amman mimicked me by getting a pad.

“I’m bored, dad. My computer just ran out of juice,” he said as we passed a small town decorated with graffiti. To me, it seemed a bit odd that taggers splashed semi-rural areas. As a former tagger, I usually associated it with urban angst. But maybe, given the sense of racial and religious discontent in this class-conscious country where anti-immigrant sentiment seemed to be on the rise, rural walls were also taggers’ canvasses. LaTanya and I discussed the fact that while most Blacks here were French, their parents usually hailed from other countries with colonial links here. I mentioned to LaTanya that Nantes, a major city in the north, had been the center of the slave trafficking. She was not surprised.

“France is a beautiful colonial country,” I mumbled to myself out loud as we passed rows and rows of symmetrical green vineyards. I felt conflicted praising this place that treated non-famous Blacks poorly and celebrity Blacks well. Yet seeing the grape vines on this fine ride made me reflective. It also made me thirsty, but I held off since it was too early in the morning for cocktails, even in France.

The train whistled, startling six cows.

The monotony of the rural landscape worked on Amman and LaTanya because they tired, went to empty seats, kicked off their shoes, and stretched out.

“Now, that’s ghetto!” I said.

Before she drifted off into never-never land, LaTanya and I discussed the need to for us to find the Black community in Montpellier. She said she located a Black hair care shop near the train station.

“That makes sense,” I said as the train passed an olive grove. “The Black community of Paris is near the Gare du Nord station. In Oak Park, the historic Black district is in the Harlem-Lake area next to the train tracks.” She understood trains and migration.

“I must admit I had not really considered seeking out Montpellier’s Black community...until now,” I said. “Perhaps I’ve been too busy focused on school, Amman’s well being, and the weekend trips we have been taking. Nevertheless, LaTanya, I will visit Montpellier Black community.”

“Now, that’s ghetto!” she said – a refrain that became the trip’s theme. We both played with that phrase as a way to connect on our journey. The locomotive zoomed into a small town.

LaTanya slumped to the floor and stretching. Her arms reached the seats in back of her, near her neighbor’s stinky shoes.

“Now, that’s ghetto!” I said. She laughed. Soon, she snored.

At times before, during and after the train ride, I reflected on LaTanya. Like most of the students, LaTanya had an easy manner. She was very likable. To me, she was the most likable student at the American college in France. She let me know she liked and respected me, too. She confided in me, laughed with me, and let me know (as did Sam) that they were glad I was here. Without saying so directly, I got the feeling they looked to me as a role model because I was an African-American writer, teacher, broadcaster, and parent. They quizzed me about each area approvingly. Sam asked me if I would review his screenplay about coping through Hurricane Katrina. LaTanya helped wrangle my son on Bastille Day near Paris’ Eiffel Tower where



thousands merged that night. Both asked me about my radio show. Both asked if I was a “cool professor.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Earlier in the week, LaTanya confided in me that she was racially profiled at a Montpellier business. “I walk into this store with other students and the White clerk singles me out to follow me making me feel like she felt I was going to steal something. You are the only person I have told this too. I think others may claim I’m imagining things or being too sensitive. You know the things some Whites say sometimes?”

“Yes, I do. Part of our job, I feel, is to help some Whites better understand. Cultural Studies theorists ask why should we have the responsibility for correcting some of their problems? I haven’t figured that one out yet,” I said.

I told her that same day Amman and I secured a cab at the Montpellier train station and a White woman arrived needing a cab, too. “She was going to the same street – Croix de las Cazes. We offered to take the same cab with her. She, instead, told the cab driver in French that if we went she wouldn’t. Amman was hurt, me, too. These kinds of racial incidents were not supposed to happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in seemingly tolerant, enlightened democracies,” I said, but stopped. I caught myself sounding like a stereotypical teacher instead of a typical friend. I moved on.

Like me, LaTanya was a seeker, a person looking for answers to the questions that have none. She sought the meaning of things we can’t see and even the writing we do and do not see on the walls. I think that’s what I liked and respected most about LaTanya, her depth. It contrasted with some of the other students who were engaged in light banter about sucking toes, sniffing laughing gas, farting, and shoe shopping. On this journey, I watched her listen to devotional tapes more than once. Like many students, she prayed. Later, she talked about taking

another train ride next weekend from Montpellier to Paris to listen to gospel music. She exuded empathy. For example, on the trip she asked if people needed help with anything. She was also outspoken. While most students, perhaps out of proper protocol, were reluctant to comment on what appeared to be aggressive and rude Parisian behavior by some, LaTanya was not. Her teacher told her in French class that news reports confirmed rudeness by French in Parisian restaurants, so she felt justified to blurt out:

“They drive like they’re crazy. They’re rude. They purposely try to hit you. Every day, I’ve been nearly hit. It’s road rage. It’s what they say about us. It’s what I say about them because to me their outward behavior reflects what they’re really thinking and feeling inside. It’s a cultural thing. Now, that’s ghetto!”

I wanted to say, “Amen,” on the one hand, and on the other say, “This is too broad a generalization with which to paint French people.” But I kept quiet. This was her moment of truth. And while it bordered on stereotyping, I felt now was not the time to correct her. I later mentioned how well some French people treated me. She understood. Then, I told LaTanya how proud I was that she visited the Premiere Museum, a new facility that featured some of the best art from the Third World. She went to the major art institute, Le Louvre, a day before our group visited it. She raved about the Egyptian sculptors and the European painters. She said she went to the “insider” art museum first to make room on her schedule for the “outsider” art after hearing our Afro-French bus guide, Christiane, discuss the apparent controversy connected with a museum that some called “primitive” and others simply called “first.” LaTanya’s cultural, artistic and intellectual pursuit moved me by showing me that she was a thinker with a universal wonder.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the train pulled closer to Paris, we noticed the suburbs ringing the city. These were the same areas that were set ablaze in the November, 2005 riots over race, class and religion. Near the pale high-rises where workers lived, we noticed graffiti near the tracks.

“How do the taggers get out on the tracks?” Amman asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. We never found that out. We also never find our way to the dining car. LaTanya dashed to the train restaurant to grab a bite before it closed.

“I’m hungry,” she said, asking us not to get off the train before she returned. If we did, I knew she’d call me names. Meanwhile, Amman and I noticed the names of the taggers – “Dexa” and “Riga.” LaTanya returned. This sequence of images reminded me of the intellectual montage of Soviet Realist filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, in October.

“I couldn’t get through. People are grabbing suitcases to get off in Paris,” she said. We ended our train ride hungry. After we left Gare du Lyon to tour the city, we all checked into Hotel Rivoli, a quaint spot in this touristy Right Bank area. Since Amman and I were starving, we went to the next street to Pizza Nomo. Several other students, led by Sam, passed by. The only one to sit down was LaTanya. Since Amman and I ordered individual pizzas, I offered LaTanya half of mine. She said she was rushing to get back to her room since her roommate, who walked past, had no key. LaTanya had the only key, and she did not want the other students to call her names, so she gobbled up pizza, sipped water and exited. While we clearly understood the reason for getting up so quickly after breaking bread with us, and even offering to share expenses, which I declined, still, within the cultural nuances of the Black community, to eat and run was frowned upon. Yet for me not to have offered a meal to a friend and colleague who taught me lessons would have been worse. Now, that’s ghetto!

## DEFINITIONS OF EXILE AND EXPATRIATE

During our train journey back to Montpellier, Amman read Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. I explained why my inquiries into the lives of "American" expatriate writers were fascinating. But I explained internally to myself that what I've found was that my father and son reports into race, class, religion, gender, and culture have been the most fulfilling literary lessons I've learned. Some called this the private story inside of the public story. Clearly, in my own head, this two-track narrative did in fact have an inside component that inspired me. Looking at my son as he enjoyed his first trip to France, Belgium and Holland was priceless. When I saw him interacting with college kids, I saw a more mature version of my oft-goofy adolescent clone. It was as if he was growing up under my watchful eye. Also, his perspectives on cultural guideposts along the way were quite instructive. For example, he gazed at the architecture of Notre Dame because as a future architect Amman noticed that "designers built the cathedral in such a dramatic vertical way so parishioners would have to look straight up to heaven." On a practical level, it was helpful. I had just had eye surgery to repair a detached retina, so Amman proved to be useful reading maps, streets signs, and brochures that were sometimes fuzzy to me. More than anything, Amman represented home.

Being away from home with symbols from home helped me relate to American expatriate writers, whom I guessed often had a memento from their stateside life to keep perspective. I tried to maintain a literary perspective with conversations in other American writers that were in Madrid. My view was equally informed by conversations with Dr. Nancy Dixon, a University of New Orleans professor of expatriate literature and an expatriate herself who went to high school in Madrid, as well as by well-written essays penned by a colorful crew of American writers reporting their definitions of key terms such as *expatriate* and *exile*. Hundreds of years ago,

French writer Michel de Montaigne created *essays*. It was French from the verb *essayer* “to try.” The essay was born as a way for writers to try to say what was on their minds in a way that connected with readers. Marc Robinson’s connection was editing American expatriate writers’ essays in a book called *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*. In talking about his own mother re-tracing her trek from Europe to the United States, Robinson writes, “It is now ten years since she began chronicling her multiple *displacements* and she’s only up to my mother’s birth” (xiii). In the next paragraph, he adds: “And she proudly insists that her trip wouldn’t constitute an *exile’s* return, but only another *displacement*” (xiii). In explaining the hows and whys behind this anthology in the very next paragraph, Robinson writes:

I have organized this anthology with an elastic understanding of *exile*, and the writers I’ve selected address (and represent) a variety of *displacements*. *Exile* usually means political *banishment*. A person leaves his or her country to avoid harassment by the state; the state expels an individual for real or imaginary crimes. My Jewish grandfather escaping Prague embodies one segment in a spectrum of political *exile*... (xiii).

He explains that, “The meaning of *exile* expands as the terms denoting it proliferate, each label suggesting a slightly different cause of *displacement* and response to its rigors. Countries in which a simple worldview sees only natives and visitors now also contain *illegal aliens*, *migrant workers*, *‘population transfers,’ pilgrims*, *emissaries*, *the ‘disenfranchised,’ loners...*” (italics added). Clearly, exile, displacement, and banishment have been used interchangeably in talking about the journey Robinson’s own family took.

In terms of the other essays in *Altogether Elsewhere*: I especially liked “How I Got Over,” by Darryl Pinckney; “A Guide to Exiles, Expatriates, and Inner Émigrés,” by Mary

McCarthy; “Why Do Americans Live in Europe?” by Harry Crosby; “The New Lost Generation;” by James Baldwin; and “Frankfurt in our Blood,” by Kay Boyle. While the creative nonfiction style of Boyle was an easier read and frankly a much better-written story to this reader, she took a longer time to provide us her definition through one source, a young woman who, calls her former nation “some isolated territory like a leper’s colony...this alien evil thing” (315). Pinckney calls Baldwin “the most famous Black expatriate” and cites Baldwin calling his former mentor, Richard Wright, “in exile estranged from other Blacks” (17-18). Later, he refers to Wright’s “self-exile” (19). Pinckney discusses Baldwin’s exile as a “quest for voice” and Black émigrés as part of the Haitian Emigration Society in 1818 (21, 25). Pinckney tells readers that during his European sojourn he was not an exile (31). He even says he “had no right to the term” because of the people he had met, mainly writers from South Africa and Yugoslavia, painters from Russia, actors from Uganda, historians from Chile, students from Iran and farmers from Bangladesh – “that was not a status I should have been in a rush to claim” (31). While I accepted his definition, I disagreed with it even though we shared a similar demographic and historical experience. If the *exile* label worked for Black Baldwin and Wright, an argument could be made that it worked for Pinckney.

I was interested in understanding definitions by other experts like Mary McCarthy, who provided perhaps the clearest, albeit a condescending one. She argues that an expatriate is different than an exile in her essay: “In an early use an *exile* was a brandished man, a wanderer or roamer, ...essentially a political figure” (49). Many agreed that politics, even sexual politics, played a part in whether or not a person who left one country for another under certain conditions, including lifestyle choices could be doing it for political, social and yes, sexual reasons. I called that person a “sexile.” According to a close reading of the literature on

expatriates, exiles and others, especially artists who left their homeland for a better space, I found that they often did so consciously or unconsciously with sexual lifestyle choices in mind. At least that was on my mind as I thought out loud reading about what Pinckney and Baldwin two gay Black writers.

## **JAMES BALDWIN**

Take James Baldwin for instance, a gay Black writer who often preferred European men; he had a hard time exercising his personal lifestyle choice in New York City in the '40s. It was not so though in France, Turkey and other hot spots where he found refuge. And while the “sexile” theory was a good discussion point, many agreed with Baldwin’s explanation for not just this Black exile writer, but perhaps as an explanation for others: “I think my exile saved my life, for it inexorably confirmed something which Americans appear to have difficulty accepting. Which is, simply this: a man is not a man until he able and willing to accept his own vision of the world, no matter how radically this vision departs from that of others” (280). In *Nobody Knows My Name* Baldwin writes:

In Paris, I lived in all parts of the city—on the Right Bank and the Left, among the bourgeoisie and among les misérables and knew all kinds of people, from pimps and prostitutes in Pigalle to Egyptian bankers in Neuilly. This may sound extremely unprincipled or even obscurely immoral: I found it healthy. I love to talk to people, all kinds of people. (140)

James Baldwin paid homage, not to Hemingway, but to Henry James, whose well-crafted, elegant, patrician 19<sup>th</sup>-century style seemed to appeal to a Black kid growing up in 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City. I met Baldwin just before he died. We were both pretty toasted from the free cognac at a 1986 Oakland, California, event honoring Baldwin, sponsored by Ishmael

Reed's *Before Columbus Foundation*. Reed, my former writing teacher and mentor, said, "Come meet Jimmy." I could barely stand. Baldwin looked rather wobbly in the chair. I said how glad I was to meet such a great essayist, and how when I as a young lad growing up in Chicago, he was someone I read from my parents' bookshelf. I told him many of my Black militant friends did not think he was "angry" enough as a Black American writer. He told me something I'll never forget: "Show me a Black man who's not angry and I'll show you a nigger who's lost!" That comment and the cognac nearly knocked me down. I politely thanked him for his time and left. He died the next year, angry I suspected.

### **ROSE JOURDAIN**

Before he died, Baldwin told Rose Jourdain, a Black American expatriate writer from his Paris and New York days, that living in Europe gave him "the literary and political freedom" he never had and probably never would in the States. I talked to Jourdain in Evanston, Illinois where she lived. We chatted about her manuscript about American expatriate writers, and her close relationship to Baldwin's New York relatives and Baldwin, whom she last saw at his Harlem funeral, an event she called "a sad goodbye." Baldwin died Dec. 1, 1987 in St. Paul-de-Vence, France.

There was absolutely no way you can have missed this proud Black intellectual writer when she walked in a room – tall, loud, and witty was the way she impressed many within her orbit. At 73, with failing health causing her to walk with a cane, this longhaired woman moved slowly, but talked quickly. Few can keep up with her, even me, who, like Rose, was an American expatriate writer in Paris. Rose lived there briefly, but resided mostly in New York befriending Baldwin, who she like most people close to him called "Jimmy." People who She maintained contact with Baldwin's family, especially his sister, Gloria. She assisted Gloria and Gloria and



“Jimmy’s” mom during the funeral two decades ago that began at their Harlem flat and extended through New York City streets through thousands of well wishers who all said their sad goodbyes to the man many regarded as the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s best essayist.

“Four days before Jimmy died, he called me from France. It was a most strange call, because he almost never calls me,” Rose said in her booming voice. “Jimmy said, ‘Rose, if you want to see me you better come to France...tomorrow.’ He never said he was dying, though we all knew he was sick. Four days later, he was gone,” she told me in a Feb. 1, 2007 interview at her Evanston, Illinois apartment not far from where another American expatriate writer, Erica Johnson-Debeljak lived. Rose’s flat was two miles from Evanston Hospital where she asked me to drop her off after my first visit. She said she had four hours of treatment for her many ailments. I worried about her. Chain-smoking Virginia Slims, coughing between sips of sugar free lemonade, this living legend who was featured in Civil Rights documentaries, was a historically important source that I felt merited her own video so I trotted out a consumer model Sony video camera and went to work on this reluctant subject. Rose’s humble apartment was adorned with African artwork, coffee table books on French impressionist painters, and black and white photos of her Harvard-trained, lawyer-daughter, now a vice president at Warner Brothers in Hollywood, her late dad, a former journalist and local leader here in this northern Chicago suburb who had a community center named after him down the street, and her brother, who she mentioned from time to time in this videotaped interview. She insisted on creating a cultural context for how “American expatriate artists felt the need to find themselves abroad so they could help others” back home:

Outside of New York City, which at that time was outside the American mainstream was such that in order to do what you had to do, you needed to get the

fuck out of here, which is what Jimmy did. He was like the crown prince of '60s intelligencia with American and European artists. For Black artists and writers like me, he was the king who often held court at his New York flat where he would order tons of food and serve only Johnnie Walker Red Label Scotch to American artists like Diana Sands, Cicely Tyson, Ivan Dixon, Rap Brown, myself, and to arty folks who'd arrive almost daily from Paris, Amsterdam, London and Madrid to pay homage to our king. And like a king, no one would stand or sit taller than him. If we were on the sofas, he'd sit on top of the sofa, often in fetal position, cigarette dangling out of his mouth, instructing us how to create, how to live, how to love, and how to change this wicked world we lived in. It was the Civil Rights Era, and we all felt we really could make a difference. Jimmy told us so. I worked at *Life* magazine. And then at government places where we were told as artists we could change the world even though none of really knew what the fuck we were officially supposed to do. Jimmy instructed us to push. Push on we did.

...When he died, and so many hangers-on started arriving at Jimmy's flat, ignoring Mrs. Baldwin as if she was not even there. None were more disrespectful than Toni Morrison, who, despite her connections, never lobbied for Jimmy to get nominated for a Pulitzer or Nobel, but instead used his funeral as a stepping stone to her own literary career, positioning herself as the one writer who should take Jimmy's literary largesse. She took over the funeral, disrespecting Mrs. Baldwin, Gloria and the rest of the family so much so that in front of everyone I called her a bitch for doing so. Instead of showing grace, as Maya Angelou did, Toni

delivered this so-called homage to Jimmy that was mostly about Toni. It was so disgraceful! One year later, Toni was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature; six years later, the Nobel Prize for Literature. You draw your own conclusions!

When I first met Rose a year and half ago, I was just back from a sojourn in Madrid where I researched for a month American expatriate writers and their Spanish counterparts. I had just met Erica Johnson-Debeljak in Madrid where her three young Slovenian-born children played with Jordan. Erica now lived down the street from Rose. I was introduced to Rose by Dino Robinson, a dreadlocked art director who worked with both of us on book projects. I fascinated her because I was a foreign correspondent who had reported from southern Africa and the Middle East, spending time in between in European capitals. She used me in part to help shape a foreign correspondent main character in her new novel. He was a White patrician, but nevertheless, Rose wanted to describe how he did his job as accurately as possible, so I guess I became part of a composite of other foreign correspondents, including Rose herself, to help frame this character's mindset. I was fascinated by her, initially because of her closeness to Baldwin, but soon I became more enchanted with her as a powerful literary person in her own right. In future conversations, she probed my mind for suggestions about Tanzania, the setting for much of her novel. I probed her mind about how living abroad "emancipated" writers, and how that played out with American expats of color like her and Baldwin. We discussed how she's part of three generations of storytellers – her dad, her daughter, and herself. I told her how I, with my parents, including my mom who visited Paris and Madrid, and my twin sons who also have lived a bit in European locales with me while I inquired deeper into this multigenerational subject. Rose perked up every time I mentioned Amman and Jordan.

Rose reminisced about how when her daughter was a teen at North Country Day School, a nearby private school for rich elites. “She’d go to school in the day and go to Free Angela Davis rallies with me at night, and when her principal asked her why she was wearing Free Angela buttons for the then-wrongfully jailed Black Panther leader, my daughter gave such an impassioned speech, all of her classmates asked her to give them Free Angela buttons, too. If you could have seen these cute little rich White Winnetka kids walking down their suburban streets wearing Free Angela buttons you’d chuckle just like I’m doing now.”

We concluded our afternoon chat because I had to go to parent-teacher conferences at my sons’ middle school. “I wish I could stay, but family first,” I said.

“I totally understand. Talking to you about your kids makes me want to call my grown up daughter again.”

“I believe my well-traveled daughter will make a difference in the industry,” Rose said.

“I believe she will, too,” I said, grabbing my coat. I never had a godmother, but if I had I’d want Rose to be that person. When I grow up and become a real writer, I want to be able to walk into a room and take it over the way she did with awesome insight.

## **HENRY JAMES**

Maybe because Baldwin so revered Henry James, I read James rather closely. Looking back, reading James provided a much-needed historical view from more than a century ago from one of the best 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers, whose work clearly has stood the test of time. His ornate, Ciceronian style, while pretentious under less able pens, established him as a consummate writer, one with elegance, verve and impact. James’ “Daisy Miller” was an exclamation point for its style which seduces the reader to accept James’ notions about double-standards in class, gender, sexual expression and even provincialism and imperialism. On one page was a playful exchange

between on the main character, Winterbourne and Daisy's younger brother, Randolph. "Are you an American man?" pursued this vivacious infant. And then, Winterbourne's affirmative reply: "American men are the best!" he declared (93). Citing the great French short story writer, Guy de Maupassant as a "lion in the path" for later generations, was how James gave credit to one of the two most important practitioners of the short story form. Anton Chekhov was the other, according to scholar Justin O'Brien, who wrote the introduction to The Tales of Guy de Maupassant. O'Brien adds:

This is what Henry James meant when he spoke of Maupassant's selecting the precisely pertinent details 'unerringly, unscrupulously, almost imprudently.' For he selected them in the same way whether recording action or creating atmosphere. Many of Maupassant's readers have expressed a preference for the stories dealing with Norman peasants. Between 1881 and 1887, he translated some fifty of Maupassant's stories for the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, taking the stories directly from the Parisian newspapers in which they appeared. (viii)

Many compared James to Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. One critic even called *The American*, "Old Tom Sawyer abroad," (xxi). In terms of my theme of "What is an American?" I must say that James' *The American*, which was first published in 1877, hits the bull's-eye in style and content by introducing us to the first *international novel* written by and about an American. In an introduction written by one of the editors of a 1962 version of The American, Roy Harvey Pearce, we learn:

The international novel, then, is one written for Europeans as well as Americans. As an American – dare say *only* as an American? – James discovered the international novel: which was not more, and no less, than a discovery (beyond

European cosmopolitanism as well as beyond American provincialism) of international life. In a way, the vital center of James' internationalism is his fecundating sense of what is traditionally called humanism. In effect, James succeeded in reinventing humanism for the modern world. (viii)

Pearce reminded us in a famous passage from James' study of Hawthorne (published in England the same year as the first English edition of *The American*) that America lacked what Europe had – high society – a point other American expatriate writers largely agreed with.

### **SYLVIA BEACH, LITERARY CAFES AND AMMAN**

One American expatriate writer created a high society of expats, it was a bookstore/salon owner of Shakespeare and Company, Sylvia Beach. It was also the name of a cool book. Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Company* was one of the first books I read about the Paris-get-fresh-crew of American expatriate writers. While it read a bit like a literary Entertainment Tonight, it still showed flickers of light. I obviously enjoyed reading about the big guns: Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Djuna Barnes -- folks who earned at least a chapter or considerable words devoted to their auras -- I was equally enchanted reading about some of the smaller names, the bit players in this world-class stage of expatriate literati like Archibald MacLeish, Ernest Walsh, Jack Kahane, and Sherwood Anderson. Yet, it was reportage on the French players that really delighted me: Valery Larbaud, Adrienne Monnier, Jean Schlumberger, Paul Valery, and Leon Paul-Fargue. Noticeably absent were western writers and artists of color like Aime Cesaire, Pablo Neruda, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Josephine Baker, Charlie Parker, (Uncle) Marshall Allen, Bud Powell, Billie Holiday, Marian Anderson, Lima Fabien, Sidney Bechet, Lois Mailou Jones, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and the Nardal Sisters (who also headed a

popular Parisian literary salon). The chapter about Hemingway coming to liberate the bookstore, however graphic and epic in detail, came across as pure poppycock. Yet it emerged as a vehicle to connect the stars to secure Beach's bench in history (218-220).

I visited Sylvia Beach's English-language bookstore that today features folk singers crooning '60s Civil Rights standards. This two-story shop sits along the colorful Left Bank side of the River Seine in Paris. It is a picturesque place, which is why I could not help but photograph my fellow American expatriate writer-friends, Sonia, Kay, and Karen as well as Amman who took a break from computer games to travel with us to learn what it is about "boring-old bookstores and goofy literary cafes" that so fascinated his dad and his writer-friends. I told him artistic-cultural-philosophical movements, such as Surrealism, Dadaism, Existentialism, French New Wave, and Negritude, were born and nourished in Parisian literary cafes. Amman said those movements "sound like video games." I laughed, and then told him some of the stories still swirling around this place about how it used to be the meeting place and cultural center for the American expatriates. I explained that Richard Wright entertained Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in one such literary café in March of 1959. Amman had seen stories about Wright and King in my book, Profiles of Great African Americans. I discussed a few of the historic Left Bank literary cafes on Boulevard Saint-Germain-des-Pres. At Café des Deux-Magot, where folks ranging from Gore Vidal and Djuna Barnes to Grant Wood and Arthur Rimbaud visited. At Café de Flore, patrons ranged from Simone de Beauvoir and Andre Breton to many of the historic and contemporary Black writers including some connected with Syracuse University's "Paris Noir" class that met there. Lastly, Brasserie Lipp was where Leon Paul-Fargue and Ernest Hemingway partied. To help detail café society to Amman, I borrowed a book from Karen called Literary Cafes of Paris by Noel Riley Fitch who in her introduction writes:

If the French, as Henry James believed, have excelled in the art of living what they call ‘l’entente de la ver’ – one of the most viable manifestations is this art of the café. Here one can sit in peace for hours, not hassled by impatient waiters or waiting customers. Here one can read and write in the morning, conduct business in the afternoon, and laugh and argue with friends at night (9).

The way I explained it to Amman, “That’s me.” We sat at a Right Bank reggae music cafe on Rue Rivoli where he played computer games on his Mac while I sipped Moet et Chandon Champagne. Orange juice was his beverage. He smiled, knowing in a few years when he’s a college freshman in Europe, he will likely join the ranks of cool, café customers.

“When I come back here as a college kid, I’m going to sit down just like you and order a Mimosa, and you won’t be able to ground me because you won’t really know,” he said.

## **DJUNA BARNES**

One of the other American writers to frequent these literary establishments was Djuna Barnes, a regular at Café des Deux-Magot, who was at least mentioned by Beach in her book. Barnes, a talented and prolific writer, deserved more attention than she got. From her name, I thought she might be a “live sista” I met in Detroit; but instead she turned out to be a delightful, deceased, White writer, rumored to be lesbian, whose journalistic prowess, social skills and guts and moving and grooving in high society earned her avenues to circles most of us dream of traversing. I liked her style in many ways. She was an economical writer. I can always tell folks who’ve worked in newsrooms and folks that haven’t from the way they turn a phrase. For instance, “The Head of Babylon,” was an outrageous piece about a talking head -- a loquacious orifice -- for which freakish frolicking could possibly occur for a future husband or with a doting dad. I found a Barnes’ passage that illustrated her stark, candid, provocative style, one that



includes descriptive verbs, economical use of adjectives, commas, semi-colons in compound-complex structures for elegance, and nouns for impact. “He would have liked to stroke her beneath the chin. While still a child she had lost the entire use of her limbs, only moving her head and intelligent cold eyes; still, something in these eyes forbade that caress that always sprung to the tips of his fingers whenever he saw her turn her head in toward the shoulder” (127). I was pleased to see how she and Stein both artfully toyed with sexual exploration within their odd characters.

## **GERTRUDE STEIN**

Gertrude Stein seemed to inspire her colleagues in so many ways through her thoughts, salons, books, sexual adventures, and elegant way of telling her friends, foes and the world at large to kiss her inflated, flabby ass. I confessed rather publicly that I liked that in her! In one of Stein’s Tender Buttons “Orange In” one might guess the alliteration, consonance, rhythm, and meter as well as the internal rhyme found in” could be interpreted as deference to Jazz Age influences consciously or unconsciously: “Go lack use to her/Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meat/Whist bottom Whites close, whist clothes, wooding/Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat meal” (38). One notices that Stein abandons verbs in favor of nouns. We discussed how this was her attempt to address nouns, talk in abstraction, do something else with words besides merely convey meaning. Her obsession was a rhetorical question, “What do we mean by what we say?” -- something the language poets of the ‘70s later adopted in expropriating Stein’s enviable style. To be honest, she was not always envied. Some hated her and her style. Her former Ivy League philosophy professor, for example, William James, the brother of Henry James, loathed Three Lives, a book she sent him detailing a trio of working-class women, including a Biracial “Melanctha,” who some scholars claim was based on Jean

Toomer's "Corintha." Others posited it was based more on Gustave Flaubert's *Three Histories*, according to expatriate literature scholar Dr. Nancy Dixon, who thinks it could be both.

On the other side of the fence was Richard Wright, a famous Black writer who praised Three Lives, reportedly saying the dialogue reminded him of how his sister spoke with its apparent authenticity – something the skeptic in me must question, not knowing Wright's sister, but certainly knowing other "sistas" and how they talk. Nevertheless, Wright saw something special in the fact Stein chose a Biracial woman to profile at least half the pages in Three Lives. This was noteworthy, since few Blacks or Whites, then or now, choose the Biracial or mixed-race character as the hero/heroine, instead, buying into the "tragic mulatto" syndrome of not being totally accepted by Blacks and not being totally accepted by Whites as the main impetus to the story line. To me, Stein, too, adopted this motif. Still, with her flaws, and there were many, Stein did something others did not; she braved new ground with Biracial characters.

## **EZRA POUND**

Celebrated and notorious, Ezra Pound was an enigma. He defied the myths and stereotypes one might have of poets, expatriated American writers, or even Fascists. He was friendly to Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, even though they were left-leaning Black writers. While it may or may not have been politically correct, I tried to pay homage to his stylistic flourishes, which were numerous despite his rightist ideologies that ran counter to mine. Pound was not a hard sell. I just needed more information and time to figure him and his work out. Pound's push for the patronage for the arts had good intentions and bad consequences, certainly for him. On one hand, he was arrested for treason. On the other hand, it enriched his aura and perhaps helped his daughter marry well enough to give baby daddy a castle. Meanwhile, Pound, a rabid anti-Semite, according to the scores of radio broadcasts heard by

American troops fighting Italian government soldiers in World War II, was a simple man from Idaho, who expatriated to Europe and found strength and beauty in the Fascists. He was fond of Mussolini, whom he heralded in coded language in the famous 40 “Pisan Cantos” written while in prison for treason against America. Even with my graduate linguistics and poetry training, Pound was still rather difficult for me to read. But I did appreciate the strength, beauty and thought that he put on the page. Using Greek, Latin, Chinese, biblical allusions, mythologies, imagery, and symbols of his era framed on historic terms coupled with a scientific understanding of language, Pound demonstrated incredible talent. It has been said the New Critics formulated their *close reading* concept of just reading what was on a page, avoiding historical and biographic context, just to justify giving Pound a prestigious award during his time of turmoil. Apparently, Pound used his prestige as a famous American expatriate poet to become Mussolini’s mouthpiece during World War II, a treasonous act. And while his critics, and mine, too, argued he used his talents for the wrong cause, who determines what’s right and wrong for each of us? Clearly, Pound had a sense of justice, albeit a warped one. Who among us has not been “diluted, diverted or disillusioned?” He filed an insanity defense, though members of the “Lost Generation” for years had been whispering that Pound’s senses had gone on vacation, most notably Ernest Hemingway. In a handout given to University of New Orleans graduate students by Prof. Bill Lavender, we were about to read how in Hemingway’s open letter to the U.S. government, Hemingway pleaded to spare Pound’s life. In this letter, Hemingway writes that Pound needs punishment for his dastardly deed, but also needs help for his mental illness.

Thanks for ... Ezra’s rantings. As he is obviously crazy. I think you might prove he was crazy as far back as the latter Cantos. He deserves punishment and disgrace but what he really deserves most is ridicule. He should not be hanged

and should not be made a martyr of. He has a long history of generosity and unselfish aid to other artists and he is one of the greatest living poets.

### **CHESTER HIMES**

Chester Himes was one of the lesser-known expatriates. Many who knew his films like Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), didn't really know he wrote them in Europe. Rose Jourdain did. "Chester Himes was a trip. He was one of Jimmy's good friends," she said.

To most others, Himes was rather obscure. Yet he was quite potent as evidenced by *A Case of Rape*, a semi-autobiographical, fictional tale, based on conversations with his Black buddies in Paris, like Baldwin and Wright, on what might possibly happen if a White woman within their orbit was drugged and raped. I read it in one sitting on the plane and made White people near me jump when I thought out loud – a dangerous thing for a Black man these days. What it lacked in forensics it made up for in raw nerve. I can't think of any Black writers who disturbed the calm, quaint sensibilities of good White folks quite like Himes did.

### **RICHARD WRIGHT**

Richard Wright had a different effect on me. He inspired me to probe deeper into the pathologies and passions of Spain than I had originally thought necessary. Wright began his literary life as a bright boy with writing talent in Mississippi who witnessed his uncle's lynching by White racists, and who chose to use writing as a vehicle for social change as have so many other writers of color. It was widely reported by Baldwin and others that Wright assisted Baldwin in getting a fellowship to come to Paris a decade or so later and write. Wright was editor of the *Daily World* in 1937 at the same time Langston Hughes was sent by that paper and four Black weeklies to cover the Spanish Civil War.

## ONE BLACK FEMALE EXPAT WRITER

Not all the expatriate writers were men as I discussed earlier with Beach, Barnes and Stein. My point here is not all important women expat writers were Whites from the U.S. One other important western expatriate writer, the Guadeloupe-born woman, Maryse Conde's Who Slashed Celanire's Throat: A Fantastical Tale, shows Caribbean women as strong characters. In a review in *Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, Opal Palmer Adisa writes that this book,

...tracks Celanire's emergence and voyage from her homeland Guadeloupe, to first Paris then French West Africa, and finally back to her land of her birth. Under the skillful hands of this accomplished writer who is not afraid to present any issue, regardless of the controversial nature, readers meet Celanire, perhaps Conde's most self-willed protagonist to date (50).

## UNCLE MARSHALL

As I followed Celanire's voyage, I reflected on my own family's foreign trips. Putting things in perspective, Amman's and my journey to Europe was one of many by family members. My Uncle Marshall lived in France during World War II as a U.S. Calvary Band member playing the saxophone.

We introduced bebop to the French," he told me. "I stayed on after the war and played since the French were so crazy about jazz. In the '50s, I met composer Michel Legrand who took me around and introduced me to everyone. I met up with him again a couple decades later when I was with the Sun Ra Arkestra. We were invited by the French government to play for several months, mostly to

stadium-sized crowds whereas back in Chicago where we were from, and Philly where we were living, we had to play small, smoke-filled juke joints.

During the time Uncle Marshall said he played the “juke joints” in the country of his birth, many of our older family members discounted his artistic pursuits, urging him instead to take a “real” job like the manufacturing positions offered to Blacks at home in the ‘50s and ‘60s. He wouldn’t have any of that because he learned first-hand how Europeans appreciated the artistry of creative African-American musicians. Listening to Uncle Marshall tell inspirational stories about how “Europeans appreciated Black artists more than Americans,” ignited my interests in the artistic communities abroad and helped me think that how one day I might play a part in that global creative community. He went on to play in Egypt for months at a time in the “Valley of the Kings” at the invitation of the Egyptian government. He was the first artist I knew that visited and lived in Africa and Europe. Uncle Marshall’s story about his own travels and intersecting with the Josephine Bakers, Count Basies and Duke Ellingtons of the world, were optimistic narratives I would always relish. He gave me hope I could make a living as a writer and a teacher. Other family members inspired me, too.

### **DISTANT COUSIN BILLY STRAYHORN**

My wife, Dr. Earlene Strayhorn-West, had a famous second cousin, pianist/composer Billy Strayhorn. His heavy smoking took its toll. Strayhorn died in 1967 of cancer of the esophagus when my wife was just 14. At a family reunion in 1995, I heard her relatives talking about how it was not the fact Billy “Take the A Train” Strayhorn was gay that upset family members; “It was the fact he played the Devil’s music, music that music he played in night clubs, with Duke Ellington that was better suited to have been played in church,” said my great-aunt by marriage. According to a biography on Strayhorn’s life called Lush Life by David Hadju,

he and Duke Ellington spent time in Paris during the '50s while writing music for the film Paris Blues. According to a website devoted to Paris's now-famous The Mars Club:

Strayhorn and Duke Ellington spent time in Paris during the 50s while writing music for the film, Paris Blues, which starred Paul Newman, Sidney Poitier, Joanne Woodward and Diahann Carroll. The first night Billy Strayhorn was in Paris, he was at The Mars Club to hear Aaron Bridgers play. Many other nights after Strayhorn and members of Ellington's band would make their way to the Mars Club to jam with musicians.

### **COUSIN JEAN PAUL**

My wife's younger cousin, Jean-Paul Bourelly, a Haitian-American jazz-funk guitarist from my old neighborhood in the Windy City, also played with Sun Ra before he became a huge hit in Paris and Berlin where he now lives. I found a street with the family name in Montpellier, something that made Amman and me feel more at home there. In Paris, he often played at the hot jazz club "New Morning" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> arrondissement. I once took Earlene there for what she called her "best birthday, ever." I'm told by relatives that Jean-Paul has a small flat in Paris. When I visited him in Berlin in 2001, Jean-Paul told me that Paris police picked him up "just because they said I looked like an Arab." This was when he lived primarily in Paris. He was married to a Moroccan-born intellectual named Khadijah, who died a few years ago from a long bout with breast cancer.

### **COUSIN MARIO**

My other musician-cousin, a first cousin on my mom's side, Mario Howell, lives in Helsenberg, Sweden recording World Beat dance tunes in Copenhagen studios in nearby Denmark. As a kid, he used to beat on the table. For the past few years, he was a percussionist.

He, too, heard Uncle Marshall's stories about faraway places and about fellow sax man Dexter Gordon who went to Denmark and Sweden to ply his musical trade because he couldn't make a living in the States, which was just what Mario did decades later. Marshall, Mario, and Jean-Paul agreed with me that as artists of color we got more of an opportunity to share our art in Europe than in America "because of all those isms and schisms that stand in our way," is the way my cool uncle explained it.

### **SIMON NJAMI**

Skeptics attributed the isms and schisms to the politics of the other. I found a Black Paris-based writer named Simon Njami who challenges Western labels concerning African art this way on the *Revue Noire* website.

Why then, does this peculiar point of view, or rather non-view, still persist, when south-Saharan artists have proven that the only criteria which can fairly be used to judge and appreciate contemporary art, be it Chinese, Japanese, Mexican or from the Ivory Coast, are the criteria of emotion and sensibility? Jan Holt, Director of the Documenta de Kassel, would say that Africa doesn't have an art history or a theory of art sufficiently well-defined to serve as a structure for discussion, and on the other hand, the discourse elaborated on in Europe since the end of the Renaissance is so context-specific that attempting to apply it to Africa would be fruitless. So where does this leave us? Is it just a question of semantics? Will the frame of reference for Africa be limited to terms like "post-colonial", "artisanal", "urban" and "functional" art? I refuse to accept this.

I believed, at the time of reading Njami, that many expatriate American writers of color agreed with him. I knew I did. It was true that artists of color, whether they are from America or



Africa, often deemed “exotic” by Europeans, were often given extra attention due more to their alleged exoticism than their artistry or perhaps by both. One European writer, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals from his trans-national news organization, explained it to me this way, “Other folks’ niggers are more interesting than our own.” That said, there appeared to be more of an honest appreciation of the unique artistry of the expatriate creative spirits of color here than back home. This seemed to be the rule and not the exception. For example, about a decade ago, with the release of two of my books, *Prism: An African-American Reporter’s Multicultural View of the New South Africa* and *Profiles of Great African Americans*, I lived in a cheap Left Bank hotel. I received more press attention from Paris-based dailies than I did from my hometown papers in Chicago. I spoke about this with an editor of *Le Figaro* in his Paris office explaining how I expected that I’d attract more praise from papers in Paris, London, and Montreal than my own town. Both books went on to win awards and sell well. The City of Light illuminated my self-confidence, one reason American expatriate writers of color, and even some Whites, found a literary home here.

## **SUSAN**

In Montpellier, where a few American expatriate students and teachers saw Amman playing computer games and skateboarding, there was one particularly interesting encounter. One warm July afternoon, I had lunch with a Philadelphia-born English professor at ENSA, a French acronym for this agricultural/engineering college in Montpellier. She knew Uncle Marshall, who was also from Philly. Susan taught writing to students who hate the subject. In her case, it was engineers and agronomists, ENSA’s primary focus. In my case, it was film and music students, Columbia College’s primary focus. Her name was Susan. I never got her last name. I guess at the time I felt that was unnecessary. We spoke about American expatriate

writers, and she mentioned one from her hometown named Paul Harrison, who was ‘huge’ here. I mentioned Hemingway, who Amman was reading at the time. Susan saw his tattered copy of The Sun Also Rises. She offered him a French language CD in the language lab where he played computer games. He put it on while she stood over him, then immediately switched back to computer games when she left. Amman played with her grandson, who spoke English with a French accent.

### **GASTON KELMAN**

One of the more interesting new voices I stumbled on in my soulful search was Gaston Kelman, an Afro-French writer, who preferred I’d just call him French. He wrote a controversial book hated by many Black folks, but hailed by some Whites, called I’m Black But I Don’t Like Manioc. Many Blacks despise Kelman’s literary brown-nosing. Many Whites enjoy his unorthodox freshness. On the *Max Milo Editions* website, Gaston writes:

I don’t wake up every morning to the sound of drums. I don’t wake up with spittle on my face as my colonized father did. Nor do I awake bruised by the beatings endured by the ancestors of Blacks in America or the Antilles. I want to stop being a Black man. I just want to be a man.

The Max Milo Editions website reported *Newsweek* as writing, “With humor and conviction, Kelman debunks the racial clichés inherited from colonial times as well as the myth of victimizations.” Meanwhile, the website boosting Kelman’s book said he’s been praised by *The New York Times*, *LeMonde*, *International Herald-Tribune*, and the *Express*.

As I journeyed through France, I wanted to find out what other Black Paris-based authors received that kind of acclaim, and if not why not? I didn’t find any. I was also curious to find out which American expatriate authors were popular with the French. I mentioned many of them in

previous pages. I didn't hold it against Kelman because he walked to the beat of a different drum. I appreciated the rich diversity of Black French-speaking authors. Kelman is a good writer. I did think about Kelman, though, with a sly smile. I thought that I was not imbued with his self-hate that seems apparent to Blacks I spoke with but not apparent to many Whites who know his work. I thought of myself as a writer of the world who was not afraid to eat fried chicken, watermelon, greens, and manioc. I thought about my Black associates in San Francisco who also said they did not like soul food as their way to cozy up to Whites. I responded by having watermelons delivered to the Blacks' professional offices. Then and now, I do not buy into the mythology that America or France was color-blind. My sense was that many of my African-American expatriate writer counterparts didn't either.

#### **DR. TYLER STOVALL**

My friend, Dr. Tyler Stovall, author of [Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light](#), reports on his homepage "...the myth of color-blind France is complex and flawed. Nonetheless, it has exercised a powerful attraction upon both[B]lack Americans and the French themselves." I first met Tyler a decade ago when he appeared on my radio show boosting his book. What impressed me most about this bilingual Black scholar was how he was able to appreciate and critique with compelling evidence the bittersweet experience of Blacks in France. More than any person I had met, he was able to link the stories and experiences of Blacks from the U.S. to those from the Caribbean, and Africa. His scholarly skills and intuitive understanding of Black culture peaked my interest to dig deeper than the oft-romantic narratives. Despite the many problems some French citizens had with issues of race, religion, class, and other kinds of difference, there was something rather unique that made Paris the unofficial capital of the French-speaking African, West Indian, and Muslim world. This was a point that Stovall and I agreed on. There

was evidence to back up the anecdotes. Paris was where Negritude, Presence Africaine and the Harlem Renaissance cultural movements first took off. The importance of these movements crossed many barriers and quarters of international expatriates. Although I was on the periphery, I was proud to be a tiny part of this long-standing internationalist writer/filmmaker/artist/musician of color tradition, as was my Uncle Marshall, and now my sons. I felt blessed to guide them as they guided me on this journey.

\* \* \*

## MADRID, SPAIN

I thought about a kaleidoscope of things on the long plane ride from Chicago through London to Madrid. I thought about what new discoveries I might find. I thought about the other writers before me and what they must have conjured up in their minds along their transatlantic trips. I thought about what I would learn about myself. But I mostly thought about what this trip might mean to the one person in the world who acted most like me, my youngest son, Jordan. Now, as I look back, Madrid seems so far away from home. Yet, with my son there, my Mac in my lap, and soul intact, one could have said home was where my soul slept. The magnificence of Madrid by air with its mesas, mountains, and majesty, made me wonder if the superstition was true: that the red clay of this area was colored with the sanguine blood of peasants, poets, Protestants, Gypsies, Jews, and Muslims who dared to be different in this place that prided its difference and barely hid its Catholic Castilian hegemony.

The high terrain of this once-placid farming community with its dry air and lush forests once attracted the Moors, a North African ethnic group “who built a fort and called it *Magerit* on a rise over the Rio Manzanares,” according to Insight Guide Spain (127).

In 1561, King Felipe II chose Madrid to establish the Royal Court and therefore, the capital of his empire, says a prepared statement by the Madrid Tourist Board. From that moment on, Madrid grew and the small town began to have new squares and palaces, churches and other civil and religious buildings. The area soon became known ‘Madrid de los Asturias’ (127).

A lot of what I’ve come to know as Spain’s rich history comes from the first book I read prior to this journey, The History of Spain by Raymond Carr. This scholarly book was so comprehensive that its information and insights were tightly woven into my memory. I reflected

on Spain's artistic history and this book as I walked in Madrid. This cosmopolitan village of four million was my new home. It was the place where, for one month, I tried to get past the stereotypes of bullfights and bocadillas, tapas and tambourines, siesta and fiesta, Sancho, and Franco and instead tried to complicate my understanding of this magical place some considered an outpost of Europe.

On one magical day, this modern sun-kissed Spanish capital painted in faded pastels with 19<sup>th</sup>-century wrought-iron verandas, emerged to me and Jordan as a city of paradoxes. According to Spain's most famous philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, who writes in The Revolt of the Masses:

Society is always a dynamic unity of two component factors: minorities and masses. The minorities are individuals or groups of individuals, which are specially qualified. The mass is an assemblage of persons not specially qualified.” Perhaps he best summed up my view when he wrote, “Castilla ha hecho a Espana y Castilla la ha deshecho” (“Castile has made Spain and Castile has unmade it). (13).

At least one Catalan poet agrees with Ortega y Gasset -- Gabriel Ferrater. In an article published in Spanish in 1953 during the height of Franco's power and censorship, “Ferrater pronounced Catalan culture dead,” writes Teresa M. Vilaris in an essay “A Cultural mapping of Catalonia” that appeared in The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture (37). In 1972, Ferrater committed suicide. Meanwhile, since Ferrater's death, other Catalan writers have resurrected their language in their literary and critical works. Writers told me the language debate made Spain different.

## **GAYS IN SPAIN**

To its credit, Spain really *was* different. To me and Jordan, Spain had a more tolerant view of gays than the United States. During my Father's Day family reunion in southern California just prior to boarding the plane, I read the Sunday, June 19, 2005 *Los Angeles Times* article, "Church leads Protest in Spain," by Tracy Wilkerson and Michael Moffitt who reported how Catholic priests, leading a huge march of 200,000 anti-gay citizens, were making forays into Spanish politics by taking on the Socialists in power to march against a bill to legalize gay marriage – a bill that passed in Spain, but never in the U.S. (3). The next week, Jordan and I watched a huge pro-gay rights protest in Madrid.

"I think it's cool so many people here support gay rights by supporting the government's new law, but I don't really agree with the priests who are leading this anti-gay protest," Jordan said. "Gays have the same rights as everyone else." In his next breath, he asked about Gypsies.

## **JORDAN AND GYPSIES**

"They're a centuries-old ethnic group with roots originally in India who have roamed Asia and Europe looking for a home," I said.

"Are Gypsies protected by the law? Do they have rights, too? Are they always on the move? Are we always on the move? Are we Gypsies, dad?"

I paused.

"In a way we are," I responded.

"Your great-grandmother, Mamie Allen, was born in 1896 at Indian Territory Reservation outside Tulsa to Running Joe Maxfield, a Cherokee man whose dream name suggested flight, and Lucy Green Maxfield, a proud Black woman uprooted from her Halls Gap, Kentucky home. Your great-grandmother always called her side of the family a 'band of

Gypsies' because they were always on the move." I explained to Jordan that we'll talk with Gypsies to learn more. He mentioned that he heard American and Spanish intellectuals "saying bad things about Gypsies that kind of remind me of how some Whites talk about us in America." I told him they have "duality" in Spain.

"Is that like the duality we have in America?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

I was amazed at the maturing of this 12-year-old. I thought about how getting away from home helped him see things in a different light. I thought about how now I was seeing him differently. Maybe Spain really was different? I thought how a child could have this revelation, surely the American expatriate writers who were in Madrid must have had the same epiphany.

On the streets of Madrid, I heard Spaniards talking about America's invertebration for not pulling out of the war in Iraq after we had initiated the conflict. The left-leaning Spanish government opposed U.S. troops remaining in Iraq, even though the former government supported the invasion. The change of heart is one reason for the changing of the guard in Spain's government. And while I understood the anti-American feelings expressed by many Spaniards, I'm not sure Spaniards understood my curious questions about their anti-Gypsy and Islamophobic sentiments. Jordan queried a lot about Gypsies. Many of them looked like us. We took a moment to examine what some might consider a high art form of dance created and popularized by the Roma-speaking Gypsy community of Spain, flamenco. According to the Madrid-based Conservatorio Flamenco "Casa Patas," this art form came to symbolize Spain's rich vibrant culture as much if not more than bullfighting. With North African, Spanish and Middle Eastern elements, the musics and the dances were able to artfully incorporate a multicultural mosaic that told a story of sadness and woe, of love lost, lust, and life itself. I



studied flamenco at Casa Patas to get the authentic experience, even took Jordan to the lesson and later the 90-minute professional performance. We were mesmerized by what we saw and felt. The Saturday night performance in a sold-out, crowded club in one of the more interesting neighborhoods of Madrid, featured singers and musicians performing Arabesque harmonies, modal forms, syncopated rhythms, and Andalusian melodies. The poly-rhythmic clapping and lyrical guitar defined dance movements that told a tale of sorrow in song. Stomping, finger-popping, hand gestures, all completed a dance repertoire that showed flamenco's rich tradition. Flamenco was art. Flamenco was soul. And flamenco represented the duality of sensation and sin.

## **DUALITY**

To Spanish citizens of Madrid with whom we spoke on the street, another kind of duality was symbolized in the then 15-month-old investigation into the terrorist train bombing in Madrid on March 11, 2005 that was blamed on the Popular Party's support of U.S. President Bush's war in Iraq by the Socialist Party that swept to power just a few days after the election. Today, the country remained divided, much to the chagrin of Madrid citizens who seek a unified front against terrorism and not party bickering. To me, Spain's duality played out in many ways. On one hand, it represented Spain's not-so-distant Fascist past; on the other hand it symbolized the nation's democratic present. It linked the European North with the African South, the Gypsy underclass with the Royal Family, the Byzantine/Romantic architecture with the Moorish and modern forms, the rich lyrical Renaissance literature of Miguel de Cervantes with the modernist writing of Nobel Laureate Carmilo-Jose de Cela, the Basque beauty of anti-Fascist filmmaker Elias Querejeta and rightist work of lensman Florian Rey. It was a crazy place. I got manic writing about it. I got neurotic reading Spanish novels. Already, I felt somewhat conflicted for

thoroughly enjoying The Club Dumas by Spanish author Arturo Perez-Reverte, a television journalist who has reported on some of the world's most dangerous crises. You may recall it was made into a film called The Ninth Gate starring Johnny Depp in the lead role. It was the story of Lucas Corso, a cynical book detective for hire who had been solicited to hunt down a volume for shady clients when a well-known book collector is found hanged, leaving behind the original manuscript of Black Frenchman Alexandre Dumas' The Three Musketeers. Dumas also wrote a travel account of Spain. He spent considerable time on the Iberian Peninsula. In The Club Dumas, Corso was brought in to authenticate the fragment. What unfolded took him to Toledo, the unofficial capital of Satanism in this cathedral-rich nation; some here believe is a metonym for Catholicism. Consider that and the mixture of Castilian culture and the *mudejarismo* (style influenced by Arabic elements), and once a Jewish stronghold. Spain was showing me its polarities. I was showing it mine.

Other dualities centered on the culture of machismo, lusting for the flesh of women while worshipping madonnas, was the way Richard Wright put it in Pagan Spain, (xii, xvii-xviii). One might say on one hand it was evangelical and on the other promiscuous. Jordan discussed the duality in terms of Spain "being both Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader," the yin and yang in the *Star Wars* trilogy. Spain was not alone. Other so-called *civilized* nations who built their economies, reputations, and geo-political prowesses on the backs of vanquished citizens of color, including and especially the United States, also had this double consciousness. For people like me that meant we're minorities at night and Anglos by day. That said, Spain seems to pride itself on its duality and hails its difference as its touristy slogan. That difference attracted me to this bipolar place. I admitted to myself and to Jordan a growing fondness for and an appreciation of its warm, hospitable citizens and their multicultural mosaic of Galician-Portuguese and chivalric

poetry, Provençal school, the Italian and classical influence as well as the Arabic verse and American hip-hop that inspired me and my son when we noticed graffiti on the bricks surrounding the cemetery near the Madrid Airport. I knew some of the words on the walls, but I confessed that my Spanish was poor despite months of formal lessons. Yet because of my fascination with Spain, I vowed to myself and to the cool citizens I met on Iberian streets that in deference to them, I would continue learning Spanish long after I returned home.

### **STAN AND JORDAN FOUND A NEW HOME**

Home was a concept Spain was helping me redefine. It represented the place where American writers, like me, have found a home away from home. Some citizens called us expatriates. American expatriate writers range from the famous to the obscure, from White to Black, from lesbian/gay to straight, and from all quarters of the United States and its territories, which is how the most people define an American. I used that definition as a starting point for my search for my own geographical definition.

Ever since I was born in 1952, in Chicago, to a working-class family of color, I've felt like an expatriate in my own land. It might not have been a textbook definition as defined by White American expatriates, but Martinique-born, Algerian-based psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon described an alienated anxiety like mine as a "psycho-existential complex," (10-12). He explained this was a way of measuring Black-White relations in a White society. I rarely felt that way as a U.S.-based reporter covering events abroad, mostly conflicts in war-torn nations. Why did I feel better away from the United States? Because I was treated like a person, not a minority, not 3/5<sup>th</sup> of a man. Once on board a transatlantic flight, I felt complete, not the 3/5<sup>th</sup> of a person the American Founding Fathers claimed some of my paternal slave ancestors to be in the U.S. Constitution. In Europe, Asia, and Africa, I was whole again, not 3/5<sup>th</sup> anymore. In Madrid, I

pondered my position within this literary constellation. Amid the languid landscape of Spain, with its pathos and its pain, was its memory. To me, it was an intertextual tale, a metanarrative with a cast of characters, swirling plots, thrilling twists that bled into my manuscript. Like a graffiti artist, I was writing on the wall. Like a rapper, I was in the “flow.” And like the scraggly wordsmith many have come to know me as, I was a sleuth for the truth of this country’s rich, robust literature and how it intersected with mine. I was a hard worker, but with all my diligence I did not emerge from this Spanish sojourn as one of the great prose stylists of our era. I was still mediocre. So what? I found a voice. At first I prayed I’d find answers to why writers choose self-exile. In the end, I was not sure I did that, which was a disappointment. Yet I pressed on. While I worked on those answers with American teachers, Spanish teachers, and Jordan, it should be noted that students in the university program abroad were increasingly working together to gain insights and understanding, completing projects while we were away from home. Perhaps this subset of expatriates – *commuter* -- students who studied abroad and returned home – did find ways to connect with one another. I think I did, too.

My journey came on the heels of three generations of family and in-laws on the Iberian Peninsula. My mom visited Barcelona and Minorca in 1992, on a cruise ship. That same year, my strange and estranged brother-in-law, attorney Donald Strayhorn, also visited Barcelona as well as Basque Country. In 2001, my daughter, Lauren, and my wife, Earlene, visited Madrid as part of Lauren’s high school experience. In a way, her visit with Lauren was a dress rehearsal for mine with Jordan, I thought looking back. I’ve known Earlene a long time. We met as undergrads at the University of Illinois. After her undergraduate degree in the ‘70s, Earlene lived in Oviedo, Bilbao, Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid for more than six months as part of her “finding herself” era as a young intellectual. Later, she became a psychiatrist, helping others find

themselves while they eased their sorrows. I liked to think of my writing and teaching in the same way. Maybe others thought that, too, about their work on the road.

## **RICHARD WRIGHT AND SPAIN**

My journey came nearly five decades after Chicago-bred, author-journalist Richard Wright visited this place. “In 1946, he arrived in Paris to spend a few months as guest of the French government. There in the City of Light Gertrude Stein told him, ‘Dick, you ought to go to Spain... You’ll see what the western world is made of,’ wrote Faith Berry in the introduction to Wright’s Pagan Spain (x). His three trips here in the mid-‘50s would wind up being his only nonfiction book published abroad despite his having spent 14 years in Spain, France and Africa. It might be worth noting that Pagan Spain is not the only book in which one can read Wright’s words on this country. His views are expressed in the 1938 book Writers Take Sides: Letters About the War in Spain from 418 American Writers:

Speaking as a Negro Communist writer, I am wholeheartedly and militantly pro-loyalist and for the national freedom of the people of Spain. I believe that conditions for the Loyalist victory depend upon the retention and extension of all democratic institutions by the people of Spain. In my opinion, a Loyalist victory over Franco and his German and Italian allies means that Spain will have shaken off feudalism and will have taken its her place in the Democratic Front of nations.

(66)

Spain didn’t shake off its feudal yokes until Franco’s death in 1975. Even then, Spain continued to be a work-in-progress. Julia Wright, Richard Wright’s daughter and author of Daughter of a Native Son, observes that, “the very aspects of suffering, oppression, and religious mysticism Wright is most sensitive to in Spain are those which molded his own oppressed youth

in the American South” (xii). Is the global North so different? I kept wondering if Jordan, who will return here during his college years in Europe and Africa, will respond to my writing about this place as Richard Wright’s daughter did? Will his insights be as sharp as hers? Will there be major generational changes by the time Jordan returns here? Will offspring of African-American expatriate writers receive the same kind of attention as their White American counterparts? Is more attention given to what Whites have to say about people of color than to the authentic World Majority voices?

### **JORDAN AND THE BULLS**

One of the reasons why I wanted Jordan to co-pilot this trip was to help him on his own terms and conditions establish himself in a world community and not just in an American community, a Black community, a suburban community, or a community of color. Like the rest of us, Jordan was part of several discourse communities, even the bullfighting community. For example, every morning at 8, we watched live on Spanish television the colorful Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, Navarra, made famous in two Ernest Hemingway novels, The Sun Also Rises and Death in the Afternoon. Amman read the former; Jordan read the latter. We viewed the “Running of the Bulls” while we stayed in a sun-drenched dormitory connected with the University of New Orleans called “Colegio Chaminade” as part of my research on expatriate writers in Madrid and Paris. Fascist strongman, General Francisco Franco bombed this particular dorm connected to the university on the hill during the Spanish Civil War because it was thought to have been a stronghold for the democratically elected “Republicans.” Today, it was home to hundreds of Spanish and mostly North American students. One American student, named Jamie Bernstein, went to Pamplona – the capital of the beautiful northern province called Navarra -- drank red wine mixed with Coca-Cola – an obnoxious drink called “Calimocho” that no one over

25 can stomach – and then ran with the bulls. Jamie survived. Others did not. According to the Mayor of Pamplona, Yolanda Bercina, who visited Oak Park in May, 2006, more than 250 people were injured at the 2005 event. Adventurous people dressed in trademark white outfits and red scarves run down a narrow 400 meter-long street that leads to the bullring, chased by a dozen angry bulls. Jamie told vivid tales of hangovers and hanging out. Anyway, Jordan was so fascinated by the whole ordeal he told me that when he's 18, just before he and his brother go away to college in Europe, "I'm going to take Amman with me to drink Calimochos all night, sleep in the park, and run with the bulls the next day." Since he obviously knew it was against the law here or there for teens to drink, I tried to ignore him thinking, it might fade. If a parent leans too hard on a kid telling him not to do something, it could make him *really* want to do it. I told that story to Hemingway Museum curator Redd Griffin and then to Allen Josephs, a noted Hemingway scholar who was on a panel with Ernest's son, Patrick, Mayor Barcina and Griffin at a delightful May 19, 2006 event called "Hemingway & Navarra." Josephs smiled hearing the Jordan story.

Over sips of ruby red Navarra wine, we also talked about Hemingway and Langston Hughes. Hughes, who visited Oak Park, also visited Hemingway in Spain. While staying at Hemingway's Madrid place at Hotel La Florida on Calle La Florida, Hughes translated the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, an anti-Fascist gay poet who was killed in 1936 by pro-Franco Fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Josephs reminded me that Lorca was killed near his home outside of Granada and not near Sevilla where Jordan and I visited. He seemed amazed I knew about how Hughes had invited Lorca to visit Harlem. "Lorca felt at home in Harlem where Blacks there reminded him so much of the Gypsies back home in Andalusia," Josephs said. Hughes scholar, Cranston Knight, who wrote *La Brigada*, a book about the Black presence

during the Spanish Civil War, confirmed this in two interviews with me. Hemingway was not alone in Spain.

“Other writers, like Thyra Edwards, a Black woman writer-activist from Chicago, were there, too,” Knight said.

Writers make sense to me. Writers report things that others feel. Writers have an uncanny ability to synthesize mounds of scholarly information in ways that make it palatable for the rest of us. Writers strive for the “truth,” which in our newsrooms we define as that that we know to be factually true and have verified by three or more credible sources at the time to be reasonably truthful. I often challenged my editor’s idea, though, of who was “credible” and who was not. Often, when I’d present women, people of color, poets, musicians, rappers, and teens as experts, I’d be asked to provide “more credible sources,” which I translated as code words for White males.

Thankfully, my source list expanded to include non-verbal cues. As I looked at a Miles Davis poster that greeted me here at the dorm and I listened to his late ‘50s recording “Sketches of Spain,” which he told biographer Quincy Troupe was inspired by Spanish composer Joachim Rodrigo’s “Concierto de Aranjuez” (241), I heard the Andalusian tune known as “the arrow of song,” called “Saeta.” I heard that what Miles Davis relished were the Spanish melodies and African chords in the flamenco prayer music. In hearing this song, I got the wild idea to visit Sevilla with Jordan and look for the soul of Spain. It was my vision; it was my quest; it was my revelation. With castanets in my head and the Holy Week rituals of Sevilla imprinted in my unconscious as I read Richard Wright’s sarcastic account of the “Tortured Christs and Weeping Virgins” in the pageant he watched from a chair in Seville’s Plaza San Francisco, a mournful blues entered my soul as I debated how far, and not so far, from the pages of Richard Wright’s



Pagan Spain I had progressed as I strolled with my son the Spanish trails, alleys and boulevards of this suffering nation (xvii). I thought about how, in five years, Jordan would revisit Spain. Will it be different? How will Spaniards treat him? And how will my own son answer “What is an American?”

In Madrid, Jordan was homesick for suburbia: mom, backyard barbecues, and a fluffy Bichon Frise dog named Titan. For Jordan, this was a temporary home. Jordan made it clear, “This is not America.” While this was Jordan’s first time in Spain, it was not his first foray into a Spanish-speaking country. It was his third. He visited Mexico in 1999. He visited Colombia in 2000, where he and Amman had their confirmation ceremony in Cartagena. Their godfather was Dr. Juan Zapata Olivella, one of the leaders of the Afro-Colombian Movement, a famous pediatrician, human rights activist, and author of Historia de un Joven Negro and Entre Dos Mundos. He gave my sons copies of his books. He gave me Cuentos del Tercer Mundo and Piar Petion Padilla. Juan befriended Langston Hughes, who spent lots of time in Colombia and Spain. Hughes, like me, once worked at *The Chicago Defender*. Juan called me “the Langston Hughes of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” for my willingness to try to link people here and there, perhaps one of the many reasons why I was writing this story. Hughes wrote in France, too. One story I recalled about his experience in France was a stint working as a dishwasher in a Paris nightclub, where, after being discriminated against because he was a “Negro,” he later wrote a poem that lyrically asked and answered what is an American? While I wrote in my journal, “I felt Hughes’ spirit and Hemingway’s ghost. One carried the cross; the other carried the pitchfork.”

Looking back, it was the memories of Richard Wright’s Pagan Spain that stirred me. His Cold War content on the long-standing suffering of Spain’s poor, its women, its minorities, especially the Jews, Muslims, Protestants and Gypsies, was something that I saw, heard, felt and

knew from books from scholars much more knowledgeable than me, and from my own eyes and ears with video and radio interviews, eyewitness reports, cultural critiques, cinema reviews, and certainly from a close reading of Wright's Pagan Spain. The thesis of Wright's 1957 book was that with all the religious and royal symbolism of cathedrals and castles and the like, Spain was merely a "pagan" place that cloaked itself in language and symbols of religion to hide its contempt for its own humanity and its own paradoxes. According to Wright, Spain weeps:

...[H]ere in this city of Seville – Christianity, in order to survive, had had to institute with a bloody war another form of collectivity. Beleaguered by modern ideas, stormed by the forces of social and political progress, Spain had had to withdraw, had had to go back into the past and find some acceptable form of enduring life that could knit its poetic-minded people together again. The anxious freedom of capitalistic, democratic Europe could not be sustained by the Spaniard. He had rejected it for being too painful, too inhuman to bear. The tense Western nomads, hungry for personal destiny, and above all, the murderous rationalism of sacrificial Communism, had been scornfully rejected in favor of an archaic collective consciousness based on family symbols: One Father, one Mother, one Spirit (276).

## **SEGOVIA**

And while I did not feel as strongly as Wright about the schizophrenia of the Iberian Peninsula, I got his point. I also got the point of a Spanish-born tour guide's probe into other bipolar aspects of Spanish history.

She moved the crowd of American students from "La Loca Juana's" Palace to the central plaza of the historic and colorful town 40 miles northwest of Madrid, which was topped by a

300-foot Christian cross seen for miles in every direction. While Americans rustled their reporter notebooks and fumbled their digital cameras amid the picturesque locale of religious and cultural sites, the English-speaking Spanish tour guide, who grew up in Virginia, revealed the not-too-tightly-held secret – that the former Muslim kings, who dominated Spain from 711 to 1492, were more tolerant than their subsequent Christian counterparts of the Jewish residents of the town of Segovia, with its postcard Arabesque palace and Romanesque aqueducts -- both of which have 2000-year-old histories, and now the city revealed as the capital of roast suckling pig, a dish so tender you can cut it with the plate.

“A little more than five centuries ago and before, even during the rule of the Moorish kings here in Segovia, Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived in relative peace,” said Christina Cabrera-Navarre, a middle-aged brunette in a tan linen top and pants, who spoke in historic and linguistic detail about the past. As she lectured, she pointed to a dramatic Catholic structure now undergoing reconstruction that she explained was a mixture of Middle Eastern, North African, Central European, and Iberian Peninsula styles built “on the site of a Jewish synagogue where the people were not just kicked out of town but expelled from Spain.” Christina said she studied history and linguistics, a point evident as she flowed seamlessly from discussing “La Loca Juana” -- the crazy Queen Juana who was least likely to rise to the throne but did, and displayed the mental illness some recognized in her mom, Queen Isabel, and dad, King Ferdinand -- to chatting about religious sites.

According to the tour guide, who spoke passionately, in lively, descriptive language not usually found in the Dorling Kindersley’s self-titled travel book, Dorling Kindersley Travel Guides to Spain: “Things changed during the reign of (in-breeding Bourbon monarchs) Ferdinand and Isabel, who, in consolidating power and attempting to establish a united Spain

were told by some in the Catholic Church that the way to do this was to expel the Jews and Moors who had lived here for a long time,”

Ferdinand and Isabel were reluctant to do that because Jews had been top advisors to the throne, major merchants, and scholars who were woven in the upper tier of Spanish life; but in the end the Spanish monarchs capitulated in 1492, when the Muslims were defeated in Granada, Christopher Columbus set sail to the Americas, Jews and Moors were ordered expelled from Spain, including in this touristy area where we are right now,” she told us in this quaint plaza sandwiched between Café Negresco, a white cloth-tabled place where waiters wear black bow ties and white jackets and a stunning church under construction.

When she spoke, a quieted crowd hung on every word. Christina pointed to a huge structure she called a “Gothic cathedral” that, according to her, had been built right over the existing Jewish synagogue, “even incorporating some of the Arabesque themes” inside of the temple. “Most of the builders were Mudejar, which literally means Arabs who were left behind. The more well-to-do Arabs went back to North Africa or at least to the southern part of Spain, from which they, too, were expelled. The workers, who apparently converted to Christianity, remained, along with their building knowledge, so they built Arab-themed Christian churches as they had done for the Jewish synagogues and before that for the Muslim mosques,” she said. Christina punctuated the point as she had in an earlier tour through the castle of Segovia, a palace some experts claimed was the archetype for Walt Disney’s trademark castle logo at Disneyland, a point verified by Jordan, who visited Disneyland twice in Los Angeles, just prior to flying to Madrid. Since arriving, Jordan had heard reports by Spanish and American scholars about how different religions co-existed here in different parts of Spain: Sevilla, Granada, Toledo, Valencia,

and Madrid. But for Jordan and the rest of this group, this news of brutal oppression was surprising in this idyllic, mountainous, mid-northern province of Castilla y Leon.

“The Jews who stayed were called *conversos* because they were forced to convert from Judaism to Catholicism. They were still persecuted, tortured and were killed in the brutal years from 1492 to the early 1600s,” she said, ringing her words as if they were epitaphs on family gravestones. And then she floored the group with a confession: “My name is Christina Cabrera-Navarre. Our family ancestry goes back to 1600, and we believe we can’t go back any further because the Jewish links in our family have been suppressed.”

A chubby, bespeckled, American lawyer turned-American novelist named Mitchell Sommers looked uneasy after hearing the revelation as did a scribe who spent so much time reporting on similar stories of Jewish citizens in parts of the Middle East. Years after I was based in Amman, Jordan I named my twins after that location at the urging of a Black Rabbi named Capers Funnye who said he felt my spiritual ties to the Holy Land. Jordan is the name of the famous river that divided the East Bank (Jordan) from the Occupied West Bank (Israel-Palestine). Mitchell and I talked about Christina and my interest in the Holy Land in between sentences from her story. He revealed to me that he is Jewish, and that his first law practice was in the mostly Black Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia.

“Now I do bankruptcy cases in Lancaster, a smaller city of mostly Whites,” he said.

I told him I was a Christian who at one time spoke some Arabic and Hebrew, and I was surprised to hear the story of Jewish suffering in seemingly tolerant Segovia. There was pain in both of our eyes. “I could tell you had a heightened interest in her story. I’ve heard the story too many times to count and it hurts every time,” Mitchell said, almost in a confessional tone to his new bald, Black friend. “What can you do?” he said in exasperation.

“Just what we’re here for, use our skills as writers to tell and re-tell the stories of sorrow, suffering and woe in interesting ways to people who need to hear why they should care and what they can do to prevent such suffering from happening again.” My words seemed to soothe the skeptical lawyer-novelist whose history, like mine, knew interminable pain. We said a word or two about religious cultural wars in America spearheaded by evangelical Christians associated with a Bush-whacked world and the similarities between Spain and America in that regard. “We could learn a lot from them, but I’m afraid we won’t,” he pessimistically said. He mentioned that some of his relatives died in the Holocaust, but his paternal grandfather, who had once fought for the Germans in World War I, escaped from the army, and fled to England, and then the United States. I mentioned the Holocausts in the Indian and African sides of my family as we continued to probe the pain of ancestors lost. This probe, like Christina’s story, helped two American expatriate writers in Spain find common ground.

Christina, meanwhile moved her group to shade, near where Mitchell was sitting. She concluded her talk by mentioning how concerned Muslims and Christians secretly aided many of the Jewish families in many different ways to “help them survive the Inquisition with courage.” Hearing individual cases of interfaith coalitions hit a universal chord with even us, skeptical, cynical Americans, who packed up our notebooks and cameras for the next story to find the soul of Spain.

## **THE SOUL OF SPAIN**

“Do you know where to find the soul of Spain” I asked our waitress, a tanned, pretty, Spanish woman in her 20s with too much rouge on her face. “Sure. You need to go to the center of town. You can take the number 32 bus to get there and find the soul of Spain,” she said. I thanked her.

It was a hot Saturday afternoon in Sevilla, this Andalusian city of tens of thousands of Christians, Muslims, Jews and Gypsies. With a look and feel of downtown Palm Springs, this multicultural, torrid town with its Arab architecture and desert air had a rich history and tradition Jordan and I were hoping to mine. Our search was not based on the 1908 book The Soul of Spain by Havelock Ellis that we had not read, or the 1957 book Pagan Spain by Richard Wright that we had, but more on a sixth sense that whether we answered the question or not was not as important as if we asked it, and that we learned from the experience. We chose Sevilla on a hunch, perhaps because Jordan's mom had once visited here, perhaps because Wright did too, but mostly because we felt *something* was here, not knowing exactly what that *something* might be. We chose Sevilla as we had chosen so many other spots to visit for reasons only a father and son would understand. It almost didn't matter where we were as long as we were together and as long as we were enjoying each other's company and learning life's lessons along the way. Writer and friend, Lee Gutkind, the "godfather" of creative nonfiction, did the same thing with his 14-year-son, Sam. They call it "truckin,'" loosely patterned on the Grateful Dead song of the same name about folks' travels and vibes. It evokes an aura of freedom and a feeling of family. Our goal and objective was certainly that, too. But it was also harder to define; it is difficult because of the spirituality swirling at the center. We honestly believed there was *something* in Sevilla that led to the soul of Spain, though Jordan was not as sure of its existence as I was. Still, he was sure I must have felt *something*. He let me know that before we left. He just asked that whatever that *something* was, "Can we find it soon so we can get back to Madrid where my computer games are?" Cynics might have said that I was a quixotic dad and my son was a boy Sancho searching this Iberian Peninsula for perhaps *something* that didn't exist. Cynics might also have said that Lee and I were forcing our sons to go on journeys they were not interested in. I can't answer for

Lee and his son. I can answer for me and mine. And while the search seemed preposterous and the question totally absurd, nothing had ever stopped this investigative reporter from pursuing a story and the fact we had little time, money or language facility was not going to stop us then, though we knew we had an uphill battle.

As we prepared to leave for the bus, a swarthy man with one leg shorter than the other got off a bike and limped to a restaurant for leftovers on patrons' plates. Jordan asked if he was a Gypsy and added that he overheard both American and Spanish intellectuals accusing Gypsies of criminal acts like pick pocketing. I told Jordan that there were several different ethnic groups committing criminal acts in Spain, including Americans, and we could not paint all Gypsies with that brush. "Most of them, like most of us, are good people," I said. "They came originally from India. They move around a lot."

"OK," he responded, as he often did when the issue of race came up. You might wonder, what an African-American boy really knows about race? The answer might surprise you. Two years ago, for example, when he was doing the same quality of honor roll work he's doing in his middle school now, his 5<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school teacher would do things, he said, to discount his intelligence.

"She made me feel stupid. She made me feel dumb. She made me cry. She wouldn't call on me when I raised my hand, instead just calling on the White girls," he said.

His twin brother agreed, as did other kids of color in the classroom. It was probably the same in Spain. Kids of all races and classes start off happily together in the same classrooms, but a kind of cloud enveloped them. Sometimes that cloud comes from teachers and parents whose deep-seated, stereotypical views make some students feel better than others and many students feel less, and this change usually occurs around adolescence, a time when boys of all races



started to notice girls of all races. When it was Black boys noticing White girls, and it upset White parents and teachers, that thing, to Jordan, was called *racism*. Whenever he was unsure about an uneasiness he was feeling he often asked, “Are they being ‘R’?” I knew exactly what he meant. He used “R” as shorthand for “racist.” I did not always know how best to respond. This excursion was one way for us to get answers to many questions.

Along the circuitous bus route through the fashionable downtown to the working-class barrios we saw graffiti everywhere we went. Writing was on the wall of an apartment complex and a stucco school next door to each other.

“This doesn’t look like the soul of Spain; it just look like taggers’ world,” Jordan said as we passed a clinic and an auto body shop. We often studied writing on the wall to see how people responded to the place in which they lived. We learned about “Chika Pepe” and “Rosid Jesse,” who we guessed might be expressive adolescents like Jordan as we traveled through a littered housing project area, a place we saw middle-aged men playing dominos on the lawn and young women hanging laundry on lines outside their windows.

“This is the Spain you don’t see in the tour guides,” I said.

Bars were on the windows of every first and second floor apartment in nearly every building at the nearby Plaza San Sebastian, where gray pigeons went hungry looking for crumbs on the Spanish-tiled sidewalk. A pretty lady was seen burping her baby at Avenida La Paz, a neighborhood that simmered with the same discontent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it probably did just prior to the Spanish Civil War in the ‘30s when the majority of the poor folks from this region sided with the Republican government and against the Fascist, Franco-led army. At the next big intersection, we saw graffiti on a tennis court wall that read: “Hambre Primer a Problema Politico” (Hunger first political problem).

“That looks soulful to me,” I said to Jordan, who rolled his eyes and retorted: “Dad, I think you’ve been in the sun too long. You’re getting heat stroke.” Sweat poured down my face, his too as we rode on the hot bus.

We finally got off our round trip bus ride through the barrios and back to visit the chic hotspot, El Templo del Café, where we drank the best coffee and vanilla ice cream ever.

“Well, Jordan, I think we found it.”

“Found what, dad?”

“The soul of ice cream,” I mused, smiling to the short waitress.

“Do you know where we can find the soul of Spain?” I asked the waitress as Jordan cringed, embarrassed that I wouldn’t drop this idiotic questioning.

The waitress shrugged her shoulders and told me, “No Entiendo” (I don’t understand). An upscale stucco apartment building across the street was decorated with political graffiti, a striking contrast in this touristy downtown area where the souls of Indian ancestors past keep popping up in the most unusual places, often accompanied by the ghosts of the present.

Music was playing nearby. We took our quest two doors down to the upscale outdoor restaurant, Café de Indias, where we listened to accordion and tambourine players. One asked me for money. I asked him for soul.

He said “They’re one and the same.” I gave him a Euro.

“See, Jordan, we’re getting someplace,” I said. The smart-ass kid rolled his eyes.

We visited a mall on the main drag. Since this is where many Westerners found peace we thought we’d try our luck here. When I asked a trendy clerk in Zara, a popular clothing store, where the soul of Spain was, she also said,

“No Entiendo.”

“This is a conspiracy,” I exclaimed. She ignored me, which on this day in history inspired me. I’m pumped up. Jordan looks amused. That made me smile.

Next door, I asked a Moroccan vender dressed in a striped tunic the same question in Arabic and Spanish, and he replied in English that “the soul of Spain is in Santa Cruz,” a multicultural area where people of different faiths live in relative harmony. “Halleluiah!” I said as I did a soulful dance on the sidewalk, finally making Jordan laugh. Then, as if he was the Grand Inquisitor, he asked the same questions of me that he did when we got off the train. “How do we know it’s there? How will we know what it is? Where do you find it?”

And again, I reiterated: “All good questions, son. Let’s just say I have a hunch, a gut feeling.”

“A Gypsy intuition,” he countered, imitating something I once said.

“Yes.”

We’ve come full circle on this fateful day. We’re back in the same spot that we began our search, walking aimlessly down Avenida Kansas City, a street that made me think about jazz great Charlie Parker’s hometown, so I felt it was a sign. Ironically, our final stop was not far from our first stop on this palm-laden lane, which was a Pizza Hut restaurant. Jordan reflected on a lesson we learned earlier today about prejudice or pre-judging people based on ethnicity. We saw a neurotic, Gypsy lady in a yellow halter-top and tattered blue jeans beg for money. I wanted to interview her, but Jordan looked at me and I looked at him and we said at the same time, “She’s crazy!”

The only reason why I did not give her a coin was a look from Jordan, whose eyes directed me to another panhandler coming this way.

“He’s a Gypsy,” said Jordan, who told me he met some “really cool” Gypsy flamenco dancers when they came to his school.

“I believe so. I think he could be her brother hustling this street,” I said in between bites of cheese pizza and sips of Andalusian red wine. We ignored him after our waitress gave us signals to do just that.

Perhaps a lesson was to be learned in this place where Christopher Columbus was entombed, a site we chose to skip. It was a place where the wayward pirate in 1495 paraded 1,200 naked Taino Indians that he captured on the island of Hispaniola to pay his debts, and sold them into slavery. To Jordan and me, this was a sinful site. In his book, *Pagan Spain* author Richard Wright describes the capital of Andalusia this way:

Though rich in oranges, sugar beets, olives, wheat, rice, the impression of poverty was so all-pervading, touching so many levels of life that, after an hour, poverty seemed to be the normal lot of man; I had to make an effort to remember that people lived better lives elsewhere. On my own in this city of four hundred thousand people and being without a car, I sank wearily into a chair in the shade of an outdoor café fronting the Alameda de Hercules, a bare, sandy park patronized mainly by working-class people. Unemployment must have been right, for scores of ragged men lounged against the walls in the sun, staring bleakly.

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We were just a block away from where we began, looking for meaning, looking for soul, but also looking for a map to the so-called Promised Land called Santa Cruz at the luxurious Occidental Hotel. Walking in this air-conditioned palace-like place, we heard soothing soul music, Aretha Franklin’s “Say A Little Prayer for You.” A tall bartender named Jesus told us

Santa Cruz was a “cool place.” He gave us a map that outlined it between Jardin de Murrib and Avenida de Constitution, a stone’s throw from the historic Rio Guadalquivir, which played a pivotal role when Muslims controlled Spain. Over a glass of champagne for me and cup of orange juice for Jordan, which made us smile, we learned that while we sought the soul of Spain by looking in these various places -- Moorish mosques, Catholic cathedrals, workers’ barrios, Spanish cafes, and Moroccan sidewalk shops -- we seemed to find our own internal understanding. After a long hard day’s detective work, we were happy with ourselves for we had fun as father and son on a zany adventure to a place neither of us knew and a place in which we discovered compassion for others and ourselves. We found many Spaniards, who like some Americans, prefer quality of life to standard of living. We found quite a few folks at the bottom of the totem pole who could not find either. Yet, as Jordan and I discovered, even people at the bottom of the well found *something* to get them through the day. That *something* comes deep within their being. It gave them strength. It gave them power. We called that *something* “hope.” On a good day, it rubbed off on others. We knew for sure that hope did exist. Historian Raymond Carr wrote in Spain: A History, “Modern historians would approve of the novelist Pio Baroja’s verdict that half the idiocies of the Spanish soul have been invented by foreigners, the other half by Spaniards themselves” (2).

While some may have questioned whether we found the soul of Spain or not, we knew we found *something*. Like a father and son detective team, we felt we had solved a case. As Jordan beamed with that look of contentment only my youngest son can produce, I popped the question: “Have you ever heard of Toledo? I hear there’s great spirituality there. Do you think....”

He paused for a minute as we walk toward the high-speed train station, and asked: “How do we know it’s there? How will we know what it is? Where do you find it? No dad! Don’t even think about it...unless it has a water park.”

After we returned from Sevilla, I thought deeply about Richard Wright’s Pagan Spain. It was the first book on Spain I read. It was interesting to me that Gertrude Stein sent both Wright and Hemingway to Spain as a way to expand their literary reputations. One of them achieved fame for his journey, the other infamy. Hemingway became an icon. Wright was discounted, it seemed to me. For instance, I knew the New Critics panned Wright’s later works. Some critiques were warranted. Others were not. Writers of color were short-shifted in the mainstream. According to the National Writers Union, mainstream publishing staffs were overwhelmingly White, so were literary review editors, poetry contest judges, and the powerbrokers in the technical field. Few agents and editors actively sought writers of color because they did not see a mass market for such work. Marketing directors, not being tied to communities of color, didn’t know how to market books by authors of color. “Editors expect Asian American and Latino writers to write about exotic *old country* topics, African Americans to write about poverty, and Native Americans to write about spirituality,” reads a brochure by the New York-based National Writers Union on writers of color (1-6). All of these truths were embedded in me as we journeyed through Spain talking to American expatriate writers and their European counterparts. Somehow the academy and the literary establishment often hailed Whites who wrote about certain subjects and flailed those of us of color who also wrote about subjects we seemed to know a lot about. Wright must have felt this way because he moved his family to Europe where Black writers – though not necessarily non-celebrity Blacks – often received more attention and appreciation than they did in the States. This irony must have angered Wright. I *felt* Wright as I

wondered through Spain. To me, he was the most courageous of all the American expatriate writers in Spain because he came back more than once. While the censors followed him and dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco's brutal regime roared, he attacked the root of the madness -- the paganistic, ritualistic, evangelical, hypocritical pathos of a bipolar nation that wanted to be loved and hated at the same time. For a Black writer to do that during the height of Fascism in Spain and America, showed character, conviction and commitment. Wright got this/close to the truth. I just wished he had written parts of the book better. Some chapters were weaker than others. His use of Carmen's fascist catechism was the hook that tied the book together, without which it probably would have flopped critically and politically.

The book, braved new ground in race relations. Wright keyed in on racial symbols in Spain. Maybe it was the fact he was an African American that made him look for race in every place. Take for instance the hooded, white sheet-wearing members of the Brotherhood of Candlemas during Semana Santa (Easter Week) in Sevilla, and the way they conjured images of hooded KKK when I saw their picture in a travel book. My wife saw them in person during an Easter Week ceremony in the mid-'70s and called it "really weird." Two decades before her, another former Chicagoan, writer Richard Wright, witnessed the Brotherhood of Candlemas and wrote about it in Pagan Spain.

"These objects reminded me of the Ku Klux Klan in the Old American South. It must have been the KKK regalia they copied" (xvi).

Meanwhile, Blacks looked at Jordan and me warily as we rode the Circular #6 bus line in Madrid. Their eyes were saying they didn't know what to do or how to act. They were too sheepish to show outward signs of solidarity or friendliness given their oft-temporary status in Spain, a place that made people who were different feel and act differently. Race and class

popped up periodically in other aspects of Spanish culture. Also popping up was anti-American sentiment. There was a perception that Americans were decadent bullies. Ironically, in labeling Spain “pagan” author Richard Wright insisted Spanish men in particular exuded decadence in this country that boasted an evangelical aura. Jordan and I saw the Spaniards were no more or less decadent than Americans.

### **AMERICAN VS. SPANISH IDENTITY POLITICS AND EXPAT WRITERS**

When I arrived in Madrid in the trendy area around Metro Alonso Martinez all the way from spa-spangled, Spanish-speaking Los Angeles with its newly minted Hispanic mayor, I noticed an uncanny similarity between the two cities. For example, the weather, language, food, and music were strikingly similar. Yet, what was different was that most Hispanic Angelinos, many of whom are mixed with Indian ancestry, often consider themselves to be people of color, whereas most of the olive-skinned citizens I saw in Madrid, some of whom are mixed with Arab ancestry, usually consider themselves White. It was cool with me. People were entitled to call themselves whatever they liked. If it worked for them, it worked for me. The interesting thing, though, was that one way I tried to build bridges between the people here and the people there was to think of them as world citizens like me. I wondered if Wright and the other American expatriates felt the same? That question was affirmatively answered at a July 20, 2005 panel of expatriate writers held at the dorm featuring Lawrence Schimel, author of more than 25 titles in four different genres, including history, gay, Jewish, erotica; Jamie Poole, owner of an American bookstore in Madrid; and Alexis Wiggins, a writer, who, like Poole, was married to a Spaniard. Each of the young panelists discussed the individual ways that they were working to bridge the gap of understanding between Spaniards and Americans. Wiggins, for example, who came here as an expatriate six years ago from a liberal family in the States, married a conservative Spaniard



and now considered herself a “spousepat” – a status she called similar to being a native, but still this/close to being an outsider, an uneasy status for me.

Jamie Poole, on the other hand, hailed from a conservative Alabama family and married a Spanish Communist, who co-owned their American-language bookstore. Both “spousepats” lived a block from their mothers-in-law, which was a typical, and perhaps even an admirable, custom here in Spain.

Lawrence Schimel, an olive-complexioned, gay, Jewish, Puerto Rican man from New York, was a bridge on other levels – genre, sexual orientation, gender, race, and religion. Social scientists explain it in terms of *intersectionality*, which occurs when a person crosses several cultures simultaneously. Schmiel writes children’s books and is a member, like me, of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. We chatted about the new market for middle-school books, post-Harry Potter success. Prior to that, middle-school markets were taboo for most American children’s book authors because publishers feared that segment of market was not profitable. One children’s book he was writing centered around Moorish/Muslim life and diversity in Spain. Because he was rather dark, Schimel said police often stopped him to determine if he was an Arab, not if he was a criminal, but for some Spanish authorities, in post-March 11 Madrid, they were one and the same. March 11, which they refer to as “Once Eme” killing 200 innocent people, was their 9/11, a terrorist act that shocked the nation.

## **KAI TAKES US HOME**

Wherever I traveled in Europe, I uncovered great sorrow, sensuality, and song. It was a lyrical place with profound poetry in its complexity. Could that be one reason why so many talented writers from the Americas found a literary home here? That continued to be part of the mystery I sought to uncover, a revelation that I felt unveiled as much about me as about the

expatriates. So I ended my journey with the same question that launched this inquiry, what is an American? According to several American expatriate writers living in Europe since 9/11, it was a humbling experience. Some who proudly flaunt their nationality today go through careful steps to conceal it. Most people do not equate U.S. foreign policy with American citizens abroad, but increasingly many do. That can be a precarious situation for American writers who simultaneously love their home country and their host country and wonder why they, or anyone for that matter, should be pressured into an either/or choice. Other American expatriate writers, like Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Frederick Douglass, were also in Europe when American government policies were under scrutiny. Douglass, who apparently picked up French during his stay in Paris, even worked for the U.S. government for a couple years as an consul to Haiti, but later resigned his post over a policy dispute with the American government. Learning about them helped my sons and me learn about each other. Learning more about people in other countries helped us be better Americans. Living abroad made us more tolerant and gave us a break from the harsh realities of intolerance back home. That was also the view of many American expatriate writers. At least that's the view of Kai El Zabar, one the more loquacious American expatriate writers I talked to, who in an e-mail to me, wrote:

Racism is a virus that lingers within the American spirit like a viral strain for herpes lies dormant in our bodies awaiting the right moment to appear as a fever blister or cold sore, or chicken pox, or herpes and begin its cycle to rise, fester and scar. In Madrid, in Montpellier, the virus did not live for there was no environment to support its existence and I soared free, 'free at last, free at last thank God Almighty free at last!' People took me on at face value, who I was being in terms of my contribution to their life rather than that 'Black wench,' or

that ‘nigger bitch’ or even ‘Black woman.’ This is not about self-pride or race pride but rather about the accusations of who we are made out to be in America in contrast to just ‘being,’ in other places like Madrid and Montpellier where our history is nobler. Remnants of the Black Madonna and the Moors linger in the atmosphere painting an entirely different picture of who we are and what we come from. Though there may be some nationalistic issues and concerns, there is respect for who I be and from whence I came. Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Josephine Baker, Nina Simone, and Pablo Neruda, had all come before me as ambassadors of the modern person of color and they had done me well. The doors were open and hearts pure. I stood on their shoulders fresh and ready to say and do whatever the spirit moved me to do. There is an acceptance of equals that exist that I’ve never felt in America amongst White Anglo Saxon Protestants. The space has been created. And yet in this foreign land I felt so welcomed, so accepted into the fold as one of the group. Finally, I was seen as a human being. I stood erect and stared what was there to face in the eye and saw me. I felt free to be self-expressed and to create from that space of freedom. It was in that special space that I found myself my own voice unencumbered by the crap that hung around my neck like an albatross. The words that came and flowed from my heart to hand to pen to paper were pure me. There I created some of my best art and for that I am grateful. It was in these foreign places that I was reborn as an artist/writer for free we must be.

On the 12-hour plane ride back home from Montpellier, I thought a lot about how Kai El Zabar probably summed up my personal view better than most. It was an epiphany for me. Here

was why; there was more acceptance of American artists-of-color in Europe than in our hemisphere. There was more acceptance of artists, period, in Europe than in the U.S., which was one of the many unifying reasons so many American expatriate writers continued moving here over the last 150 years. Henry James articulated this quite well in his 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, *The American*. James' *American* seemed to be slightly different than mine.

## **SUMMARY**

Once I came back, a University of New Orleans creative nonfiction professor named Patrice Melnick challenged me to think out loud on the page as I recalled my trips with my boys. Thinking back, my sons and I had positive recollections. It did not mean there was no incident of racism, xenophobia or religious intolerance that made us uncomfortable. It did not mean that we didn't feel the brunt of stereotypical jokes about "loud, brash, ignorant, arrogant Americans." We did. The general consensus was that in the post-9/11 era, people from the U.S. did feel more scrutiny -- writers and non-writers alike. Jordan said he felt it in Spain; Amman said he felt it in France. I felt it both places. I felt more scrutiny based on my country of origin than my race. Our support system -- friends and family -- was more in place in France than in Spain. The numbers of people of color were higher in France than in Spain. Additionally, Jordan was first, making him a year younger. Advanced as he may have been, another year might have shaped his perceptions differently. Psychologists have reported how age 12 often is the transitional age for adolescent maturity. Spain was a first for both of us. I had visited France a few times before, so my ease moving through that country was facilitated by some history. My comfort with the few words I knew in French was higher than with the few words I remembered in Spanish. This helped Amman feel more welcome and at ease.

“I feel more at home in France than I do in America because French people are nice to me, which makes me be nice to them. One day, I’ll take my brother and my kids here,” Amman said. “I think I could live here, too.”

He’s since started organizing a French club at his middle school to encourage other teens to embrace French language and culture. He earned an A in French, what he calls “my favorite class.” He uses his Haitian-American uncle’s name as his new French persona – Jean Paul. Even his French teacher, Mrs. Lohman, addresses Amman’s homework with a note to “Jean Paul.” Mrs. Lohman recommended Amman to French 3, an intermediate sophomore-level class for his freshman year in high school. My oldest son (by one minute) loved French culture.

According to Amman, “I want to be an expatriate in France. I can make friends there easier than here.” Discovering his love for France was an unexpected plus for our visit.

On the other hand, Jordan said, “In Spain, I don’t always feel welcome as a Black; I don’t feel welcome as an American. Still, I mostly like it here in Spain, and I plan to come back with my brother when I’m in college to goof off a little. I do not think I could live here, though, at least not yet.”

He’s abandoned studying Spanish in eighth grade, focusing instead on reading American novels for one year. For high school, he registered to take Italian.

“I always wanted to learn it. It’s close to Spanish on the page,” he said. “I’ll be able to practice it with Aunt Cornelia, Uncle Marshall’s girlfriend who lives on the Italian/Swiss border.”

Amman chimed in, “I can speak French with Aunt Cornelia. That’s her first language though she told me she also speaks Italian, German and English.”

While they are not quite ready to study Slovenian, both of my sons agreed we should take my wife to Slovenia next year to hang out with Erica Johnson-Debeljak and her Slovenian-born husband and kids who we've hung out with in the States and in Spain. Both of our sons agree that racism in Europe seems less overt than in the United States. Both say they felt like they were good American representatives because they were kind, courteous, interested in the host country's language, and not given to the stereotypes some abroad have of us. Those stereotypes claim that Americans are greedy, self-centered, shallow, and narrow-minded.

When I pressed Amman for a definition of what an American is, he said, "An American is a person who cares about other people wherever they are. I love France. I feel less racism here than I do in the United States. The only three times I felt racism was when the White, blockhead, conductor on the French railway tried to throw us off the train, suggesting that our rail passes were invalid. They were not. The loud, rude way he spoke to us was racist. Then it was the White lady who would not get in the cab with us in Montpellier. And lastly, there was the North African lady in the Paris metro station who was rude to us, not so much because we were Black, but more because we were Americans. I do feel prouder to be an American in the States. Here in France, to be proud to be an American seems like a crime the way everyone here trashes Bush."

Jordan's definition had a similar political bent. "An American to me is just like a Spaniard. We believe in families, fun and freedom. And none us seem to like Bush."

My kids love the fact I am a writer, but they are not always thrilled about answering my reporter-like questions. What I chose to do was explain that I would write in general terms about their impressions on traveling with me because I felt their perspectives made sense. I would not record every conversation. I did not want my children to feel they were constantly being

interviewed. When they've seen kids of writers in movies, they've commented how intrusive writer-parents on the screen are. I got the hint.

Jordan, Amman, and older sister, Lauren, are very much part of my private-public literary lives and I wouldn't have it any other way. Lauren's view lines up closer to Jordan's than to Amman's. In Paris, Amman said he felt "most at home" with our West Indian friends, Ary and Toto Gordien in Porte de Bagnole, a "banlieue" (suburb) that was one of the sites of the 2005 riots. Amman also loved Chateau Rouge, the African area near Gare Nord (the northern train station).

"People in both places are real cool. They make me feel welcome. They are not pretentious like some people I see in other parts of Paris," Amman said.

In Madrid, Jordan joined Amman in spirit when he said he felt most at home in the Atocha Renfe (train station) area where many Africans lived. Both understood trains and migration.

"I love the way Black people crowd in the KFC there just like they do at home. Black folks everywhere love that fried chicken" Jordan said. The other place Jordan said he felt welcome was a suburb outside of Madrid where Aqua de Madrid water park is. "I used my Spanish from school to get directions to the one place in Spain that made me feel like an American again," he said.

Amman and Jordan both found people who looked like us at train stations here and back home, which is something I did not realize until I captured their comments. They both were fond of Gypsies in Europe, partly because of the warmth members of the Roma community displayed. Another common experience was that Amman and Jordan pouted in famous museums when they wanted to be outside doing kid stuff. Jordan rebelled at the Prado in Madrid. Amman showed his defiance at the Louvre. Though slightly embarrassed when both outbursts occurred, I was not

surprised. Looking back, I was a little amused. They remained true to their characters. They spoke their minds. They did what kids do. I listened to what they said, and how they said it. And maybe, just maybe, their answers to the question “What is an American” make more sense than mine. Their life experience is rooted in the way Europe was presented to each of them by me. I felt more comradeship with my American expatriate writer-colleagues in Spain than I did with the American writers in France. There were simply more of us.

Similarly, I felt more comradeship with the French writers, particularly the writers of color. There were more of them, too. I was as comfortable chatting with French writers, Spanish writers as I was with American writers. I had the same feeling with filmmakers from France, Spain, and America when I covered the Cannes Film Festival in 2003 for my radio station. We seem to have more in common than in conflict. It was highly possible that American expatriate writers felt exactly the same. Thinking back to how the trip affected my writing, I know I have moved closer to creative nonfiction and farther away from journalism, but being the interdisciplinary border crosser I’ve grown up to be, I still find ways to build those fences, rather than blow them up. Thinking back, I shared with my sons and with my uncle how fulfilling our international interactions are to me. I apologized for waiting so long. I said too often American guys are slow to communicate intimate details of how and what they’re thinking, and that this is one reason why Americans are often misunderstood. All of these reflections remind me of my own American connection, which to me speaks to how I view my culture and how I want my culture to view me. All of these memories help me recall J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s definition of an American as a more tolerant person, who has abandoned his/her “ancient prejudices and manners” (“Letter III,” 1782). Like others, my definition of being an American as a global citizen took on a unique spin along with my *world majority* status, a term some sociolinguists use to



describe so-called racial minorities. My comfort with this term also explains my comfort defining “American” in hemispheric terms, rather than jingoistic ones. I’ve heard other intellectuals, particularly those from Central and South America, question why many connote “American” with simply United States. That said, I’ve focused this story on U.S.-born expatriate writers who I feel represent an era and/or represent my own definition of what it means to have been an American writer abroad. My own definition, my sons,’ and their great-uncle, Marshall Allen’s, who is simultaneously “proud to represent the U.S. as a musician, and proud of my place at the table of the world’s best players,” and who sought solidarity across borders, across oceans. Marshall said that on May 17-20, 2007, he was scheduled to headline the “Uncool Jazz Festival” in Poschiavo, Switzerland, near the Italian border. He invited me and the boys to visit. Since they will be in school, I’ll be the only one in our family to help him celebrate. This will mark the first time Marshall and I will be together outside of America. It will be only the second time another family member will have witnessed his playing in Europe. “Mario showed up at my show in Copenhagen in October,” Marshall told me. “He came across the water from Helsenberg, Sweden, and brought to my gig some of the cats he records with in Copenhagen. It was great seeing him.” It will be cool seeing my favorite uncle doing his thing in a country that appreciates his art more than the country of his birth does. That strikes me as a cruel irony. It reminds me of the way Uncle Marshall’s search for artistic freedom parallels his quest for racial parity and personal emancipation. Even some older members of the family cautioned him against looking for freedom in foreign lands. He knew the risks. He knew the rewards. He knew the Promised Land. I followed his lead. My sons followed mine...and on and on.

As I reflect on three generations of my family’s view on our role of Americans abroad, I’m reminded of our role to ourselves. While we embrace a more global view of what we should call

ourselves, we respect the views of those who disagree with our definition. I hope readers respected my right to disagree with theirs. During Christmas of 2006, three generations of global guys – Uncle Marshall, my sons, and me – got together in Chicago to compare our respective reports, definitions, and reflections. We shot video footage to record this historic event. The *Wednesday Journal* newspaper reported on it in an article Feb. 7, 2007. Amman thanked Uncle Marshall for teaching him how to compose on the piano. Jordan thanked him for teaching him how to do choral compositions. Marshall thanked both of them for letting him play “Shadowbane” on the computer and “wipe out some dragons.” One theme that emerged from the conversation was that we’ve all learned how to be more tolerant of others. We’ve all discovered how to be more tolerant of each other. And we’ve all tried to teach others how to better recognize our complexity. For example, I learned how much Jordan enjoyed water parks by the effort he went to help us get to Aqua de Madrid, 20 kilometers outside of town on public transportation. I learned how much Amman enjoyed skateboarding just by the hours he logged boarding in Porte de Bagnole, the suburb we were told was a “no-go zone” as it was the scene of riots more than a year earlier. My sons learned, how in a crunch, I summoned the Spanish, French, and Arabic I had learned in what seemed like previous lives. As citizens of several discourse communities, we learned that by increasing our tolerance for ambiguity we simultaneously increased our abilities to mediate different viewpoints. We learned that because we were born African Americans, we were also born citizens of the world. We accepted and embraced both roles. In sum, that’s how we defined “What is an American?”

–FIN–

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## **VITA**

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