

The Narrative Power of Place – Paris at the Intersections – 1920s/2020s
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I arrived at the L’AiR Arts residency with the goal of researching and writing about the narrative power of place: of Paris then and now. As a writer, urbanist, and community organizer, I wanted to explore the geohistory of Paris in the 1920s, how artists shaped the city and how the creative power of place influenced art and culture on a global scale. I wanted to understand Paris through the lens of what Haitian scholar, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, described as “the production of historical narratives” which involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production. The ultimate mark of power, Trouillot noted, “may be its invisibility and the ultimate challenge; the exposition of its roots.”¹

I sought to answer two overarching questions. First, what were the stories of artists at the intersections? I searched for stories about Black writers, musicians, and dancers from the US and Harlem, like Jessie Faucet and Ada “Bricktop” Smith, painters and poets from Latin America, and queer and trans folks who found refuge in the salons, cafes and bars of Paris. How could I center these stories often told, if at all, at the margins? As artists shaping culture between the wars, distilling life across genres, how did Paris influence them on a transnational-scale? And upon their return home, did this decade of flourishing creativity, strengthen their resiliency and help prepare them for the rise in fascism and war that was to come?

And my second overarching question: how does Paris of the past connect to Paris of today, a time when across the globe we are once again seeing a rise in fascism and also growing resistance movements?

In the style of intellectual thought of the 1920s, I found fragments and contradictions and tried to bring them together. The search for a portal to connect the past to present turned into a research vortex. After two weeks of digging in, asking questions and searching for answers, I learned enough to know I hardly know enough — past or present — about Paris: Paris as cultural capital of the world, as colonial empire, as artistic catalyst, as a city once divided between the Left and Right bank. Now the contrasts are better understood as arrondissements vs banlieues, ex-pats vs refugees, yellow vests vs neoliberal reforms. And what I hoped to present at the L’AiR Arts Symposium could only scratch the surface. I vowed to return to these topics one day, to excavate the lives of artists who deserved a bigger spotlight.

¹ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past, Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) xix.

The remnants of history are with us, whether it's the famous stories like the ones of Le Dome where I sat working on a draft of this essay, surrounded by glasses of afternoon wine and oysters, remembering that writers once gathered there with nothing but lint in their pockets as they waited for another artist to arrive with a little extra money to front the cost of the coffee.

I wanted to dive into the romanticized nostalgia of the 20s, to hunt for the muse of an epic decade in the City of Lights where the spirit of creativity breathed life into hands, bodies and minds. But whimsical notions of the past negate the critical awareness of its historical production.

I started with the schools of thought and practice of this era that continue to influence us today. Artists searched for meaning on the heels of World War I, where millions of lives were lost on the battlefield. Millions more wounded. And for what exactly? What was the rationale behind such devastation? Dadaism, with its disjointed thoughts, rendered art as everything and art as meaningless. Malik Crumpler from *Paris Lit Up* simulated in our writing workshop at Shakespeare and Company the interruptions that often took place in the salons: interruptions to break free, to hunt down our own imaginations.

Breaks in the writing -- fragments of ideas and thoughts -- created a certain rhythm that flowed outside the workshop, and I began to walk throughout the city paying attention to interruptions: ones that brought me back to the present and others as remnants of the past.

Interruption: La Greve

The transportation strikes were going strong upon our arrival, with France's retirement system at stake. I witnessed interruption for political power and leverage. The labor organizers successfully shut down the city, making life inconvenient, and public support remained high, even with union density relatively low in comparison. Because the metro was shut down, walking was my major form of transportation and I could explore the city in a different way. I walked past a protest in front of the Pantheon and asked a student why she was protesting. She held a sign and waved at cars passing by, honking at her in support.

"Retirement is important for all of us. As a student I support the strike," she said, in fragmented words in English. I was interrupted and humbled by my inability to speak French. No longer was I travelling in Latin America, which I am accustomed to, where speaking Spanish or Portuguese opens doors to knowing people, to learning about what everyday life is like for folks, what they care about and why. In Paris, I could only gather information and stories through a filter.

We learned how artists played a role in supporting the strike, and in resisting the rising rents and high cost of living in modern-day Paris. For the last five years artists at the DOC, including L'AiR Arts painter, Lauren Coullard, have squatted in an abandoned building that once was a

high school. This collective of artists meet regularly to maintain and run the community space and have their own studios and workshop spaces. Visual artists at the DOC made banners, created signs, and fundraised for the striking workers who were without an income.

The ability to live on very little money in the 1920s and find affordable housing, like La Ruche, attracted many artists to Paris. Today, with high rents in most major metropolitan areas across the globe, gentrification and displacement are a reality for working class communities, often of color, and pose challenges for artists to have space to create and connect. DOC was my portal to the past and showed what could be possible with regard to collective land acquisition and adaptive reuse of a building for community benefit.

Interruption: Exposition of its Roots

Through a friend, I was fortunate to meet Severine Catelion, one of the founders of Cinemawon, a collective of Black filmmakers, producers, and directors that showcase documentaries and films. Their mission is to center and bring visibility to the stories of Afro-descendent communities from France, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.

As many Parisians took to the streets to support the strike, I saw more and more people wearing yellow vests — on their bikes and in the parks -- and, of course, in the massive street protests that blocked intersections and forced the entire country to pay attention. I was impressed by the turnout and creative street protest and effective political pressure. I noticed, though, that there weren't a lot of people of color participating. I asked Severine about it.

She told me how most working class folks, including herself, are supportive of the strikes. The growing neoliberal reforms Macron continues to implement are problematic for the future of France. But, she said, the unravelling of a public safety net has been an issue for many folks of color and immigrant communities for years, and never got much traction. The history of French colonialism isn't even taught in the classrooms.

She also mentioned how the Yellow Vest movement in 2018 was started by a Black woman named Priscillia Ludosky from Martinique. She said she had since been pushed out of the movement. Her response resonated with me. How many times have Black women in my own country been the catalyst for social justice and change and not been given the recognition they deserved? How does it still happen today?

I thought about the whitewashing of the Stonewall Riots in a feature film that came out several years ago, and the director's decision to give the film a white male protagonist and invisibilize Martha P Johnson, a Black trans woman and leader who had played a pivotal role. Or more recently, the #MeToo movement, and how Tarana Burke, a Black woman from New York, founded the movement over a decade ago and far too many gave celebrities like Alyssa Milano the credit for its creation. (To be fair, Milano has since made clear it was Tarana Burke who has

been doing this work for many years.) And closer to home, I was reminded about the domestic workers movement I am a part of, and our shared belief that our organizing must be led by and center the lives of Black women because Black women are who the industry was built to exploit.

Then there were the times I saw either ‘Anonymous’ written next to African art in the museums — or failure to mention in the interpretation of the art the influence and appropriation of Black culture by renowned artists in the 1920s and beyond. Again, I hear the words of Trouillot, the invisibility of historical production. The challenge: the exposition of its roots.

Interruption: Collage Feminicides and Protest Street Art

I was reminded of #MeToo for different reasons as well. This began when I walked out of FIAP and discovered the Collages Feminicides. A movement of feminists, known as ‘the gluers’, founded by Marguerite Stern, wheatpasted statements throughout the city that forced us to pay attention to the sexual violence endured by women and girls.

One image in particular pasted on a building led me to a Google translation and search: ‘Gabriel Matzneff: Pedocriminality Is Not Sexual Freedom It Is A Crime.’ I learned about this acclaimed author, and known sexual predator of girls and boys, who had fled France and has yet to be prosecuted. A brave survivor, Vanessa Springora, published the book *Consent* about what happened to her. France was reckoning with acts of gender-based violence overlooked for far too long.

Then I headed to the Musée d’Orsay, where Gauguin’s work is displayed, and tourists take pictures of paintings of young exoticized Tahitian women. This sexual predator is famous for renderings made possible thanks to patriarchy and colonial rule. Now, the paintings have turned into instant likes on Instagram. The invisibility of historical production. The challenge: exposition of its roots.

Interruption: Yo Soy Pintora

As a Chicana, my portal to the 1920s begins with Mexico City, with Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, indigenismo and the muralist movement. The possibility of freedom after the Mexican Revolution, and of Tina Modotti’s camera lens capturing the fervor of an agitated working class. But Paris, I’d come to find out in my L’AiR Arts journey, was also seen as the capital of Latin American art in the 1920s and an important place of cultural convergence for Latin American artists. Through excerpts of the book *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris Between the Wars*² by scholar Michele Greet, I’d discover there were over 300 artists from across the region, often not accounted for, who had made Paris their home during this decade. Many fled the political turmoil of their homelands.

² Greet, Michele. *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris Between the Wars*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

I learned of women like Amelia Peláez, a Cuban painter, and tried to imagine her life in Paris, during our L’AiR Arts theater workshop. How did she navigate this new language, these spaces dominated by European men? Did the sights, smells and sounds of Cuba have its own rhythm she could tap into on the canvas? As I dug into the research, I learned another layer: many Latin American artists, despite their own European heritage and white privilege, were shunned by the dominant art scene in Paris when their work wasn’t exotic enough to the European palette.

Once the artists arrived, they were othered, Greet noted, and any work they attempted to create with a European aesthetic was considered “derivative”. But Greet also wrote about their resiliency, and the notion of “exhilarating exile” which gave Latin American women artists like Amelia Peláez a heightened awareness of their cultural differences, a new framework and inspired creativity.

Interruption: The Immigration Museum

Migration as a portal between past and present is palpable. Understanding what’s happening today, cannot be done in a vacuum. I head to the Immigration Museum one afternoon. The purpose of the museum, I read online, is to advance the views and attitudes of immigration in France. I learned that in 2007, President Sarkozy, refused to officially recognize the museum when it opened.

With interpretation in French, I made out what I could about Arab and North African, Asian, Eastern European and African communities’ migration stories to France over decades and centuries. My lack of language forced me to think about the images and draw parallels to life back home. I saw a painting by André Fougeron titled ‘North Africans at the Gate of the City’. They are lying under what looks like a corrugated metal wall, similar to sections of the US/Mexico border. I saw photos and posters of immigrant communities protesting in the streets, of home videos and archival photos and newspaper clippings.

Then I saw a magazine cover, with the words “Immigration or Invasion?” A woman in a hijab stood in the background. There is danger in those words. It had only been a few months since I returned from El Paso, Texas, at the US/Mexico border and site of the massacre, where my family was directly impacted and grieving the lives that were taken away. The murderer, inspired by the US president’s hate, used the word “invasion” too to attack and kill my people. I also read that Le Pen said Trump’s election was an additional stone in the building of a new world. I wanted to learn more about what immigrant communities in Paris are doing today to resist and counter dangerous narratives.

I returned to my original questions fused into one: how to learn from this decade of flourishing creativity 100 years ago, to strengthen our resiliency and power, and prepare us for the rise in

fascism, as communities under siege. The invisibility of historical production. The challenge: the exposition of its roots.

Interruption: The Right to the City

I am inspired by Charlotte Perriand, a woman architect whose genius broke glass ceilings from France to Brazil. At the Louis Vuitton Foundation, a museum whose architecture impresses as much as the exhibits themselves, I learned about Perriand's work with Le Corbusier. I am interrupted once again after the visit. Fragmented pieces of story blend. I want to know more about the cités and banlieues, and I discover how the Brute architecture of Le Corbusier inspired the highrise buildings on the outskirts of Paris. We don't see these photos as architectural achievements on the walls of the Louis Vuitton Foundation.

I read about the resistance against police brutality in the banlieues, the protest of thousands in the streets after police killed a Black man named Adama Traore on his 24th birthday. They have coined the protests "Ferguson in Paris". And as I sat in the backseat of an Uber on a midnight ride past the Louvre, driving through iconic architecture, I remembered a quote from a community organizer of Cité 93: "I do not know the Mona Lisa, my dream is to see it one day."

And so I learned enough to know I hardly know enough about Paris, past or present, and vowed to return one day, excavate more stories with a spotlight and a microphone. I am drawn to cities of paradox and contradictions: inside such contested spaces I better understand humanity. Ironically, it isn't the romanticized notion of Paris that drew me in, it's in the shattered mirrors, the fragments. The unanswered questions make me want to chase down the muse in streets filled with historical remnants too often overlooked.