

ABSTRACT

BILLHEIMER, SARAH GRACE. *Champagne and Shakespeare: Bricktop and Sylvia Beach in Interwar Paris*. (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron.)

The names “Bricktop” and “Sylvia Beach” appear sprinkled throughout histories of the expatriate experience of Paris in the 1920s and ‘30s. Bricktop’s nightclubs on the Right Bank of the Seine River, and Shakespeare and Company, Sylvia Beach’s bookshop on the river’s Left Bank, served as two of the most popular gathering places for Paris’s native and foreign residents. Sylvia Beach is well-represented in scholarly studies of the Lost Generation of writers, artists, and intellectuals, and was the subject of a lengthy biography, but Bricktop has received less serious attention. This thesis compares and contrasts her life with that of her contemporary Sylvia Beach, in an attempt to establish Bricktop as Beach’s equal in the position of hostess to the City of Light’s illustrious expatriates.

Relying on archival sources, each woman’s own published account of her life in Paris, the published letters and remembrances of fellow expatriates, and related secondary sources, this study thus also challenges the simplistic divisions that have crept into our common conceptions of interwar Paris. Literary memoirs like Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, or even scholarly treatments such as William A. Shack’s chronicle *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars*, have contributed to a stratified portrait of Paris’s expatriate community, often separated according to gender, race, class, profession, and location. While such distinctions certainly did exist, examining the lives and careers of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach reveals a fascinating, and more complicated network of social and commercial connections among the various sets of international celebrities in Paris than we have usually acknowledged.

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Champagne and Shakespeare: Bricktop and Sylvia Beach in Interwar Paris

by
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DEDICATION

To the memory of my grandfather Edwin John DuCongé, Jr., who first told me about his aunt Bricktop, and who encouraged me to honor the past.

BIOGRAPHY

A North Carolina native, Sarah Billheimer is an M.A. candidate in the Traditional History program at North Carolina State University. After receiving her B.A. degree in French Education from Campbell University in 2011, she spent time teaching English in France and Latin in Cary, North Carolina. At NC State, her research interests have included cultural history, modern Europe, and African American history. Upon graduation in May of 2016, she hopes to pursue a career in French or History education.

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INTRODUCTION

“Sylvia Beach, the bookshop owner who made literary history when she became the first to publish James Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’ was found dead last Saturday in her apartment at 12 Rue de l’Odéon. She was 75 years old.”

– *New York Times* Obituary, October 10, 1962.¹

“Bricktop, the legendary singer and entertainer whose cafe society nightclubs in Paris in the 20’s and in Mexico City and Rome in the postwar years drew royalty, writers and the fashionably riffraff, died in her sleep early yesterday in her apartment on West 68th Street. She was 89 years old and had been in fragile health.”

– *New York Times* Obituary, February 1, 1984.²

The paragraphs above open the respective obituaries of Sylvia Beach and Ada “Bricktop” Smith DuCongé, two American women whose stories help to illuminate the complex coexistence of the various expatriate groups in 1920s and ‘30s Paris. Sylvia Beach, a white minister’s daughter from Princeton, New Jersey, operated a bookshop and lending library on the Left Bank of the Seine River. Her shop, Shakespeare and Company, attracted many of the twentieth century’s greatest writers, artists, and musicians before they achieved fame. She spoke French fluently and resided permanently in Paris from 1919 until her death in 1962. Bricktop, on the other hand, was a redheaded African-American from West Virginia, come to Paris by way of the nightclubs of Chicago and Harlem, and the chitlin’ circuit of black vaudeville that crisscrossed the United States. After her arrival in France in 1924, she worked in the nightclubs of Montmartre, on the Right Bank of Paris, until World War II forced her to return to the United States.

¹ Author unknown, Obituary for Sylvia Beach, “Sylvia Beach, 75, First to Publish Joyce’s ‘Ulysses,’ Dies in Paris,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1962.

² Albin Krebs, Obituary for Ada “Bricktop” Smith DuCongé, “Bricktop, Cabaret Queen in Paris and Rome, Dead,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1984. <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/01/obituaries/bricktop-cabaret-queen-in-paris-and-rome-dead.html>

Despite the differences of race and class between them, glimpses into the lives of Sylvia Beach and Bricktop also reveal connections. The wealthy European and white American businesspeople, socialites, and minor nobility who congregated in the more fashionable areas along Paris's Right Bank represented the bulk of Bricktop's clientele. Yet several of Sylvia Beach's Left Bank intellectual customers also found their way to the Montmartre clubs in which Bricktop provided entertainment, as works like Robert McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together* and Bricktop's own autobiography reveal.³ This overlap in patronage challenges the standard narratives of separate social groups presented in many stories of interwar Paris. As businesswomen and hostesses to a diverse group of patrons, Bricktop and Beach exerted a unique influence in the expatriate community.

Like many of their contemporaries, both women also published books filled with their memories of expatriate days in Europe. Bricktop's narrative encompasses the entirety of her life and work as a club owner and entertainer, while Beach's focuses on the years during which she ran her bookstore. Overall, both women chose to use their stories to present two sides of the same coin: the discovery of Paris as a unique space in which American women explored freedoms and opportunities less available to them at home. At the same time, many factors determined the differences in their lives in Paris and the degree to which each woman assimilated into French society, as well as the ways in which she remembered and represented her time in the city.

* * *

Bricktop and Beach were not alone in recalling the glory days of Paris in the first half of the twentieth century. Many authors have published fascinating works on the subject of

³ Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968). Ada "Bricktop" Smith DuCongé with James Haskins, *Bricktop* (New York: Atheneum, 1983).

expatriate women in the city. Shari Benstock's 1986 survey *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* is perhaps the most significant work on the topic. Benstock limits her study to the women involved in the literary world of reviews, small presses, salons, and bookstores, but offers both narrative history and detailed analysis of this group. She emphasizes the roles that women such as Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, Djuna Barnes, and Annie Winifred Ellerman (called Bryher) played in the development of literary Modernism. Sylvia Beach and her close friend and business adviser, Adrienne Monnier, feature prominently among the large, well-connected cast of characters. Often cited in subsequent investigations of the topic, *Women of the Left Bank* has become the leading scholarly account of the lives of expat women in the intellectual communities of Montparnasse. Even so, Benstock fails to engage in any substantive discussion of black women in Paris, aside from a few passing mentions of the American-born dancer Josephine Baker and Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Fauset. In reality, several notable women of the black diasporic community of writers from the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States came to Paris in the interwar period. In helping to foster the Négritude movement among black writers, Martiniquan sisters Paulette and Jane Nardal, in particular, played parallel roles to the white women Benstock chronicles. Geography may explain their invisibility, as the sisters operated a salon in a suburb of Paris rather than on the Left Bank. Yet their work did draw black students from the universities near where Beach, Stein, and Barney lived.⁴

Geography shapes other scholarly accounts that cover women's presence and contributions to interwar artistic life. *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank*, by Andrea Weiss, is a collection of photographs and character studies of female writers and

⁴ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 105-106. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 86.

artists, growing out of a film project of the same name. Written nearly ten years after *Women of the Left Bank*, *Paris Was a Woman* borrows heavily from Benstock's work in its emphasis on the centrality of lesbianism to groups of expatriate women in Paris. A focus on the unique suitability of Paris for these women constitutes the main difference between Weiss's work and Benstock's. In answer to Samuel Putnam's 1947 memoir *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Generation Lost and Found*, Weiss attempts to show the gendered differences in how expatriate men and women experienced the cultural world of the Left Bank, and she begins with Sylvia Beach's and Adrienne Monnier's bookshops on the rue de l'Odéon. Following Benstock's lead, Weiss presents an exclusively white story. Her introduction mentions Bricktop and Josephine Baker, but only within the context of the various groups who viewed Paris as a more liberated environment than the United States.

Where Benstock, Weiss, and others offer token integration for narrative spice, studies of African Americans in Paris tend to depict their protagonists in a similarly segregated fashion. Tyler Stovall's 1996 study *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* laid the foundation for all succeeding efforts. *Paris Noir* traces the establishment of the African American community of Paris, from its earliest days in the aftermath of the First World War to the 1990s, with particular emphasis on the interwar years. For Stovall, the history of African Americans in Paris represents a "success story" because of the opportunities and freedoms black men and women have consistently found there, providing a stark contrast to what they have left behind in the United States. While he does acknowledge the diversity of black experiences in Paris, Stovall remains adamant that "the African American community in Paris symbolizes the potential of African American life in general

once it is fully liberated from the shackles of racism.”⁵ Stovall’s focus extends to black writers both before and after World War II, but he makes few attempts to relate them to their white contemporaries during the interwar years.

Stovall’s work also reflects the fact that black men traveled to Paris in greater numbers than black women, though he does write about Bricktop and Josephine Baker in several places. In *Bricktop’s Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting offers the most scholarly treatment to date of black women’s experiences in that place and time. Sharpley-Whiting sets up Bricktop as the most well-known black woman in Paris after Josephine Baker, and then briefly tells the stories of several of other, less-familiar women. Her narrative remains true to its title, with sole attention given to black women, although she does hint at some points of interaction with white female expatriates.⁶

William A. Shack’s *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* has much in common with *Paris Noir*. Aside from the actual similarities in the material they cover, both texts paint an unabashedly rosy picture of black American life in Paris, though, as his title implies, Shack narrows his temporal focus and applies it exclusively to the jazz world. The work succeeds at showing that “jazz” had many different meanings and forms. Shack also provides an interesting account of the American genre’s reception among the French, which led to the development of uniquely Gallic strands of jazz, such as *zazou* in the late 1930s and early ‘40s. However Shack, like Stovall, has less to say about black women, or about possible interactions between the Right and Left Bank expatriate groups.

⁵ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, xv-xvi.

⁶ Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop’s Paris*, 9. For an extended example of Sharpley-Whiting’s unique attempts to reintegrate the stories of black and white women in Paris, see especially Part 2.

Comparing and contrasting the lives of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach, this thesis explores the social connections of expatriate Paris these scholars have often ignored. Regardless of whether historians study white or black expatriates in Paris, Bricktop—or her nightclub at least—always figures prominently in their representative anecdotes about Jazz Age Paris. In retelling these stories, authors often cite her autobiography, written with James Haskins, and published in the years just prior to her death. To a certain extent, the lack of both primary and secondary source material about Bricktop explains this. The scarcity of primary sources generated by Bricktop—and about her by those who knew her—also contrasts sharply with the vast amount of correspondence and personal papers that Sylvia Beach left, most of which have found their way into archives and publication. Additionally, the more serious efforts scholars have expended on Beach’s life and career as a bookseller reflect her location in a world of artists and intellectuals. But many who frequented Shakespeare and Company during the day also enjoyed the nightlife at Bricktop’s. Thus, Bricktop’s omission from scholarly works indicates how race, gender and space combine to shape critical studies of this era.

Although their music provided a soundtrack for the Parisian *années folles*, or “crazy years,” that white expatriates of various classes, nationalities, and occupations enjoyed, African Americans have not necessarily received the same level of recognition for helping to define the Jazz Age. In the Lost Generation’s Paris-themed works, like Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Moveable Feast*, or Fitzgerald’s *Babylon Revisited* and *Tender is the Night*, the experiences and contributions of black expatriates often remain hidden in plain sight, even as their presence played a vital role in defining the atmosphere of interwar Paris. In *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald’s fictionalized description of the city’s black community

reveals the ugly undercurrent of racism still present in many black and white relations abroad:

In brief, Abe had succeeded in the space of an hour in entangling himself with the personal lives, consciences, and emotions of one Afro-European and three Afro-Americans inhabiting the French Latin quarter. The disentanglement was not even faintly in sight and the day had passed in an atmosphere of unfamiliar Negro faces bobbing up in unexpected places and around unexpected corners, and insistent Negro voices on the phone.⁷

There is a sense here that black people, even compatriots, do not belong in the world of the white expatriates of the Left Bank. They are “unexpected” and inconvenient – something from which one needs to entangle oneself. Yet, while a clear racial divide existed between black and white, the color line was sometimes more permeable than most scholarly works attest. Black and white Americans often met on unequal terms in Paris, but their interactions took place in shared spaces, as part of overlapping social networks.

* * *

As a cosmopolitan world capital, Paris has a long history of entertaining Americans, one that stretches as far back as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Beginning in the eighteenth century, many wealthy Americans visited the city as part of their “grand tour” of Europe. The mutual experience of revolution, and the exchange of aid and ideas that took place in connection with the founding of the United States and the French Republic, respectively, further strengthened the relationship. In the nineteenth century, groups of American artists, writers, and musicians – including James Whistler, Edith Wharton, and Henry James – made the city their home as they sought to connect with their contemporaries

⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 106.

from other nations. Similarly, students relished the opportunity to take classes at the Sorbonne, perfect their French, and explore the history and culture of the French capital.⁸

World War I proved the great dividing line, and any examination of Paris in the twenties must include a discussion of its effects on both sides of the Atlantic. As the first truly global conflict in history, the Great War profoundly changed the way people thought about themselves and the world. In Europe, the war had whittled away a generation of young men, left countless others physically and psychologically impaired, rendered many women and children widows and orphans, and decimated the landscape of northwestern France and Belgium. In addition to its physical devastation, the war also wreaked economic havoc and toppled the old system of political alliances that had once governed the continent, leading to the creation of new states with artificially constructed borders and identities. By the war's end in 1918, Europeans on both sides of the conflict were exhausted and disgusted, forever changed by the experience of total war, with its trenches, poison gases, and tanks.⁹ In *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War*, Glenn Watkins describes the psychological aftermath:

Among the multiple characterizations of the post-Armistice period, the one cited most frequently was neurasthenic exhaustion. Not only had the idea of the soldier's frayed nerves been medically acknowledged in the expression "shell shock," but society at large had also become increasingly aware that it was no simple matter to pick up where they had left off at the outset of the war.¹⁰

⁸ For more on Americans in Paris in the nineteenth century, see David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

⁹ For a detailed account of the cultural and psychological effects of the war, see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

¹⁰ Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 378.

The “Generation of 1914” in Europe would carry these wounds with them across the next two decades and into another world war.¹¹

While thousands of American “doughboys” saw combat and many lost their lives after the United States entered the conflict in 1917, the war’s impact on Americans hardly compared to the toll it had taken in Europe. For one thing, the fighting and devastation occurred an ocean away, and resulted in no destruction of property on American soil, but, rather, in increased profits for American industry. The majority of Americans had never witnessed the horrors of war firsthand or felt the same fear that those living near the front in France or Belgium, or even close by in Great Britain, had. Then, too, the United States’ late entry saved its troops from some of the worst of the fighting and allowed them to arrive on the scene as conquering heroes.

This did not mean, however, that Americans were not affected by the war. After their engagement in a conflict of such staggering intensity and desolation, many in the United States thought it best to avoid European entanglements and the possibility of ensnarement in another global clash. The rise of Bolshevism in Russia during the war also pushed the United States into a period of “100% Americanism,” with its distrust of radical foreign influences. This dampened labor activism that alternately sought to reform or fundamentally change the economic system throughout the Progressive Era. Appealing to patriotism and traditional American values in the postwar years, the remnants of Progressivism marched on, with anti-vice groups leading the charge against alcohol, prostitution, and other social ills.¹²

¹¹ Phrase taken from Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹² For more on social concerns in the WWI-era in the United States, see: Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); and Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the sale of alcohol, went into effect in the United States. In its wake, a new subculture of speakeasies, bathtub gin, and gangsters emerged. Meanwhile, the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment the same year enfranchised American women and signaled the suffrage movement's political fracturing as women turned their attention to party politics and other issues. Many older suffragists lamented their daughters' seeming lack of interest in the cause. Young women, many of whom had tasted independence as relief volunteers during the war, rejected older standards of behavior, appearance, and political activism, personified in the figure of the "flapper."¹³ A postwar wave of racial violence also accompanied these heady changes as the sight of black men in uniforms stoked the fear and hatred of white supremacists, resulting in riots and lynchings in many American towns and cities. Where W.E.B. Du Bois had urged the black community to "close ranks" during the war and fight with the expectation of full citizenship as their reward, black veterans and others soon realized that on-going racial tensions and violence would render achieving such recognition impossible.¹⁴

All of these changes notwithstanding, the United States emerged from the war as a nation boasting money, youth, and glamour in contrast to a war-weary Europe. A favorable exchange rate and the chance to spread the gospel of American-style business and consumer

¹³ See, for example, Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the post-war American climate that led many to Paris, see: Brooke L. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the linking of black military service with citizenship, see W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks" editorial in *The Crisis*, July 1918 (Vol. 16, No. 3); and Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). On postwar racial violence, see William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

culture lured many across the Atlantic, just as a large number of Europeans anxiously sought a distraction from the memories of war and the new disillusionments of its aftermath.¹⁵

Remarkably, perhaps, Paris escaped the destruction the war had meted out in the bloody battles that occurred in the French countryside. People from all over the world still looked to the city as a center of culture and innovation. Even before the Great War, a colony of international social elites, artists, writers, and musicians had mingled with native Parisians and the job-seekers from the provinces along its boulevards.¹⁶ Such cosmopolitan audiences enjoyed, and participated in, colonial exhibitions, world's fairs, and the rise and fall of multi-national artistic movements like impressionism and *art nouveau*. Artists and musicians from outside France, such as Pablo Picasso and Igor Stravinsky, had begun experimenting with primitivism and cubism in Paris just before the outbreak of war, and these styles reached maturity in the years following its conclusion.

Jazz music constituted another famous foreign import. The warm welcome French communities proffered often pleasantly surprised the few African American units serving in France during World War I. Among the well-received were those who played in all-black military bands, such as that of the 369th led by James Reese. The ragtime and jazz tunes that soldiers from New Orleans, Chicago, and Harlem played delighted French listeners.¹⁷ As Watkins notes, the music also fit the mental and emotional state of many in Europe and the United States after the war:

In the eyes of some during the 1920s, signs of frayed “nerves” were evident not only in the migration to France of the so-called “Lost Generation” of American writers but also in most of the American

¹⁵ Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Green, *The Other Americans in Paris*, 6.

¹⁷ The story of black jazz musicians in Paris has been recounted in many places, but for a detailed account of “first encounters,” see William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), especially chapter 2.

dances that were finding their way to Europe. Despite its seemingly carefree attitude, “jazz,” which often found expression in an insouciant, compulsive beat and runaway energy, reflected the societal distress many were experiencing. The Jazz Age, a fabled era marked by exuberance and mounting prosperity in America, barely concealed the extreme mood swings of the postwar society’s collective neurosis.¹⁸

Thus, jazz assumed a functional role, both by expressing the feeling that life had spun out of control and in helping to drown out those feelings. Jazz also served as a tool of youthful rebellion for the flappers and their admirers. Due to its simplistic associations with black people and sex, the music pushed the boundaries of what “polite” white society considered acceptable. As it became the music of choice in the clubs where gangsters sold and imbibed illicit booze, the connection with the forbidden only increased.¹⁹

Harlem served as the cultural capital of the postwar “New Negro Renaissance” in the United States. By 1920, this newly black enclave in the heart of New York City had emerged as the preeminent stage for a blossoming and unabashedly celebratory African-American culture. Political leaders and cultural commentators like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke encouraged pride in blackness, and artists like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay responded with works that presented African Americans as strong, smart, powerful, and talented members of society. Filled with vibrant expressions of black culture, Harlem also hosted whites looking for a night of “slumming,” dressing up for an evening of dancing and drinking at popular hotspots like the Cotton Club, in a deliberate attempt at flouting white respectability.²⁰ But superficial popularity with a certain set of whites did not guarantee equality for African Americans, or even safety, and thus many black

¹⁸ Watkins, *Proof Through the Night*, 379.

¹⁹ See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

²⁰ For more on the remaking of Harlem in Paris, see Stovall, *Paris Noir*, chapter 2, and Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre*.

musicians, dancers, writers, and artists jumped at the chance to see what France might offer. In 1924, Bricktop found herself among them.

Of course, the history of African Americans in Paris does not start in the interwar period, nor does it even begin with the increased global mobility African Americans gained during World War I. Some accounts, for example, look to the earliest years of the French Republic and contend that Thomas Jefferson began his notorious relationship with his young slave, and half-sister of his wife, Sally Hemings while in Paris.²¹ Another slave, David F. Dorr, penned the notes for a travel narrative while on an extended trip to Europe with his master in the 1850s.²² This longer history points to the difficulty involved in telling the stories of black Americans in Paris; the land of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* has not always held complete freedom for visitors of color.

The popular wartime song “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm After They’ve Seen Patee?” ostensibly refers to white doughboys returning from the excitement of Europe, but it also serves as a good description for the attitude of large numbers of black veterans of the Great War. Approximately 370,000 African Americans served, and for many the experience provided their first escape from sharecropping and poverty in the Jim Crow South, or partial relief from discrimination on the housing and employment front in the urban North. The U.S. military segregated black soldiers, and assigned the majority to menial tasks while preventing them from sharing trenches with their white counterparts. Black men did, however, serve alongside French troops, which meant they acted as equals with white

²¹ Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 48. For more on Jefferson and Hemings, see Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

²² For more on Dorr’s trip, see his travel account *A Colored Man Round the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), originally published in 1858. The city of Paris served as a home base for Dorr and his master as they crisscrossed Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

soldiers and encountered other members of the African diaspora, many of whom hailed from colonial possessions of the French empire.²³

For those who shared experiences of white supremacy back home, choosing to stay in France allowed black men to become part of a new expatriate community optimistic about their chances there.²⁴ Moreover, the accounts black American soldiers had sent back home, describing the warm welcome they had received, prompted others to migrate to France. Famous jazzmen and entertainers, fresh from the juke joints of Chicago and the nightclubs of New York, joined students, artists, and writers. The chance to exchange ideas with black colleagues from Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean excited all.²⁵

As in the United States, black entertainers in postwar France enjoyed widespread popularity with white audiences. The American jazz craze, which intertwined with trends of primitivism in art, music and dance, had a French counterpart in “*les années folles*.” Ragtime, the cake walk, and other black dance-inspired musical forms preceded the embrace of jazz on both sides of the Atlantic, but the worldly, often sexually-themed flavor of this

²³ For more on the interactions between white and black soldiers in World War I, see Stovall, *Paris Noir*, chapter 1.

²⁴ As Brent Hayes Edwards writes in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*: “Metropolitan France was one of the key places where African Americans, Antilleans, and Africans were able to ‘link up.’ During World War I, about 370,000 African Americans served in the segregated American Expeditionary Force in France, in both service and combat units. Along with a warm reception from French civilians, African American soldiers encountered the tangible presence of soldiers of color from throughout the French Empire. During the war, the French conscripted nearly 620,000 soldiers from the colonies, including approximately 250,000 from Senegal and the Sudan and 30,000 from the French Caribbean. France simultaneously imported a labor force of nearly 300,000 both from elsewhere in Europe and from the colonies. Although France repatriated the great majority of the ‘native’ troops, in 1926, there were still at least 10,000 Caribbean students and workers and 1,500 black African workers in Paris alone, along with hundreds of African American visitors and expatriates. After the war, tales of encounter and connection, forged in the trenches and on the docks, traveled back to the United States with American fighting forces.” Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 3.

²⁵ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 105-106. In *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1957), Claude McKay shows that black laborers from the United States made France their home as well.

latest variety of black music became the ideal soundtrack for the rebellious twenties.²⁶

Where jazz helped to lubricate conviviality in Prohibition-era America, in France, it provided a way to forget the horrors of total war. In jazz's birthplace of New Orleans, the popular phrase "*Laissez les bon temps rouler*," meant "Let the good times roll," and that sentiment translated easily in postwar Paris.

Broadening the context for the French welcome of black Americans helps to explain the contrasting attitudes they encountered. While the younger generation in France greeted African Americans with enthusiasm as harbingers of all that was new and daring, many of their elders saw the black American presence as disrupting order and overturning the *mission civilisatrice* of French imperialism in Africa. Primitivism, a pre-war movement in art, music, and dance, also contributed to the popularity of *l'art nègre* in France. This movement drew inspiration from the stark, "uncivilized," and "primal" lines, patterns, colors, and rhythms supposedly found among groups of people who lived closer to the earth, whether in colonized Africa or ancient Russia. Just as the colonial powers hungered for new territory and new markets, Western artists and composers craved new sources for their creativity. Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific often served as targets for both endeavors. Over time, Primitivist ideas fostered important works such as Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), Pablo Picasso's Cubist paintings, and Paul Gauguin's Tahitian canvases.²⁷

As privileged exemplars and guardians of "primitive" artistic knowledge, blacks found themselves in high demand as models, performers, and producers in France during the

²⁶ Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 22-23.

²⁷ For more on Primitivism and Exoticism, see Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* and Brett A. Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

interwar period. Most African-Americans in Paris headed for the neighborhood of Montmartre, the legendary haunt of artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pierre-August Renoir, and musicians such as Erik Satie at the turn of the century. In addition to this, Montmartre and the neighboring area of Pigalle had long been famous for their risqué music halls and cabarets, with colorful names like *Le Lapin Agile*, *Le Divan Japonais*, and most famously, *Le Moulin Rouge*. By the mid-1920s, however, black jazz clubs filled Montmartre and Pigalle, though *le Tumulte noir* only became more pronounced with the arrival of Josephine Baker and her titillating performances.²⁸

At the same time, on the other side of the Seine, another “hill” began to attract the international artistic set known as the Lost Generation. Not really a hill, Montparnasse borders the Sorbonne-anchored Latin Quarter, and had been a popular neighborhood for students and writers since the nineteenth century. The name “Montparnasse” derived from Mount Parnassus, where the Nine Muses were said to have resided in Greek mythology. While Montmartre became a new Harlem – a kind of nighttime playground for the wealthy white elite of Europe and the United States – Montparnasse drew a less glamorous crowd of writers intent on rebelling against staid literary traditions. Aspiring British, American, and French authors gathered to debate new approaches and ideas in the cafes and bars that lined the boulevards.

During the day, these Left Bank American expatriates pursued their literary endeavors, but Montparnasse had its wild side as well, with fights, balls, parties, salons, and endless rounds of drinks at the Dingo or the Jockey to fill the night.²⁹ In his firsthand account of the Lost Generation in Paris, author Malcolm Cowley summed up the migration

²⁸ Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre*, 6-8.

²⁹ Morrill Cody and Hugh Ford, *The Women of Montparnasse* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1984), 60.

of students, soldiers, war volunteers, and expatriates like himself who chose to make the City of Light their home:

Ever since 1920, there had been no break in the movement toward France. Artists and writers, art photographers, art salesmen, dancers, movie actors, Guggenheim fellows, divorcees dabbling in sculpture, unhappy ex-debutantes wondering whether a literary career wouldn't take the place of marriage – a whole world of people with and without talent but sharing the same ideals happily deserted the homeland.³⁰

As Cowley's words attest, the American community in Paris was a diverse one, filled with people of all classes, colors, and concerns. Even as they made a new home in France, all brought with them their heritage as Americans, from their music to their language to their dress. Some succeeded more than others in discarding or surmounting their homegrown ideas about race, gender, and class. Regardless, Paris in the 1920s and 1930s would continue to function as the site of significant cultural exchange.

* * *

As two of the best-known and best-connected American women in Paris, Bricktop and Sylvia Beach's lives invite reflection on the gendered expectations and experiences of Americans in the city during the interwar years. Both Bricktop and Beach are particularly suited to such study because their success sprang from an ability to balance traditionally male and female roles in ways that were unique, but also socially acceptable. Putting Bricktop's and Beach's stories in dialogue with one another also highlights how race affected expatriation, assimilation, and interactions among white and black Americans in Paris.

Chapter One, "Bricktop and Sylvia Beach: *Américaines* in Paris," introduces the biographies of both women and explores the many factors that helped to determine the differences in their lives in Paris and the degree to which each adapted to French society.

³⁰ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 240.

This chapter establishes the importance of social and cultural geography as it discusses the specific locations of their businesses, their friends, and their patrons. Adding attention to race and gender, I argue that all of these elements played a role in distinguishing each woman's experience of interwar Paris.

Any consideration of the lives of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach requires a note on the availability of source material for each. Literary historian Noël Riley Fitch produced an authoritative biography of Beach in 1985. Two years later, a collection of James Joyce's letters to Beach appeared, and in 2010 Keri Walsh edited an anthology of her letters.³¹ Beach has understandably received prominent mention in other literary studies as well, especially those related to Joyce, such as Kevin Birmingham's recently published *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses*. Princeton University and the University of Texas at Austin hold two large collections of Beach's papers, and pieces of her correspondence with many of the twentieth century's most well-known cultural figures appear in them. Walsh's edition of selected letters Beach sent to various friends and associates unites many of these far-flung epistles, adding to the large body of material scholars have at their disposal when researching Beach.

No scholar has undertaken a detailed account of Bricktop's life, as mentioned above, and this is probably due, in part, to the fact that the archival material she left behind remains extremely limited. Emory University and the Schomburg Center for Black Culture in Harlem both house collections of Bricktop's papers, but these contain very little information about the facts of her personal life. Business and money matters dominated much of Bricktop's correspondence until the 1940s, when she converted to Catholicism. Material that pertains

³¹ James Joyce, *James Joyce's Letter to Sylvia Beach, 1921-1940*, ed. Melissa Banta and Oscar A. Silverman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). Sylvia Beach, *The Letters of Sylvia Beach*, ed. Keri Walsh (New York: Columbia University Press, 201).

to her personal life dates, for the most part, from this period onward, making it more difficult to reconstruct her earlier years apart from what she relates in her autobiography.³² As any references to Bricktop's career in print rarely include details about her earlier years, my first chapter necessarily relies on the account she provides in her autobiography, but adds a critical historical reading to it.

Chapter Two, "Night and Day: Sylvia Beach and Bricktop as Businesswomen and Hostesses in Paris," examines the very different businesses these two women operated, and the ways in which both could claim membership among a diverse group of women in Parisian history who created communities for cultural exchange. This chapter features a more in-depth look at women's roles in expatriate Paris, the clientele of Bricktop's nightclub and Sylvia Beach's bookstore, and the ways in which their patrons – male and female, black and white, rich and poor, American, European, or from further afield – reflected the expatriate worlds of Paris. Questions of gender also dominate the discussion of Bricktop and Beach's relationships with specific male and female friends.

Chapter Three, "Memories and Myth-making: The Crowded Recollections of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach," discusses revealing differences and similarities in how Bricktop and Beach remembered and represented their lives in 1920s and '30s Paris long after those decades had ended. Autobiographical writing holds an important place in American letters – from Benjamin Franklin to Frederick Douglass to Maya Angelou. On the surface, Bricktop's and Beach's remembrances seem to focus on famous names and anecdotes, but larger themes like respectability, audience expectation, sexuality, agency, and memory simmer underneath. This last topic deserves particular attention, as the selective process of remembering and

³² Questions surrounding the reliability of both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach's published recollections make up much of Chapter Three of this thesis.

recording their experiences determined the degree to which each woman reconciled the public and private aspects of her life. As a black woman and an entertainer by trade, Bricktop had an even greater interest in writing performatively, but Beach's silences prove equally revealing.

While it remains unproven that Sylvia Beach and Bricktop ever met, it is undeniable that they tiptoed around each other for more than fifteen years. In the parallel roles of American expatriate, businesswoman, hostess, friend, helper, and finally, recorder of life experiences, Bricktop and Beach complicate our conceptions of the typical American in Paris. While their obituaries frequently mentioned their famous friends and patrons, these women possessed unique qualities that made them legends in their own right – most notably an ability to manage the dizzying array of talent, fame, and ego around them. As they went about the often less-than-glamorous business of stocking bookshelves or liquor cabinets, adding up accounts, giving advice to young newcomers, and introducing acquaintances, they shaped the expatriate community from behind the scenes. Without Bricktop and Sylvia Beach, Europeans and Americans in Paris between the wars would have truly been a lost generation.

CHAPTER 1: Bricktop and Sylvia Beach: *Américaines* in Paris

*“I also started feeling uncomfortable when some people who were not my real friends started asking how I felt about being back in America. I remember this one man asking. I answered, ‘It feels all right. I’m an American. I haven’t changed.’”*³³
 - Ada “Bricktop” Smith DuCongé

*“I envy these fine Americans, we see out here – so sportmanlike, so businesslike, so keen and energetic, nicely well-to-do and useful. The world is ‘the Great Adventure’ to them. . . All the same someone has to do their thinking for them and I must have some books for those someone’s [sic].”*³⁴
 - Sylvia Beach, 1919

On July 11 of 1919, Sylvia Beach wrote the above in a letter to her sister Cyprian from Belgrade, Serbia, where she and her other sister, Holly, had joined a post-war Red Cross relief unit. In this epistle, she detailed her thoughts on a possible business venture in London, and mused about the presence of Americans overseas. Four months later, Beach would open Shakespeare and Company, a bookstore and lending library specializing in English-language works. However, instead of providing books for those “fine Americans” in London, she ended up in Paris – a setting in which friends would ultimately use “American” adjectives like “businesslike,” “energetic,” and “useful” to describe *her*.

Whereas Beach reflected on her American identity before establishing her famous bookstore abroad, Ada “Bricktop” Smith DuCongé, remembered her time as an American businesswoman in Paris by claiming, “it didn’t change me.” Bricktop lived in the city for just over fifteen years, compared to Beach’s forty-eight, but each woman would look back on her time in interwar Paris as the most significant period in her life, the most crucial in shaping her identity. This chapter examines Bricktop and Beach’s biographies, with a particular focus on the ways in which both grappled with acclimating to life as American women in Paris. For Bricktop, Paris also represented a chance to escape Jim Crow during a

³³ Bricktop and James Haskins, *Bricktop*, 210-211.

³⁴ Beach, *The Letters of Sylvia Beach*, 70.

time of growing racial violence in the United States, and this aspect of her story deserves additional attention. Although Sylvia Beach and Bricktop lived on opposite sides of the city of Paris and spent their nights and days very differently, considering their stories together sheds light on commonalities among the American expatriate community during this period, while also highlighting factors such as race, class, language acquisition, and friendships that helped to distinguish the time these women spent in the City of Light.

* * *

Of the two women, Sylvia Beach was the elder, entering the world as Nancy Woodbridge Beach on March 14, 1887. Born to the Reverend Sylvester Woodbridge Beach and his wife Eleanor Orbison Beach in Baltimore, Maryland, Nancy was the second of three daughters, and as a teenager, she changed her name to reflect the feminine form of her father's name. While Sylvester came from a long line of clergyman, Eleanor was born in British India, where her American parents served as missionaries in Rawalpindi (now a part of Pakistan). The Beach family, including Sylvia and her older sister Mary (later called Holly, in a derivation from her middle name of Hollingsworth), moved from Baltimore to Bridgeton, New Jersey, before Sylvia was a year old. When Sylvia was five years old, the third sister, Eleanor (called Cyprian, once she sought a film career) arrived, rounding out the family.³⁵

The year 1902 marked a crucial moment in the life of the Beach family, as Sylvester answered a call to serve as a pastor of the American Church of Paris.³⁶ For fifteen-year old Sylvia, the move would spark an affinity for Europe, and for Paris in particular, which would

³⁵ All biographical information in this paragraph is derived from Noël Riley Fitch, *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation: A Literary History of Paris in the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983), 19-21.

³⁶ Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare & Company* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), 4.

follow her throughout the rest of her life.³⁷ The Beaches mingled with many fellow Americans in the city, both as part of Sylvester's work with students studying at the Sorbonne, and due to Eleanor's desire to experience the culture and social life of Paris. Sylvia, troubled by severe headaches from a young age, did not find the Swiss school she and Holly attended any more effective than the schooling she had received back home.³⁸ She would often later claim that she had little formal education, and that she learned to read and write at her own pace.³⁹

Even after they moved back to the United States in 1905, each member of the Beach family would spend significant amounts of time in Europe for the rest of their lives. Eleanor Beach presents perhaps the most interesting case. Eleanor crossed the Atlantic many times, for pleasure, and later for business, as she established herself as a dealer in European antiques in California. She took most of these trips without her husband, with whom her relationship became strained after their third daughter's birth.⁴⁰ Sylvia also seemed to have a hard time feeling close to Sylvester. Several of her letters to him contain references to notes unanswered, or ignorance of his whereabouts. At one point, in a letter to Holly, she wrote of Sylvester that he had "disappointed her again" by not making good on a promise to visit.⁴¹

In fact, among all family members, the three sisters probably shared the best rapport with each other. Save for a few years when she and Cyprian experienced a frosty period, Sylvia and her sisters spent many of their early adult years together in Europe, and they wrote warmly to each other throughout their lives. Holly would often serve as Sylvia's

³⁷ Beach, *Letters*, 7.

³⁸ Unless noted otherwise, all biographical information in this paragraph derived from Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 25.

³⁹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 25.

⁴⁰ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 28-29.

⁴¹ Sylvia Beach to Holly Beach Dennis (hereafter SB and HBD), August 8, 1929, Box 7, Folder 15. The Sylvia Beach Papers, Firestone Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Manuscripts Division, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey (hereafter, SBP.)

business adviser and agent from afar, and helped to support her financially during lean times.⁴² So integrated were Holly and Cyprian into Sylvia's world that much of their sister's correspondence includes messages for them from her friends in Paris, and especially from her adopted French family, the Monniers.⁴³

Although Eleanor also encouraged Sylvia's work, and would eventually make a present of her life savings to Sylvia in order to help her set up her bookshop, their relationship was complex.⁴⁴ In the letters they exchanged, Sylvia often expressed affection for her "P.L.M" or "D.L.M." ("Poor Little Mother" and "Dear Little Mother," respectively), but when writing to her sisters, she revealed tensions between the two. Especially during the years that she ran her bookshop, Sylvia complained that Eleanor's visits could prove distracting and overwhelming. While rarely explicitly stated, reading between the lines of some of these letters shows that the sisters seemed to find their mother's emotional and relational dependence on her adult daughters burdensome and odd.⁴⁵

After their return from Paris, Princeton, New Jersey, served as the family's home. As the pastor of the town's First Presbyterian Church, Sylvester counted the families of three American presidents among his congregants – the Woodrow Wilsons, the Grover Clevelands, and the widow of the slain James Garfield. The Beaches enjoyed a particularly close relationship with the Wilson family.⁴⁶ Sylvia would not remain at her Princeton home for long, though; in the years leading up to World War I, the women of the family spent much of their time traveling together or with friends in France, Italy, England, and Spain. While Holly had a good head for business and secretarial work, and Cyprian was a gifted singer and

⁴² HBD to SB, March 27, 1932, Box 7, Folder 15, SBP.

⁴³ SB to HBD, October 21, 1955, Box 10, Folder 5, SBP.

⁴⁴ Beach, *Letters*, 75.

⁴⁵ SB to HBD, February 9, 1920, Box 7, Folder 4, SBP.

⁴⁶ Beach, *Shakespeare & Company*, 7.

actress, Sylvia's interests lay in books and languages. At one point, she considered a career in journalism, but for the most part, she seemed to lack a direction for her talents.⁴⁷

In 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, Sylvia left for Spain, which signaled the beginning of her permanent residence in Europe. She spent a couple of years there, learning Spanish, and nursing a desire to study French poetry.⁴⁸ In 1916, Sylvia joined Cyprian – now a silent film star – in Paris. Holly would follow her sisters to France the next year to work with the American Red Cross.⁴⁹ Before teaming up with Holly to do relief work in Serbia in 1918 and 1919, Sylvia spent a few months in the French countryside southwest of Paris, working as a farmhand to replace Frenchmen who had gone to war.⁵⁰ She also continued her exploration of French literature. This led her, in 1917, to the Paris bookshop of Mademoiselle Adrienne Monnier, who would become her closest friend and advisor.⁵¹

Beach had toyed with the idea of opening a bookshop for several years, but could not decide on a location. Her thoughts had originally centered on London or Greenwich Village, but a disappointing scouting trip to England and a lack of information about the bookselling climate in New York City put her plans on hold.⁵² Once she had established herself in Paris after the war, Monnier advised her to stay there since the city had no English bookstore. In addition, she pointed out that the cost of living and doing business would be cheaper in Paris than in London.⁵³

⁴⁷ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 29-41.

⁴⁸ Beach, *Letters*, 28.

⁴⁹ Beach, *Letters*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ SB to Eleanor Beach (hereafter, EB), August 27, 1919, Box 5, Folder 1, SBP.

⁵² Beach, *Letters*, 70-71.

⁵³ Beach, *Letters*, 75-76.

In fact, it was also Monnier who found a suitable location for the shop at 8 rue Dupuytren, a former laundry in the sixth arrondissement of Paris's Left Bank.⁵⁴ This area housed Monnier's own shop, La Maison des Amis des Livres (The House of the Friends of Books), at 7 rue de l'Odéon. It was not far from the Latin Quarter neighborhood in which Beach's family had lived during her father's pastorate at the American Church. Positioned in between the student-filled Latin Quarter, the fashionable Boulevard St. Germain, and the legendary bohemian neighborhood of Montparnasse, the bookshops attracted a diverse clientele.

In addition to Monnier's experience as a bookseller, Beach benefitted greatly from her friend's connections to the French literary world. Monnier's circle included established novelists and poets such as André Gide, Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, and Jules Romains, as well as younger, more experimental writers, like André Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Louis Aragon.⁵⁵ These authors, whom Beach had enjoyed reading from afar for several years, would now become some of her first patrons and most faithful friends, especially after Shakespeare and Company relocated in July 1921 to its permanent location at 12 rue de l'Odéon, across the street from La Maison des Amis des Livres.⁵⁶

In time, Beach also welcomed many of the young American writers who came to the city to absorb the fertile artistic atmosphere that dominated interwar Paris. The names of several of these writers – Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thornton Wilder, and later Richard Wright, to name just a few – would one day attain celebrated status in modern American letters, but Beach became a friend and helper to them at the very beginnings of

⁵⁴ SB to HBD, December 7, 1919, Box 7, Folder 3, SBP.

⁵⁵ Adrienne Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, trans. by Robert McDougall (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 69-98.

⁵⁶ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 91.

their careers.⁵⁷ Many of these young Americans – mostly men – also made pilgrimages to experimental American author Gertrude Stein’s home at 27 rue de Fleurus in Montparnasse to receive guidance from the godmother of literary modernism and to view paintings by friends of hers, such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.⁵⁸ Beach’s own relationship with Stein began cordially enough, with Gertrude and her partner Alice B. Toklas patronizing her shop and hosting Beach and Monnier for dinner and conversation. However, the relationship grew tense after a few years. The cause of this strain came from an outside source, namely Beach’s support for the Irish poet and novelist James Joyce, whom Stein considered an overrated competitor.⁵⁹ Besides his effect on her relationship with Stein, Joyce would leave his mark on Beach’s life in several other areas as well, in both positive and negative ways.

Authors from the British Isles thus formed the third main segment of Beach’s friends and bookstore clients. Joyce and T.S. Eliot (an American by birth) stand as probably the two most famous in this category, but Beach also developed close friendships with several lesser-known British writers, such as the novelist Annie Winifred Ellerman, known as Bryher, who supported Beach financially for many years. When asked to name her favorite authors, British and Irish writers often topped Beach’s list: William Blake – whose artwork helped to decorate her shop; James Joyce – whose physical presence and demands dominated the place for most of the Twenties while Beach undertook the publication of his notorious masterpiece *Ulysses*; and William Shakespeare – whose name the shop bore.⁶⁰

Beach’s and Monnier’s circle also included a diverse array of artists, photographers, composers, and musicians from many nations. American composer George Antheil and his

⁵⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), 20. Of Beach, he famously wrote, “No one that I ever knew was nicer to me.”

⁵⁸ Beach, *Letters*, 82.

⁵⁹ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 32.

⁶⁰ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 17, 19.

wife lived above Beach's shop beginning in 1923, and she developed a sisterly relationship with them, always on the lookout for funds to support him as he labored over avant-garde works such as 1926's *Ballet Mécanique*.⁶¹ French composer Erik Satie paid visits to Shakespeare and Company and played some of his music at La Maison des Amis des Livres.⁶² In 1925, Beach befriended African American singer Paul Robeson and hosted a reception in his honor, as part of an attempt to introduce her French friends to Robeson's talents and to traditional black spirituals.⁶³ Beach and Monnier also enjoyed friendships with many photographers, and Man Ray and Berenice Abbott's portraits of Shakespeare and Company's most illustrious patrons joined Blake's drawings in adorning the shop's walls.⁶⁴ Monnier's brother-in-law Paul-Emile Bécot was a noted French artist, and both women counted the painter Marie Laurencin among their acquaintances.⁶⁵

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Beach's bookshop thus served as a key meeting place and site of cultural exchange for American and European writers and artists, but it was her offer to publish *Ulysses* that guaranteed her worldwide recognition.⁶⁶ Beach spent much of the Twenties dividing her attention between running her shop and attending to Joyce's business, financial, and personal needs. These preoccupations took a toll on her physical health and her business's financial stability, and when the Depression hit, she entered the Thirties with uncertainty.⁶⁷ By 1935, the situation had become desperate. Beach's friends collected personal funds to support her and sponsored a series of readings held at

⁶¹ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 122-124.

⁶² Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 39.

⁶³ SB to EB, October 30, 1925 and November 10, 1925, Box 5, Folder 7, SBP.

⁶⁴ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 111-112.

⁶⁵ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 50.

⁶⁶ Beach, *Letters*, 87. This aspect of Beach's life will be covered more extensively in Chapters 2 and 3.

⁶⁷ Beach, *Letters*, 158.

Shakespeare and Company.⁶⁸ A trip back to the United States in 1936, her first since she had left for Spain in 1914, further decimated Beach's financial situation, as it included the expense of an unexpected hysterectomy.⁶⁹

Beach held on to the shop for a few more years, but the German occupation of Paris in 1940 sealed Shakespeare and Company's fate. Apart from brief wartime internment by the Nazis at a camp in Vittel, France, and time spent in the French countryside, Beach lived out the rest of her days in the apartment above her old shop on the rue de l'Odéon in Paris.⁷⁰ She filled these years with visits to friends, occasional work on her memoir, interviews and talks about her former bookshop, and continued involvement in the literary life of Paris.⁷¹ In 1955, Monnier, who had developed a disorder of the inner ear called Ménière's Disease, committed suicide. After this, Beach sought solace in finishing her memoir *Shakespeare and Company*.⁷² She died of a heart attack in October of 1962.⁷³

A white American woman from a well-connected family lived a certain kind of expatriate life in interwar Paris. We should expect an altogether different narrative from an African American woman who hailed from rural West Virginia. Yet, in fact, their biographies contain some subtle parallels. For example, like Sylvia Beach, Bricktop rejected her original first name. While some of her colleagues adopted grandiose names in the development of a stage persona, the memorable moniker "Bricktop" was a step down from her birth name. In her autobiography, she claims that her entire hometown had wanted a say in naming her, and thus she ended up as Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith.

⁶⁸ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 209-212.

⁶⁹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 365. Beach, *Letters*, 173-175. "They gave me a scraping," she wrote Monnier, with her typical dry wit.

⁷⁰ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 216-217.

⁷¹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, chapter 20.

⁷² SB to HBD, October 11, 1955, Box 10, Folder 5, SBP.

⁷³ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 414; author unknown, Obituary for Sylvia Beach, "Sylvia Beach, 75, First to Publish Joyce's 'Ulysses,' Dies in Paris," *New York Times*, October 10, 1962.

She would go by Ada for most of her youth, then her stage name Bricktop with all but family. Meanwhile, most of her patrons referred to her personally as either “Brick” or “Bricky.”⁷⁴ Like Beach, Bricktop would share a close relationship with her siblings, and also lacked interest in school as a child. Finally, just as they would for Sylvia Beach, the Twenties and early Thirties represented Bricktop’s golden years as a businesswoman.

Bricktop’s stock answer when asked to relate the details of her birth usually included some variation of the following: “And so on the fourteenth day of August 1894, in the little town of Alderson, West-by-God-Virginia, the doctor said, ‘Another little split-tail,’ and on that day Bricktop was born.”⁷⁵ Aside from the general similarities listed above, young Ada Smith’s upbringing could not have been more different than that of little Nancy Beach. Most obviously, perhaps, she came from a mixed race background. In her memoirs, she claims that both of her parents probably came from unions between slaves and their masters.⁷⁶ This heritage resulted in Bricktop’s distinctive features as a woman of color: lighter, freckled skin and auburn hair.

Bricktop’s father, Thomas, died when she was four years old, but her autobiography contains proud references to him as a well-respected man in town.⁷⁷ After his death Bricktop’s mother, Harriet E. Thompson Smith, known as Hattie, moved the family of five to Chicago, where she had family and planned to open a boardinghouse.⁷⁸ In later remembrances, and especially in her negotiations with co-writers over the details of her autobiography, Bricktop’s close relationship with her mother often appears as a significant

⁷⁴ All biographical material in this paragraph derived from Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 4.

⁷⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

aspect of her life.⁷⁹ She frequently credits Hattie Smith with teaching her self-respect, hard work, and how to “be a lady.” This last injunction dovetails with prevailing ideas in the black community about “respectability.” In *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham relates how black mothers in this era shouldered responsibility as “the caretaker of the home, ergo caretaker of the race,” gatekeepers of a black female morality that always bore the scrutiny of whites.⁸⁰ From good manners to discreet sexual behavior, Smith’s ideas of ladylike behavior mainly revolved around the idea of not calling negative attention to oneself, thus hopefully protecting her daughter from harmful white attitudes and actions. Scattered throughout the address books and day planners that functioned almost like diaries for the active businesswoman, Bricktop also copied Smith’s more general words of wisdom, like “Think big and you’ll do big,” next to a week’s accounts or grocery lists.⁸¹

The last of four children born to Thomas and Hattie Smith, Bricktop also cherished her relationship with her sister Blonzetta (derived from “Blond Etta”), a successful businesswoman herself, apparently, due to shrewd dealings in real estate.⁸² The two grew even closer after their other two siblings died as young adults. Much like the relationship between Holly and Sylvia Beach, Bricktop and her older sister would remain close throughout their lives, with Blonzetta lending her sister money to help in times of need, just

⁷⁹ Bricktop to Co-writers, Box 2, Folders 17-19, The Ada “Bricktop” Smith Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, New York, New York (hereafter, SC).

⁸⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1993), 202.

⁸¹ Address book, Box 4, Folder 14, Bricktop Papers, SC.

⁸² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 4, 137.

as Holly helped to keep Sylvia financially afloat.⁸³ In a clear contrast from Beach, however, Bricktop would take responsibility to support her aging mother from abroad. Her accounts contain several entries detailing money she dutifully sent to Smith over the years after her boardinghouse business slowed down.⁸⁴

Bricktop's experiences of growing up as a young black woman in a diverse neighborhood in Chicago offered her a much different life than she might have known had she stayed in West Virginia, or if her family had lived further south.⁸⁵ For one thing, she gained an exposure to different cultures that would come in handy as a hostess for an international clientele. Calling hers a "typical" working-class neighborhood on the city's South Side, she wrote that it included Jewish, Irish, Italian, and black families, living in segregated buildings, but "behav[ing] like neighbors" once outside; she even recalled lighting the Sabbath lamps for the Jewish families in her neighborhood.⁸⁶ In addition to observing her mother's ability to make guests feel welcome and comfortable in the family boardinghouse, young Ada spent many of her free hours during childhood peering into the saloons in her neighborhood, and later recalled, "Saloons were part of our everyday life."⁸⁷ While her mother would probably not have approved of her curiosity about what happened inside those saloons, Bricktop's informal education around the neighborhood would fit her perfectly for her future career.

⁸³ Bricktop to Blonzetta Smith Lowary (hereafter, BSL), October 1, 1939, Box 1, Folder 3, The Bricktop (Ada Beatrice Smith) Papers, 1894-1984, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter, EU).

⁸⁴ Bricktop's Financial Records, Box 3, Folders 1-23, Bricktop Papers, EU.

⁸⁵ According to the census of 1900, Chicago's total population numbered 1,698,575 (<https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab13.txt>), with 30,050 African Americans making up Bricktop's community of South Side in the city (<http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/53black/53factsr.htm>).

⁸⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 14.

⁸⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 18

From an early age, Bricktop knew that she wanted to be a performer and hostess, and the excitement she imagined inside the saloon mesmerized her. As she wrote, “A lot of people set out in life with a certain goal in mind, some place in the world they aim for. I don’t think I set out to want anything but to get into the back rooms of those saloons.”⁸⁸ After a while, her ambitions came to center more on the theatre, and when she was sixteen, a chance to join a traveling black theatrical group as a chorus member arrived. Hattie Smith reluctantly allowed her daughter to take advantage of the opportunity, even though it would mean the end of her formal schooling. Looking back, Bricktop often spoke with regret about her ignorance of world affairs and noted ruefully, “It is one of the biggest regrets of my life that I didn’t listen to Mama and finish my education.”⁸⁹ Perhaps time in the intellectual capital of Paris contributed to this sentiment, or perhaps Bricktop simply expressed this feeling in accordance with what she thought contemporary readers expected of her. Nevertheless, with schooling until the age of sixteen, she certainly acquired more than most African American and many white Southerners.

The companies Bricktop joined for the next few years specialized in the kinds of vaudeville and blackface minstrel routines that filled American theatres in the early twentieth century. While on the road, Bricktop discovered more of a connection with Southern black culture than she had previously known, despite growing up in West Virginia and among Southern black migrants on Chicago’s South Side. She claimed, “There weren’t all that many Negroes in Chicago when I was growing up, so it wasn’t until I went to places like Louisville and Cincinnati that I met up with Southerners and ate things like spare ribs and biscuits, sweet potatoes and cornbread, chitlins and fried chicken. I loved it, couldn’t get

⁸⁸ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 18

⁸⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 23.

enough of it.”⁹⁰ Regardless of the implicit suggestion that Hattie Smith might have considered Southern black cuisine beneath her, Bricktop appeared to relish it. Although Bricktop’s family did live among other African Americans from the South while in Chicago, she curiously wrote that she only learned about “soul food” in her later years, since, she added, “Soul food was Southern food. Mama never made it, and I don’t know whether she knew about it or not.” She also understood how it linked the American black community together outside of the South. She would later pride herself on her ability to cook soul food for fellow African Americans in Europe who were hungry for a taste of home, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and a young Maya Angelou, who recalled time at Bricktop’s kitchen table in Rome fondly in her own autobiography.⁹¹

While she developed as a performer on the road during these years, Ada Smith acquired her unique stage name. As a member of the Oma Crosby Trio, she visited a saloon run by a man named Barron Wilkins. Catching sight of her red hair, Wilkins said, “I think I’ll call you Bricktop,” and the nickname stuck.⁹² Yet this would not be the only time she would experiment with her name. In the photo insert in her autobiography, Bricktop includes a portrait of herself in Los Angeles in 1917. On the photograph, she had written, “To my Mama. From her Baby Adah.” Bricktop told her readers, “I signed myself Adah, because it sounded more theatrical. Mama wrote back, ‘Your name is A-D-A.’”⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁹¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 282. Maya Angelou, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976) 253.

⁹² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 34. In a humorous aside, Bricktop further related, “At the time, there was only one well-known Bricktop in the country. She was a white woman with red-gold hair who was a prostitute in Chicago... Everybody started calling me Bricktop after that, but not Mama. Probably because of that prostitute.” Given Smith’s concern with her daughter’s reputation, her reaction is hardly surprising.

⁹³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 62. Even after this reprimand, Bricktop would occasionally spell her name “Adah,” but she avoided adding the extra “H” in her correspondence with her mother.

Around 1911, Bricktop finally found the chance to transition from vaudeville to her long-held goal of performing in the more intimate setting of a club. She landed her first gig in the back room at Roy Jones's club in Chicago.⁹⁴ For the next thirteen years, she would sing in various saloons and theatres in her home city and across the country, all the while mixing with pimps, prostitutes, gangsters, soon-to-be-famous performers, and even the boxer Jack Johnson, the early twentieth century's most famous athlete.⁹⁵ When she met Johnson, he had plans to open his own club in Chicago, the Cabaret de Champion, or Café Champ. Once he did, he hired Bricktop. Working at this high-class, racially-integrated saloon – set up in the style of the cabarets of Europe that Johnson had visited – would prove an important experience, since Bricktop would later model her own clubs after Johnson's. After Johnson's volatile private life began to interfere with business, the club closed, leaving Bricktop without a job.⁹⁶

She did not rest long, however. During World War I, Bricktop went back on the road again as part of the Panama Trio with Florence Mills and Cora Green. She also spent time on the West Coast in California and in Vancouver.⁹⁷ In 1920, her older sister Ethel was shot in a domestic dispute, and Bricktop decided to head back east.⁹⁸ This eventually led her to Harlem, and a job working for Barron Wilkins, the man who had first given her her name as a young vaudevillian. During this time, she met and helped a struggling musician who was then part of a group called Elmer Snowden's Washingtonians: Duke Ellington. The Washingtonians had had a hard time finding a steady gig, so Bricktop asked Wilkins to hire

⁹⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 39.

⁹⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 42-43.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55, 61, 71.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73. In 1912, Bricktop's older brother Robert had died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-two while she was on the road (p. 49).

them as the club band. In her memoirs, she quotes a passage from Ellington's autobiography, in which he says that she reminded him to support his fellow performers once he made it big.⁹⁹

The black entertainment world that Bricktop had entered was relatively small, and she worked hard to establish her reputation in it. In 1924, while entertaining at Connie's Inn in Harlem, she learned of a new opportunity. As she later bragged, "I was wanted in Paris."¹⁰⁰ Eugene Bullard, a former boxer, soldier in the French Foreign Legion, and decorated fighter-pilot-turned-nightclub-manager wanted a female African American singer to headline his club. He needed someone distinctive to compete with Florence Embry Jones, the only other black female entertainer in Paris at the time.¹⁰¹ Jones's husband, Palmer, had actually made the suggestion to Bullard that a "little girl over there named Bricktop," with "the damnedest personality" might fit the bill. Bricktop greeted this news with excitement and a small degree of uncertainty. "I packed and made preparations without any idea of what was in store for me," she remembered. "It was a spur-of-the moment thing, a new adventure just for the sake of adventure."¹⁰² In 1924, Harlem was still "jumpin'," in Bricktop's words, and Josephine Baker had not yet arrived in Paris. Thus, Bricktop set out very much into the unknown, although she would look back and consider herself lucky to have made the transition when she did, since the golden age of Harlem could not last forever and would, in fact, soon come to a close.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 81.

¹⁰¹ Craig Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard: Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 70; Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 91-92.

¹⁰² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 82.

¹⁰³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 82.

Bricktop's new workplace in Paris, Le Grand Duc, sat at 52 rue Pigalle, at the foot of the hill of Montmartre. While Montmartre had long been the haunt of avant-garde artists, writers, musicians, absinthe drinkers, and can-can dancers, Pigalle had a reputation as the red-light district of Paris.¹⁰⁴ If she would later enforce strict guidelines about the type of behavior allowed in her own club, the location of Le Grand Duc did not bother Bricktop, as she had been accustomed to socializing with gangsters and "loose women" on the vaudeville circuit and in American saloons all her life. The real disappointment Bricktop felt upon seeing the Grand Duc for the first time had to do with its size and appearance. She noted, "It didn't look very impressive, but I had played enough saloons and cabarets to know better than to judge a place from the outside." The inside would not improve her opinion, but as she confessed, "I smiled my prettiest. [And said] 'My this is a nice little bar. Now where's the cabaret?'" When Bullard informed her that she had arrived there, she began to cry. "'Do you mean to say this is the whole place?'" she managed to respond. "'Have I come to Paris to entertain in a bar about the size of a booth at Connie's Inn?'"¹⁰⁵

Bricktop's account of her arrival in Paris is not the only one on record. One of the first to welcome her at Le Grand Duc was an aspiring young writer who worked nights as a dishwasher in the club's kitchen, the American poet Langston Hughes. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes recalls, "Finally, they sent to New York posthaste for a new girl to feature – any new girl. New York sent Bricktop Ada Smith of Connie's Inn." Hughes describes this new addition as a "plain little mulatto girl...She was short and freckled and slightly lighter than mustard. She was plainly dressed. She had reddish hair and was not very pretty. But she went around and met everybody in the place and shook hands with each

¹⁰⁴ Arlen J. Hansen, *Expatriate Paris: A Cultural and Literary Guide to Paris of the 1920s* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 268-269.

¹⁰⁵ All quotations in this paragraph from Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 85.

one, and smiled. And you liked her right away.”¹⁰⁶ Bricktop would later express her gratitude to Hughes for comforting her in those first moments after her disappointing arrival. “I might have gone on and said something I would have regretted later if a handsome young Negro busboy hadn’t come out of the kitchen just then,” she remembered. Hughes tried to cheer the young singer up, and she later expressed her surprise when, many years later, the American photographer and author Carl Van Vechten revealed the identity of her first friend in Paris.¹⁰⁷

It would take a while for Bricktop to acclimate to the differences between French and American club culture. Montmartre had not yet become the hotspot of black American music and entertainment in Europe. Although her first few months saw many an empty house, Langston Hughes wrote that this time was far from wasted as Bricktop made friends with the other black musicians and looked for new ways to bring in business:

These Negro entertainers liked Bricktop and they rallied around her. Late, any morning, the Grand Duc was almost like a Harlem night club, except for the French boss, and Luigi and Romeo... It was fun working in the Grand Duc that spring, with practically nothing to do all night except sit around and listen to the musicians and Bricktop talking about when they first started out in the show business... Then about four in the morning, more and more dusky tale-tellers and singers and dancers would come in, and drinks would be ordered (at professional rates) and from then on until seven or eight, the gaiety of professional merrymakers no longer being professionally merry – but just themselves – would obtain.¹⁰⁸

Hughes goes on to describe one of the club’s special attractions for black Americans far from home, particularly when new arrivals introduced them to popular dance trends, like the Charleston. “For a while, the Grand Duc was a colored Charleston school,” Hughes writes. Because the club had a reputation for helping its patrons stay

¹⁰⁶ Langston Hughes, *Autobiography: The Big Sea*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 13*, ed. by Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 145.

¹⁰⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 85-86.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 146-147.

current with American cultural developments, it began to attract new clientele. This group, Hughes notes, “liked Bricktop, too, and so customers finally began to come earlier, just to hear her sing—as early as one or two o’clock [in the morning].” Slowly, Bricktop was building her own reputation, which would follow her from Le Grand Duc to her own club.

When the spring season of 1925 began, Bricktop and her friends at Le Grand Duc got a lucky break. Fannie Ward, a white American actress, adopted the club as her favorite and brought her high society friends. When that crowd faded with the end of the season, Bricktop credited another American patron with keeping her in business – F. Scott Fitzgerald. Just as Ward had done, and as Cole Porter would do after him, Fitzgerald invited friends to join him, and the club soon filled with regulars. In these networks forged by white artists, the lives of Sylvia Beach and Bricktop came the closest to intersecting. Many of Fitzgerald’s fellow patrons also visited Shakespeare and Company, La Maison des Amis des Livres, and Gertrude Stein’s Saturday night salons; these included Ernest Hemingway, Janet Flanner, Robert McAlmon, Man Ray, T.S. Eliot, and Pablo Picasso, to name a few.¹⁰⁹

In 1926, right around the time that Fitzgerald and the Monparnassians gave way to Cole Porter and the showier St. Germain set, Bricktop left Le Grand Duc and, for the first time, opened up a successful club of her own, The Music Box. While she did secure a powerful new acquaintance in the Prince of Wales at this time, the lack of a long-term business license forced her to close The Music Box and return to Le Grand Duc. She soon took over managing the place herself, much to Eugene Bullard’s displeasure, before opening her most famous establishment, Bricktop’s, down the street.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ All information in this paragraph derived from Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 90-99.

¹¹⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 118.

Over the next half-decade, Bricktop's became the favorite club of the rich and famous from across Europe and the United States. While Bricktop's skills as a hostess constituted the club's unique selling point, she constantly credited Cole Porter for playing a strategic role in packing the house. "Everyone who was there knew Cole Porter," she averred, "In a way, Bricktop's was Cole Porter's Club."¹¹¹ In addition to her role as the owner and hostess of the club, Bricktop also provided entertainment at private parties. Notable clients included Cole and Linda Porter, the Prince of Wales and Wallis Simpson, socialite Elsa Maxwell, and the actress and interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe, also known as Lady Mendl. At these parties, Bricktop often gave her guests lessons in dancing the Charleston, just as she had done for expatriated African Americans in her early days at Le Grand Duc.¹¹²

In 1927, Bricktop met Peter DuCongé, a black Creole native of New Orleans, who worked as a musician and arranger in Louis Armstrong's touring band. Married at the very end of 1929, they later separated over Peter's infidelity, but remained friends until his death.¹¹³ During their happier times as husband and wife, the two enjoyed the fruits of Bricktop's success, sponsoring an extended trip to Paris for her mother and buying a country home outside the city.¹¹⁴ These years also saw the opening of an even larger and grander Bricktop's further down the rue Pigalle.¹¹⁵ This new location required more from Bricktop, and she soon found herself in need of a business partner. Shortly after the new club's debut

¹¹¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 122.

¹¹² Information on parties and teaching the Charleston derived from Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 102-106; also found in day planners in Box 1, Folder 1, Bricktop Papers, SC.

¹¹³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 132, 145, 182-183. Bricktop's archives contain proof of her lasting relationship with the DuCongé family. She remained in contact with Peter's brothers and sisters, with whom she corresponded and exchanged holiday greetings even after his death in 1967 (see Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 5, Bricktop Papers, EU).

¹¹⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 137, 145.

¹¹⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 158.

in 1931, she tapped Mabel Mercer, a black soprano from England, to help entertain and manage the establishment.¹¹⁶

As in Sylvia Beach's case, things began to turn sour for Bricktop in the mid-1930s as the Depression hit even the deep pockets of her wealthiest clients. But even after her club folded in 1936, she tried to hold on to her life in France, following the Prince of Wales and other rich clients to resort clubs in the off-season to make ends meet, and entertaining in other Montmartre bars.¹¹⁷ As Hitler began to march across Europe in the late Thirties, Bricktop knew she had to leave.

After her return to the United States, Bricktop spent the 1940s in North America, picking up gigs in Chicago and New York, then opening a new Bricktop's in Mexico City for a few years. While in New York, she converted to Catholicism, and diverted much of her money and attention to religion and charity, even as she continued to operate saloons and work in show business for the rest of her life.¹¹⁸ In 1950, Bricktop returned to Paris, but her attempts to re-capture the magic of the old days met with failure. So did experiments in Rome, Madrid, and Portugal.¹¹⁹ In 1952, she decided to give Rome another chance, and this time, as with Paris in the Jazz Age, she found herself in the right place at the right time for entertaining the rich and famous. While it took a few years for the Rome incarnation of Bricktop's to become a hit, from the mid-1950s through 1964, her club in Italy hosted a diverse clientele of American diplomats, nobility from Europe and Asia, foreign correspondents, and movie stars.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 198-199.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

In 1965, Bricktop returned to the United States for good, where she nursed an ill Blonzetta, and lived off of her fame well into the 1980s. Like Sylvia Beach, she spent her last years staying in touch with friends, giving interviews, appearing at events, and working on her autobiography, which she published in 1983.¹²¹ She outlived many of her celebrated friends and died in her sleep in her Harlem apartment at the age of 89.¹²²

* * *

Both Sylvia Beach and Bricktop enjoyed unique successes as American businesswomen during a particular cultural moment in Paris. In letters and later remembrances, one gets a sense of how life away from the United States affected them in the moment and for years afterward. Probing some of these sources offers a view of how Paris left its mark on their lives, even as their presence helped to define life in Paris for the American community there. Significantly, the experience of expatriation provided each woman with opportunities to reflect on multiple facets of her identity, such as nationality and gender. Moreover, in the languages they spoke, the areas of the city in which they lived, and their relationships with their clients, each woman had to negotiate prevailing American attitudes about race and class.

To varying degrees, both Beach and Bricktop embraced the French language, interacted with French people, and adopted French cultural habits, and the choices of these two women help to illustrate the diverse approaches to expatriation that characterized much of the American population in Paris during the interwar years. Clearly, some embrace of the language and culture provided a crucial component for achieving success in business. Yet of the two women, Beach always considered herself more “French” than did Bricktop.

¹²¹ Ibid., 282.

¹²² Krebs, Obituary for Ada “Bricktop” Smith DuCongé,
<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/01/obituaries/bricktop-cabaret-queen-in-paris-and-rome-dead.html>

Additional factors informed this self-identification, but none mattered more than those of the racial and class differences that shaped each woman's sense of national identity.

As a white woman with experience abroad, it was likely easier for Sylvia Beach to adopt Paris and the French language as her own. Friends often commented on Beach's unique brand of French – at once fluent and distinctly American. She felt comfortable enough in the language to speak it exclusively with her closest friend, Adrienne Monnier, during their many years of companionship.¹²³ Beach had had exposure to the language during the years she lived in France with her family, and she improved her French through constant immersion since Monnier did not speak English well. As with many who learn a second language, Beach's constant use of French even affected her English.¹²⁴ As an example, in 1941, she wrote to her sister Holly that during the August vacation all of the shops were “ferméing,” a combination of the French verb “fermer,” which means to close, and the English suffix “-ing.”¹²⁵

Bricktop, on the other hand, did not make a great effort to speak much French during her time in the country. In fact, she would later speak proudly of her “fractured French” as another element of her personal style. In typical fashion, she embraced some of French culture, but shrewdly realized that much of her appeal lay in preserving her distinction as an African American entertainer and club owner abroad.¹²⁶ The language did leave its mark on her, though, as she consistently used the French words for some months of the year like

¹²³ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 100-101. See Beach and Monnier's correspondence in SBP.

¹²⁴ French was not the only language that found its way into Beach's native tongue. When in Serbia, she began to add “-ski” or “-sky” to many words as a joke. She wrote to her father in 1919 that she and Holly had attempted to learn some Serbian, especially the “more important words such as—please—how many—cream puffs etc.” (Beach, *Letters*, 46).

¹²⁵ SB to HBD, August 14, 1941, Box 7, Folder 18, SBP.

¹²⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 121.

“mai” and “juin” in letters and business papers for the rest of her life.¹²⁷ This makes sense as Paris became the site of her first business and was where she began patterns of keeping accounts. Even if only a few French words remained with her throughout her life, Bricktop’s model for running her clubs would always retain some of its French flavor.

Facility as a French-speaker naturally affected relationships with the French, but it was not the only factor that determined how much each woman interacted with the native community. Geography, race, and class also played a part. These factors also help explain how and why Beach managed to gain a deeper entry into French society than Bricktop.

The literal divide between the Left and Right Banks of Paris’s Seine River found expression in both women’s lives. As mentioned above, Beach’s Left Bank apartment and Shakespeare and Company occupied the same space on the Rue de l’Odéon in the area between St. Germain and Montparnasse, while Bricktop worked and lived in various places in Montmartre on the Right Bank.¹²⁸ These physical spaces represented the very different ways in which Americans experienced expatriation. Moreover, as Brooke Blower claims, many visitors and tourists actually sought to create Parisian versions of communities found in the United States, such as Harlem or Greenwich Village.¹²⁹ In so doing, they reproduced American boundaries of race and class in the geography of Paris, while also leaving some room for cultural exchange.

The Right Bank of the city hosted wealthier—and nearly exclusively white—Americans who had come to Paris for business, or who arrived as tourists. The most popular destinations for these Americans, such as the Louvre, the Palais Royal, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Opéra Garnier, lay on the Right Bank. Right Bank tourists also enjoyed visiting the

¹²⁷ See, for example, rent note from 1958, Box 3, Folder 13, Bricktop Papers, EU.

¹²⁸ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 90.

¹²⁹ Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 44-45.

Champs-Élysées and other shopping meccas. As more and more Americans came to take advantage of the favorable exchange rate, restaurants, banks, and hotels appeared to accommodate them, creating certain Americanized areas.¹³⁰ Yet, as at home, these Americans also found Paris's entertainment offerings enticing, and frequented the city's cabarets and music halls. After Prohibition went into effect in the United States in 1920, Paris's bars counted even more Americans among their patrons and owners. Black musicians and entertainers like Bricktop soon established a kind of "Harlem in Montmartre," to recall the title of William A. Shack's study.

If parts of the Right Bank began to look like certain posh areas of New York City, where Bricktop could not have lived, the Left Bank, where many of Sylvia Beach's artistic friends and clients resided resembled its more bohemian neighborhoods. Here, young American students filled the Sorbonne's lecture halls and its cafés. A more permissive attitude toward experimentation and a wealth of opportunities for exchange drew artists, writers, and musicians from around the world. Living and working on the Left Bank also represented a distancing from the more conservative American community that congregated on the Right Bank, and this figurative and literal separation allowed for increased creative and moral freedom.¹³¹

There was some amount of overlap between Bricktop's and Sylvia Beach's patrons, but for the most part, Bricktop's Right Bank club served mostly wealthy white Right Bank clients, while Beach's Left Bank establishment catered mostly to those whose nonconformist interests naturally led them to that part of the city. Due to the latter's language skills and connection with Monnier and her friends, she counted many French men and women among

¹³⁰ Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 18-19.

¹³¹ Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 30-31.

her closest associates and best customers. Bricktop, on the other hand, mainly socialized with black and white American or British expats. Due to the nature of her business, her life ran on a very different schedule from most – up all night working, then sleeping during much of the day during the social season.¹³² This would have made it difficult for her to befriend anyone outside of club life.

Race also played a part in determining Sylvia Beach and Bricktop's different sets of friends. Here again, the spaces they inhabited often reinforced racial lines, but there were some exceptions. Beach apparently rejected her native country's racial prejudice, but like Bricktop, her work dominated her waking hours and the degree to which she could engage in friendships. She had very little time for socializing outside of the bookstore, and her clients tended to be white. However, she did welcome some black visitors to the store – mostly students – and tried to make sure that she stocked material that would interest them, such as *The Crisis*. She even claimed, “The French Negro students in Paris rely on my lending library to keep them in touch, as much as possible, with American Negro literature.”¹³³ Black students from all over the world had begun meeting in Paris as part of the Pan-African and Négritude movements, making the availability of black American literature at Shakespeare and Company an important draw.

As mentioned earlier, Beach befriended black American singer Paul Robeson and his wife, Eslanda. In the 1940s, she also became particularly close to African American author Richard Wright and his family, who lived in Paris for a few years after World War II. She would later write to Holly that Wright was the “most unselfish and thoughtful” of all of the many writers she knew. “In fact,” she continued, “none of the others – the so-called white

¹³² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 138.

¹³³ Beach, *Letters*, 178.

ones – were interested in anyone but themselves. Fellas like Hemingway appear uncooth [*sic*] beside Dick Wright.”¹³⁴ Here, it seems Beach really had assimilated French attitudes that placed less emphasis on racial identity than on character and intelligence. Indeed, her correspondence shows that when she faced some legal problems related to her work with Joyce, Wright offered to contact his lawyer for advice.¹³⁵ Beach’s papers even contain artwork from Wright’s young daughter Julia.¹³⁶ Ironically, perhaps, Beach had more opportunities to interact with black people who ran in the same “high culture” circles as she did, whereas Bricktop’s closest black friends tended to be fellow entertainers.

When it comes to Bricktop’s relationships with whites, class differences also complicate matters. The exchange rate in the Twenties did favor Americans, but not everyone could afford to pack up life in the United States for an extended period of time and re-establish themselves in a new place. Bricktop herself once said, “If you said you were going to Europe, everybody knew you had money – unless you were one of those eccentric writers.”¹³⁷ As the proprietress of a celebrated nightclub, Bricktop’s business depended on these high society clients who could travel – although “eccentric writers” like Beach’s friend Hemingway also visited in the early days. After Bricktop complained to him about being asked to entertain for free at parties, Cole Porter reassured her that she was right in feeling miffed since, “Brick is for the *rich* rich.”¹³⁸ Bricktop did become particularly close to some of her wealthy clients, such as Cole and Linda Porter, Lady Mendl, and the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli. Yet she often confirms in her autobiography that she usually did

¹³⁴ SB to HBD, December 04, 1947, Box 8, Folder 17, SBP.

¹³⁵ SB to HBD, July 13, 1958, Box 35, Folder 20, SBP.

¹³⁶ Julia Wright to SB, undated, Box 38, Folder 10, SBP.

¹³⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 83.

¹³⁸ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 191.

not mix work and play, and thus did not seek out friendships with her clients, as a general rule:

I never got confused about who I was. I always knew my place. People today think that's a terrible thing to say. I get criticized for it. I don't mean I thought I was any less than anyone else, or that anyone was better than me. The rich and famous, royalty, they're just people – they go to the bathroom just like you and me. But that doesn't mean there aren't certain rules to go by in life. I was a saloonkeeper, a hostess. My job was to make my clients feel at home. That meant being their friend in Bricktop's, but I usually didn't see them outside the club – and didn't want to.¹³⁹

Here Bricktop vaguely alludes to both class and race-consciousness, speaking more explicitly of the former, but likely subtly hinting at the latter. She portrays herself as viewing everyone, especially the wealthy, as equal human beings, yet also abiding by another unspoken “rule” that prohibited black and white Americans from socializing as equals. Even if she did not feel herself inferior, racially or socially, Bricktop was nevertheless engaged in the service industry. The friendliest of her rich white patrons still expected to be treated a certain way and her job lay in pleasing them. That did not necessarily mean doing so always pleased her, though. In the end, Bricktop cites her own professionalism as the reason close personal friendships with many of these rich whites would have been unappealing outside the club.

Beach's business catered to a wider population than Bricktop's, class-wise, and although she did have some very wealthy close friends like the English novelist Bryher, for the most part, she, too, socialized with middle and working-class people like the Monniers and Joyces. Unlike Bricktop, she felt perfectly comfortable when business relationships became personal – in fact, that was the norm, and even the ideal. Yet these were personal relationships unhampered by racial difference. While Bricktop made it a point not to ask her

¹³⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 130.

rich white acquaintances for money during the Depression, Beach's ability to relate to her clients as a friend and equal meant that they proved more than willing to bail her out several times over the years.¹⁴⁰ Many of her clients had felt comfortable accepting Beach's help when they had arrived in the city, and thus felt obliged to help her in return when she fell on hard times. Bricktop could not assume this same level of reciprocity, even though she claims to have performed various services for her white patrons.

Bricktop explained her reluctance to ask for help as "just not having sense enough to ask" because of her longtime independence, but race most likely also played a role in her desire to maintain a strict boundary between her work and personal life.¹⁴¹ Because many African Americans had succeeded in Paris as entertainers, the black American musician and black American dancer remained stereotypes. As Claude McKay's eponymous character reflects in *Banjo*, "The American darky is the performing fool of the world today. He's demanded everywhere."¹⁴² Langston Hughes experienced this firsthand upon arriving in Paris, but also suggested that his fellow African Americans perpetuated narrow perceptions about which kinds of black people France would most welcome. In his autobiography, Hughes recalls finding the black American community congregated in the clubs of Montmartre and asking a few musicians at one of them for help:

I spoke to them, and said: "I've just come to Paris, and I'm looking for a cheap place to stay and a job." They scowled at me. Finally one of them said: "Well, what instrument do you play?" They thought I was musical competition. I said: "None. I'm just looking for an ordinary job." Puzzled, another one asked: "Do you tap dance, or what?" "No," I said, "I've just got off a ship and I want any kind of job there is." "You must be crazy, boy," one

¹⁴⁰ Marion Peter (hereafter, MP) to SB, May 01, 1936, Box 30, Folder 9, SBP.

¹⁴¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 198.

¹⁴² Claude McKay, *Banjo*, 14. McKay addresses European views of black Americans at length in *Banjo*. On page 323, the character Ray observes: "In the large cities of Europe he had often met with educated Negroes out for a good time with heavy literature under their arms. They toted these books to protect themselves from being hailed everywhere as minstrel niggers, coons, funny monkeys for the European audience – because the general European idea of the black man is that he is a public performer."

of the men said. “There ain’t no ‘any kind of a job’ here. There’s plenty of French people for ordinary work. Less you can play jazz or tap dance, you’d just as well go back home.”¹⁴³

While the stereotypes hindered or troubled writers like Hughes and McKay, Bricktop seems to have accepted the situation. After her dancing skills gained her the good graces of Cole Porter’s high society friend Elsa Maxwell, Bricktop quipped, “Me and the Charleston were something new for her to play with. I was in.”¹⁴⁴ Elsewhere she said, “I have to give the Charleston the credit it deserves for launching me on my career as a saloonkeeper... It caught on and I caught on, Cole Porter standing right there behind me and never leaving me until I became Bricktop, the one and only.”¹⁴⁵ In Bricktop’s eyes, the black performer stereotype brought her her earliest success, and thus she embraced it. Preserving that identity required playing the part, or allowing rich whites to project it onto her, at least in public. This also helps to explain why she maintained some amount of distance from her white clients in private.

Time spent in France also affected each woman’s sense of herself as an American. Bricktop’s employment as an entertainer and saloon owner depended on the social season in Paris and on an upper-class clientele. When patrons had to quit her club because of the Depression or because of the war, she had to adjust accordingly. By contrast, long-term foreign residents, such as students or journalists, and native French or Europeans comprised Beach’s patrons. Thus, her business did not fluctuate as much. Like Bricktop, she had to close her doors near the beginning of World War II, but she had been in Europe a full ten years before Bricktop arrived in 1924, and had made all of her career, and much of her life, in Paris. When the American Embassy in Paris ordered all Americans to leave, Bricktop

¹⁴³ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 124-125.

¹⁴⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 101.

¹⁴⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 102.

reluctantly obeyed, departing in 1939. Beach, by contrast, chose to stay. In *Defying Dixie*, Glenda Gilmore details the parallels between the Nazis' master race ideology and that of white Southerners. Just as Hitler and his associates proposed a horrific "Final Solution" to Europe's "Jewish Question," so too did white supremacists locate the source of their troubles in the "Negro Problem," leading to organized violence against African Americans at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁴⁶ Beach would spend time in a Nazi internment camp in Vittel, France for foreign women; as a white woman, her experience of the Nazi occupation was still probably better than Bricktop's might have been, had the latter tried to stay.¹⁴⁷

Looking beyond the emergency of war, considerations like class status, friendships, and family might also have played a role in shaping each woman's decision to stay or go. Beach could have reasoned that her ties to British and French people would protect her. For her, France was home. Moreover, her family and friends from the United States appear more inclined and more able to visit her, making it easier for her to rationalize remaining in Paris. Eleanor Beach's antique business offered her the excuse to make regular trips to Europe, and one of Beach's longest and best American friends, Carlotta Welles Briggs, actually lived in France.¹⁴⁸

Bricktop, on the other hand, hailed from a working class background and had always moved around more than Beach. Both her mother's business and her sister's real estate ventures kept them in the United States. Though she knew many celebrities, more than Beach, most were American and not European. It is also likely that she would not have felt

¹⁴⁶ Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 158-161.

¹⁴⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 203. Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 216.

¹⁴⁸ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 5. Sylvia and Carlotta had met during the Beach's early years in France, and after her release from Vittel, Sylvia would spend much of the remainder of World War II at Carlotta's home outside of Paris (SB to Carlotta Welles Briggs, August 14, 1941, Box 14, Folder 1, SBP).

comfortable relying on her rich patrons for help during the war, as her attempts at preserving strict boundaries between her private life as a black woman and public life as a businesswoman indicate. Bricktop later asserted that she did not care “too much about making a lot of friends. Being alone never bothered me. It still doesn’t.”¹⁴⁹ True, she kept many address books filled with the names of her family, clients, and acquaintances, but she seemed most content not to live too near them, moving on from city to city throughout her life in search of a place to recreate Bricktop’s.

For both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach, living and working in Paris during the Twenties and Thirties offered more than simply a chance for fame or success; in later remembrances, the two women took advantage of the opportunity to reflect on how Paris had shaped them. The facts of Beach’s life affirm her preference for living in France, but her own words also reveal a distancing from other Americans. She appreciated the business that American tourists brought to her bookshop, but appears not to have prioritized friendships with fellow Americans in Paris over friendships with the British or French. In fact, life in Europe seems to have provided her with a lens through which to view her countrymen abroad. Early in her bookselling career, she wrote Holly that “All the Americans that have visited my shop are as ignorant as can be of books. They look around with terror at my wares and I can see they think it a funny business [*sic*].”¹⁵⁰ When she returned home briefly in 1936, she wrote Monnier, “I am wrong in the American atmosphere as much as it’s possible – the evangelical Aimee MacPhearson and all that.”¹⁵¹ Apparently, Beach had adopted French attitudes as much as French language and culture.

¹⁴⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 106.

¹⁵⁰ SB to HBP, December 11, 1919, Box 7, Folder 3, SBP.

¹⁵¹ Beach, *Letters*, 169.

In contrast, Bricktop's feelings about her country seem somewhat ambivalent. Her time in Paris reveals that she mainly focused on running her club, and the ratio of business-related material to letters or diaries from her years in the city suggests as much. In her autobiography, Bricktop claims that she had not gone to Paris in order to escape life in the United States, nor had she sought a career in Europe until she received Eugene Bullard's summons. Declaring herself "happy with my life in New York," she says that setting out into the unknown "was a spur-of-the-moment thing, a new adventure just for the sake of adventure."¹⁵² Aside from her nonchalance about learning the language, once in Paris, she did not seek out the usual tourist attractions either. When Hattie Smith visited her daughter in Paris, she looked forward to seeing the city with her own personal guide, but she met with a rude awakening: "Of course Mama wanted to take in the sights, and when I confessed how little I had seen, she huffed. 'Wouldn't you know? Ada's been here for five years and hasn't even been up the Eiffel Tower.' Well, a person couldn't work all night, sleep much of the day, and handle sightseeing with any energy."¹⁵³ Clearly, Bricktop viewed herself not as a tourist passing through, but as a working resident of Paris, regardless of the prevailing stereotype.

While Bricktop often spoke of her life in very practical terms, she also looked back fondly on her time in Paris. During her first, quiet year there, she had the opportunity to interact with the French as she set up housekeeping and went about her errands. These pleasant interactions helped her to feel at home in Paris.¹⁵⁴ She recalled struggling with the decision to leave the city in 1939: "Even after I knew what I should do, which was to get out, I didn't. I realized there was really nowhere for me to go. I'd built my whole career, and

¹⁵² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 82.

¹⁵³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 138.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

lived a sizable part of my life, in France. It had become my home. Returning to America had no appeal for me.”¹⁵⁵

Much of this reluctance to leave also had to do with career uncertainty. Even before the war began, Bricktop wrestled with how to stay financially solvent in Europe: “All sorts of ideas raced through my head, including one that seldom occurred to me – going back to America. I didn’t think about it long... What would Americans make of someone like me? I just wasn’t known outside the small, select circle that had cultivated me and kept me going.”¹⁵⁶ While she always considered herself a proud American, she seems to have felt that her particular style of club worked best outside of the United States, and indeed, she found her greatest success in Paris and Rome, away from the more heated racial and class tensions that would have complicated her business back home.

When she did finally return to the United States in 1939, Bricktop felt that she had come back to “an unknown world.”¹⁵⁷ Re-entering the tense American racial climate came with its own kind of culture shock, as she claimed, “prejudice and I hadn’t met for a long time.”¹⁵⁸ After encountering suspicion from a receptionist when she visited Cole Porter’s New York City apartment, Porter warned her that she should not expect people to treat her as a “queen” as they had in Paris. Taking issue with this advice years later in her memoirs, she wrote, “I couldn’t understand why I had to be a very special Negro to be treated with even common courtesy.”¹⁵⁹ Crediting both the French craze for black American culture in the 1920s and ‘30s, and the “protection” of powerful friends in Europe, Bricktop admitted to living a more sheltered life in some ways as a black American woman in Paris. Once back in

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 201.

¹⁵⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 191.

¹⁵⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 204.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 208.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 208-209.

the United States, she encountered the kind of “average white Americans” with whom she had not had to associate in many years – the kind whom she found more likely to exhibit overt racism.¹⁶⁰

For Sylvia Beach, a white woman, Paris served as a liberating space in another way. In many letters to her family, she speaks of becoming more of a feminist, and while France did not necessarily stand as a beacon of women’s rights, the circle in which Beach moved in interwar Paris did stand as the exception to the rule when it came to expectations of foreign women’s behavior.¹⁶¹ In *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank*, Andrea Weiss speaks to this difference in atmosphere: “It was not that Paris was culturally more ‘liberated’ than England or America in its attitude towards women, but simply that it left its foreign women alone. Asked why she liked to live among the French, Gertrude Stein wrote, ‘Well the reason is very simple their life belongs to them so your life can belong to you . . .’”¹⁶² Had she stayed in Princeton, a town bound by a male-dominated intellectual tradition, Beach could not have moved in the same circle of international avant-garde writers and artists as she did in Paris, except perhaps by marrying into it. Nor would she have had the opportunity to publish *Ulysses*, which faced charges of obscenity in the United States, but not in France. In addition, Paris offered her the chance to build a respected career on the basis of her own hard work and talent, rather than as the daughter of a respected clergyman. Her close relationship with Adrienne Monnier might also have attracted more questions in the United States, and Beach’s own silence on the subject of lesbianism is revealing, when compared to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 127, 129.

¹⁶¹ In a letter to Eleanor in 1919, she claimed that working under the inefficient male leadership of the Red Cross in Serbia had made “a regular feminist of me.” (SB to EB, April 18, 1919, Box 4, Folder 12, SBP).

¹⁶² Andrea Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 21.

Monnier's admission of love for a former female classmate in her own memoirs and the many homosexual relationships among their friends.¹⁶³

It seems safe to say that we would not know the names of Sylvia Beach or Bricktop today if they had not gone to Paris. For both women, the city served as a unique space in which central aspects of their identities, like race, class, and gender, did not hinder them from achieving success as these factors might have at home. Rather, these things drew people to them and helped Bricktop and Beach to distinguish themselves from the crowd. As the next chapter will argue, both women balanced traditional male and female roles as they oversaw Anglo-American-oriented businesses, on the one hand, and "mothered" fellow young expats, on the other. Even as Bricktop and Sylvia Beach enjoyed the best years of their lives in interwar Paris, their businesses functioned as distinctly American spaces. Bricktop's club on the Right Bank represented the growing financial clout of the United States, as well as the appeal of African American music and dance. Sylvia Beach and her fellow Americans on the Left Bank – male and female – showed that Americans could stand as equals among Europe's cultural elite. Just as Paris "made" both Sylvia Beach and Bricktop, so, too, did the American communities with whom they interacted.

¹⁶³ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 315.

CHAPTER 2: Night and Day: Bricktop and Sylvia Beach as Businesswomen and Hostesses
in Paris

*“Who is Sylvia, what is she
That all our scribes commend her?
Yankee, young and brave is she
The west this grace did lend her
That all books might published be.*

*Is she rich as she is brave
For wealth oft daring misses?
Throngs about her rant and rave
To subscribe for Ulysses
But, having signed, they ponder grave.*

*Then to Sylvia let us sing
Her daring lies in selling.
She can sell each mortal thing
That’s boring beyond telling.
To her let us buyers bring.”*
-- James Joyce, “after W. S.”¹⁶⁴

“Taking care of people is my business.”
-- Bricktop¹⁶⁵

In the opening chapter of his expat chronicle *We All Went to Paris: Americans in the City of Light: 1776-1971*, Stephen Longstreet recalled, “It was a time of names, a time of precocious, lunatic banging about in search of other names.”¹⁶⁶ Neither Bricktop nor Sylvia Beach appear as “lunatics” or “bangers about” during their time in Paris, but Longstreet’s observation does point to the fact that we might not know the names of these two women today apart from the many other illustrious “names” who gathered at their businesses. Indeed, in public memory, Bricktop and Sylvia Beach have become inseparable from their careers and the communities that supported their work. While Bricktop appears in scholarly

¹⁶⁴ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 85. Joyce composed this poem “after” Shakespeare in Sylvia’s honor on the day of *Ulysses*’s publication in 1922.

¹⁶⁵ Bricktop and Haksins, *Bricktop*, 218.

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Longstreet, *We All Went to Paris: Americans in the City of Light: 1776-1971* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 403.

literature as part of the phenomenon of “Harlem in Montmartre” and “Black Paris” that William A. Shack and Tyler Stovall have described, Sylvia Beach is one of the “Women of the Left Bank,” or more specifically, one of the “Women of Montparnasse,” in studies by Andrea Weiss, Shari Benstock, and Morrill Cody.

While both women did enter literary history as memoirists, the genre itself shaped the choices they made as authors. The focus of their books revolves around operating a successful business and their connections with the famous men who helped make that possible. To be sure, Beach’s bookshop and Bricktop’s club might have existed as good businesses with an international clientele of devoted customers, but they may not have achieved lasting *fame* if not for fellow expatriates James Joyce and Cole Porter, respectively. However, simply hitching Bricktop’s and Beach’s wagons to Porter’s and Joyce’s stars does not tell the whole story of their accomplishments.

Alongside these men, and others like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Bricktop and Beach also benefitted from the help and experience of close female friends Mabel Mercer and Adrienne Monnier. As previously noted, Sylvia Beach lived among a mostly white Left Bank expatriate community in which women featured prominently. Indeed, many women had come to Paris in search of freedom from traditional American and British gender and sexual mores. The networks of support and collaboration among these women are well-documented.¹⁶⁷ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting has filled a gap in the study of black American women in Paris with *Bricktop’s Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars*. Using Bricktop’s time in Paris as a framework, Sharpley-Whiting shows that black women formed parallel support systems to white women during their time in the city, even if their time there was of shorter duration and less illustrious in the

¹⁶⁷ See Weiss’s *Paris Was a Woman*, Cody’s *Women of Montparnasse*, and Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank*.

eyes of contemporaries and later historians. Both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach looked to fellow women as associates in business and close friends.

In cultivating their respective communities, each woman balanced both traditionally male and female roles. As businesswomen, they took advantage of the freedom Paris afforded them as single foreign women, and they related with men as equals, or in Bricktop's case, as a superior. As hostesses, they followed in the footsteps of many other women in France who had overseen spaces for cultural and intellectual exchange. They also embraced feminine roles such as "midwife," "mother," and "sister" in the personal and professional lives of fellow expatriates.

Delving more deeply into the records of the friends and patrons of Beach and Bricktop offers a new way of thinking about the different expatriate communities in interwar Paris. While it is possible to identify certain distinct social circles, scholars have usually neglected or discounted links between them, dividing them instead into groups roughly reflecting those who knew Sylvia Beach by day and Bricktop by night. Resulting accounts of the city in the Twenties and Thirties often segregate the various groups that resided there according to the city's geography, or by categories such as race, gender, and class. Yet exploring these communities with a broader and more integrated social perspective reveals interesting points of overlap. Many expatriates, such as Robert McAlmon, Kay Boyle, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and T.S. Eliot, took advantage of the spaces that each woman provided for making connections across social, racial, and cultural boundaries. Thus Beach's and Bricktop's significance in interwar Paris goes far beyond their roles as "hostess" and "businesswomen." In a very real sense, they facilitated the formation of the networks among

artists, musicians, writers, and intellectuals that have come to define high modernism and the Jazz Age.

* * *

Bricktop and Beach often fulfilled similar roles within their respective communities, but matters of race and class meant that they experienced life as American businesswomen in Paris very differently. Bricktop's club belonged to a particular moment in Parisian and American history in which jazz's popularity, the strength of the dollar in Europe, and Prohibition in the United States combined to make her business particularly lucrative. On the surface, a similar argument could apply equally to Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, since the Lost Generation's celebrated exile in Paris certainly proved a crucial factor in the bookstore's success; however, as a business that traded in books, rather than in expensive champagne, Shakespeare and Company generally avoided the pitfalls of a more niche establishment like Bricktop's. While Bricktop depended almost entirely on wealthy clients, Beach's business appealed to students, foreigners, writers, artists, and intellectuals – groups that have always filled Paris, even in less celebrated days.

Aside from the divergence among patrons at their establishments, each woman's background also affected her initial efforts to open her own businesses. Unlike Beach, Bricktop had had a great deal of experience in her chosen field before she established her first club in Paris. She also had the benefit of models of independent black female entrepreneurship in her family. In her autobiography, Bricktop describes her mother, Hattie Smith, as a capable restaurant and boardinghouse owner, from whom she no doubt gleaned some of her knowledge of the hospitality business. She likely drew inspiration from her older sister Blonzetta, too, who found success in the real estate business as a young woman.

When it came to Bricktop's own profession as an entertainer and bar owner, she had already spent nearly fourteen years as a singer, dancer, and unofficial apprentice in the nightclub business before she ever set sail for Paris in 1924. Once in France, she benefitted from the opportunity to gradually take over management of Le Grand Duc before opening a club under her own name.¹⁶⁸

Sylvia Beach, on the other hand, entered into bookselling, booklending, and publishing with plenty of gusto, but no prior experience – especially, by her own admission, when it came to *bookkeeping*.¹⁶⁹ In spite of this inexperience, Beach did possess a few key advantages that Bricktop did not. First, she had traveled widely and lived in Europe for several years before attempting to open her shop. She also spoke enough French to carry on conversations and establish close relationships with native French people. This integration into French culture would prove all the more helpful when her shop began to feel the effects of the Great Depression in the mid-1930s. Finally, she received crucial help from her friend and mentor Adrienne Monnier, who knew Paris, the bookselling trade, and the local clientele, and offered her help freely to Beach for over two decades.

Both women faced their share of struggles when it came to the financial side of running a business, but they figured among the few Americans – male or female – who managed to hold on their operations in France several years into the Depression. While Sylvia Beach had no real training in managing a business account, she excelled at connecting her customers to potentially interesting and helpful books and people. The relational ties that she established helped to keep her in the red personally even after she lost her shop. Bricktop had learned the nuts and bolts of the hospitality industry from a young age, and she certainly

¹⁶⁸ All information in this paragraph derived from Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, chapters 1-5.

¹⁶⁹ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 21.

made more money than Beach ever did. Yet when the Depression chased away the wealthy foreigners who filled her club, she lacked the kind of safety net that Beach had in both her local customers and a better-off family back in the United States. Whereas Beach carefully cultivated close relationships with her clients, Bricktop claimed to prefer a more self-sufficient life; indeed, this quality allowed her the flexibility to make decisions as needed to support herself.¹⁷⁰

When it came to each woman's particular approach or attitude toward her business, Bricktop seemed more in tune with practicalities while Beach at times focused on relationships at the risk of her shop. By her own admission, and as others would characterize her, Bricktop possessed a drive, not necessarily for money, but for excellence in business and creating a special atmosphere that people would enjoy even if she herself did not occupy center stage. Beach devoted her personal attention to matching books and customers and to assisting young writers and artists.¹⁷¹ It was not that Bricktop did not care about her customers as people; she simply viewed her club as a place where people could socialize and enjoy themselves while she ran the show. Sometimes that meant spending time with them at their tables or performing for the crowd, but she always juggled multiple roles and responsibilities at once. Kay Boyle added a passage to her friend Robert McAlmon's account of Jazz Age Paris, *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930*, that described Bricktop's ability to multitask:

At this time [1928-1929] Brick's night club was having a good deal of success, and while she sang and danced now and then, she generally sat at her cashier's desk keeping accounts, while at the same time observing every action that went on in the cabaret. If ever a person possessed perfect coordination of faculties and reflexes, Brick is that person. ...

¹⁷⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 106, 119.

¹⁷¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 93-94.

When the doctor and I arrived there the place was crowded. One drunken Frenchman wanted to get away without paying his bill. At another table a French actress in her cups was giving her boy friend [*sic*] hell and throwing champagne into his face. In the back room several Negroes were having an argument. Brick sat at the cashier's desk keeping things in order. With a wisecrack she halted the actress in her temper, cajolingly made the Frenchman pay his bill, and all the while she was adding up accounts, calling out to the orchestra to play this or that requested number, indicating to the waiters that this or that table needed service; and, when asked, she began to sing 'Love for Sale,' while adding up accounts. Halfway through the song there was a commotion in the back room where the argument was taking place, which meant that the colored boys had now come to blows. Brick skipped down from her stool, glided across the room, still singing. She jerked aside the curtain and stopped singing long enough to say, 'Hey, you guys, get out in the street if you want to fight. This ain't that kind of a joint!' Then she continued the song, having missed but two phrases, and was back at her desk again adding accounts."¹⁷²

While this description likely contains some amount of embellishment, it remains consistent with other references to Bricktop's reputation as a capable manager and hostess. In fact, it seems that much of Bricktop's unique success sprang from her ability to interact intimately with customers, while remaining simultaneously aware of and involved in all aspects of the club's activity.

By contrast, Sylvia Beach often wrote of her struggle to balance attending to customers in the shop, keeping up with necessary correspondence for patrons who requested books or literary magazines while they vacationed or worked abroad, and maintaining accounts. Many of Beach's letters to family and friends contain apologies for not writing sooner due to the volume of her work, or quips that she was writing in between customers.¹⁷³ Yet just as Bricktop gained respect for her own particular method of doing business, Beach also left a favorable impression on her customers, even in the midst of feeling overwhelmed and constantly behind on work. What she lacked in business sense, she seems to have

¹⁷² Boyle, in McAlmon and Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together*, 316-317.

¹⁷³ SB to HBD, November 23, 1926, Box 7, Folder 10, SBP; SB to MP, May 29, 1923, Box 30, Folder 7, SBP.

assuaged with a reputation for self-forgetfulness, making her patrons and friends the default priority above her own desires for financial security or a perfectly-organized business system. This quality often stood out in the memory of those closest to Beach, and was, in turn, what she seemed to value in others.¹⁷⁴

Of course, Beach was not alone in struggling to run a business and cater to her clients; however, Bricktop appears to have recognized the dangers of overwork, and she found ways to cope earlier in her career than Beach did. In her autobiography, Bricktop comments that she noticed herself growing irritable and nervous in the late 1920s. A nerve specialist told her that she was experiencing a nervous breakdown as a result of trying to please too many people, and advised her to find ways to relieve pressure.¹⁷⁵ She kept away from the club for a while, and writes that she also took to walking in the rain and screaming, in lieu of taking out her anxieties on others. As a black woman managing a successful business for guests who tended to be both white and wealthy, Bricktop likely realized the potential social and financial consequences of letting her frustrations get the better of her in the heat of the moment at the club. Although patrons missed her presence and complained that “Bricktop’s is just not Bricktop’s without you,” she decided to take her health seriously, even if it meant distancing herself temporarily from nights at the club.¹⁷⁶

As for Beach, although friends described her as energetic and quick, she actually suffered from debilitating migraines and various other physical ailments; her devotion to her work only exacerbated these conditions. She did adopt the French habit of taking weekends

¹⁷⁴ “Homage to Sylvia Beach,” issue of *Mercure de France*, ed. by Jackson Matthews and Maurice Sallet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1963), 10, 13, 119, 131-132, 163.

¹⁷⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 140-141. This balancing of the public and private aspects of Bricktop’s life is addressed at length in Chapter Three.

¹⁷⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 142-145.

off and leaving for a long vacation in the summer, but even then, work often followed her.¹⁷⁷ While she never appears to have experienced a complete breakdown, her letters reveal perpetual worries about money and her health.¹⁷⁸ Unlike Bricktop, whose wealthy patrons ensured her financial success, Beach found it more difficult to take a day or two off from the store and her other tasks. She had a few assistants in the shop throughout the years, but after some bad experiences, she preferred attending to the work more directly herself, rather than entrusting it to others.¹⁷⁹

The emphasis in each woman's personal style of business sprang from both the nature of their work and their personalities. While Beach's interactions with her literary customers naturally spilled over into correspondence with many of them throughout her life, Bricktop's did not. She did save many calling cards of clients – often with her own humorous comments about the person added in pencil, perhaps to help her remember them if they came back to the club, or in case she needed to track them down for an unpaid bill – and some letters dating from the 1940s and following decades.¹⁸⁰ However, the success of her club during the 1920s and 1930s would have left her little time to correspond during the day, and she probably interacted on a nightly basis with most of the people with whom she would have felt most comfortable writing. Bricktop described herself in her autobiography as a “loner,” but her references to visits and meals with friends reveal that she did in fact do a good deal of socializing after closing her final club in Rome, yet always still on her own

¹⁷⁷ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 196.

¹⁷⁸ Beach, *Letters*, 176, 181, 183.

¹⁷⁹ SB to HBD, February 3, 1932 and April 26, 1932, Box 7, Folder 19, SBP.

¹⁸⁰ See Calling cards, Box 4, Folders 15-17, Bricktop Papers, SC. On the back of one, she wrote “Spooky.”

terms.¹⁸¹ Without the club, she seems to have felt a need to reach out again to her friends; freed from the demands of work, she now had the time to do so.

Even though Bricktop and Sylvia Beach approached their businesses with some differences, they each speak unabashedly in their memoirs about owing their fame to famous men. While both women had established businesses prior to meeting James Joyce and Cole Porter, these men raised their profiles significantly in Paris and beyond. Of course, Beach's relationship with Joyce and Bricktop's relationship with Porter differed, but the degree to which they came to be associated with these men is similarly strong. Such a parallel dependence on men demonstrates the limits for businesswomen in this era. Even the most capable among them still looked to an influential man as key to propagating their own success in the first half of the twentieth century.

On the surface, Sylvia Beach's work as James Joyce's publisher certainly involved a more complicated balancing act between friendship and work. The two first met at a small party welcoming Joyce and his family to Paris in early July of 1920.¹⁸² Beach had read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as well as portions of his forthcoming project *Ulysses* in serialized form. He became a member of her lending library, and told her about his troubles with *Ulysses*. Upon hearing that the work had run into obscenity charges in the United Kingdom, Beach asked him if he would allow Shakespeare and Company the honor of publishing it in full, in France. Although Beach had no previous experience in

¹⁸¹ See Bricktop's Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 1, Bricktop Papers, EU.

¹⁸² Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 62-63. Fitch claims that the date of their meeting should bear the title "Beachday," just as Joyce devotees call June 16 Bloomsday in reference to *Ulysses*'s main character Leo Bloom, and the novel's 24-hour setting on that day in 1904. Ironically, Beach's name did not initially appear on the guest list for the afternoon, but Adrienne Monnier brought her along since Beach did know many of the guests.

publication, Joyce had little choice but to agree. As the two had become good friends prior to Beach's proposition, both parties looked forward to the collaboration with high hopes.¹⁸³

If Beach excitedly announced the tidings of her new role as “a regular Publisher and of the most important book of the age” to friends and family, she soon found that the privilege of working with Joyce did not come cheaply.¹⁸⁴ Beset by eye problems, and attached to a standard of living completely out of proportion to his income, Joyce and his family often depended upon the generosity of others. A formal agreement to act as his publisher came with an almost equally consuming load of informal duties on his behalf, from administrative chores to lending him money and helping him secure medical help. What makes Beach's workload all the more striking is the fact that Joyce already had several other people at his command, most notably a British activist and magazine publisher named Harriet Shaw Weaver. Weaver's services to Joyce lasted even longer than Beach's, and the two women developed a close friendship as a result of their shared allegiance to him. For several years, Weaver took on supporting the Joyce family almost entirely from her private wealth, and thus she and Beach could commiserate – always with the utmost discretion – about the attendant headaches of working for Joyce. Both stood so in awe of what they believed he contributed to literature that they usually acquiesced to his requests with only minimal griping.

Joyce's many, and diverse, directives to Beach emerge in their correspondence. In a short note penned on February 2, 1922, the day of *Ulysses* appeared in print, he wrote, “I cannot let today pass without thanking you for all the trouble and worry you have given yourself during the last year. All I can hope is that the result of its publication may be some

¹⁸³ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 77.

¹⁸⁴ SB to EB, April 01, 1921, Box 5, Folder 3, SBP.

satisfaction to you.”¹⁸⁵ This is one of the only explicit acknowledgments on record of Joyce’s gratitude for Beach’s efforts; but, of course, another request fills the second half of this note. Another letter from the summer of 1927 further gives a sense of the usual character of Joyce’s missives:

Dear Miss Beach: Herewith the MS of Goll’s article, very friendly. Please send it to him, 27 rue Jasmin and say I’ll write from Amsterdam. Also the maquette. Please be sure the price is on the back as other wise [*sic*] the title has no sense. Also the proofs of my ‘Absurdity’ no 4. Please ask E[zra] P[ound] to see the corrections through. Did Eliot give leave to reprint Absurdity no 5. I go to Amsterdam tomorrow and will wire address there. Having been revising since Thursday and am very tired. Please look carefully at text of P[omes]. P[enyeach]. as my mind wanders away from it. I bought but did not pay for (25 Dutch florins about 235 frs) a reproduction of Johannes Vermeer View of Delft. When it arrives it has to be paid for as I could not spare the money. I would like a broad frame of the kind Mrs Becat used in her show, sloping in, of common wood painted a very deep green brown. I like the picture very much. I wonder could you get this done but there is no hurry about it.¹⁸⁶

At this point, Joyce signed off, although he could not help but add a few more questions and requests in a lengthy postscript! Occasionally, he does seem to have realized the trouble his demands might have caused Beach. The postscript to another typically importunate letter playfully poses the following “Riddle”:

“Question: When is he more troublesome, when he is in Paris or when he is out of Paris?
 Answer: _____.”¹⁸⁷

While Beach’s respect for Joyce’s work motivated her to bear with Joyce’s orders for many years, Adrienne Monnier’s tolerance evaporated more quickly. As Beach’s fellow promoter of Joyce and as a translator of some of his work into French, Monnier eventually grew angry at his constant demands on both of them. In May of 1931, she confronted Joyce

¹⁸⁵ Joyce, *James Joyce’s Letters*, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Joyce, *James Joyce’s Letters*, 124.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

in a strongly-worded letter, something that Beach could never quite bring herself to do.

Beach's reluctance to challenge Joyce did not necessarily signal acceptance of his treatment of her, though. In 1927, she wrote honestly of her struggles:

I have not a sufficient provision in the bank to meet all the bills and shall try to get some of the more lenient publishers to wait a fortnight, but it makes business relations very unpleasant. ... Meanwhile I am afraid I and my little shop will not be able to stand the struggle to keep you and your family going from now till June, and to finance the trip of Mrs Joyce and yourself to London 'with money jingling in your pocket.' It is a very terrifying prospect for me. I have already many expenses for you that you do not dream of, and everything I have I give you freely. Sometimes I think you don't realize it, as when you said to Miss Weaver that my work was 'easing off.' The truth is that as my affection and admiration for you are unlimited, so is the work you pile on my shoulders. When you are absent, every word I receive from you is an order. The reward for my unceasing labour on your behalf is to see you tie yourself into a bowknot and hear you complain. (I am poor and tired too) and I have noticed that every time a new terrible effort is required from me, (my life is a continual 'six hours' with sprints every ten rounds) and I manage to accomplish the task that is set me you try to see how much more I can do while I am about it. Is it human?¹⁸⁸

Unlike Monnier, who did not work as closely with Joyce, Beach never sent her letter, but she did grant Professor Oscar Silverman of SUNY-Buffalo permission to publish it in 1959 – the same year that a discreet account of her dealings with Joyce appeared in her memoirs.

For Beach and Joyce, joint efforts on the publication of *Ulysses* and fight against the novel's piracy united them in a common struggle. Beach also came from a more respectable background than Joyce, and she might even have derived some advantage in the 1920s from her status as a citizen of the newly dominant United States versus Joyce's ties to the struggling young nation of Ireland. While her gender rendered her more easily manipulated in Joyce's eyes, in this partnership she did not have to deal with the prospect of racial inequality, as Bricktop did in all of her relationships with even the friendliest whites.

¹⁸⁸ Joyce, *James Joyce's Letters*, 209.

In the early 1930s, matters finally came to a head. Less than a decade after its initial publication, Joyce began to hint that he wanted Beach to sell her rights to *Ulysses* in order to clear the way for the novel's eventual release in the United States. She did so in late 1931, and spent the next two years mourning the breach in their relationship even as it lightened her load considerably.¹⁸⁹ However, long after she and Joyce parted ways, his legacy continued to create work and trouble for her. Beach's fame as his publisher and onetime friend drew many Joyce scholars to her door throughout the rest of her life, and a significant conflict with one of them later brought about a rupture in her friendship with Joyce's patroness Harriet Weaver.¹⁹⁰ Of course, Beach did accrue significant benefits from her association with Joyce. The formality of their references to each other as "Mr. Joyce" and "Miss Beach" in their correspondence belies the fact that they shared a genuine friendship for many years. Then, too, Beach's shop received more publicity and business as her name became known in connection with Joyce's, a favorable outcome that she had shrewdly anticipated from the beginning.¹⁹¹ Joyce also repaid both Beach and Weaver with original manuscripts of his works, and while Beach tried to hold onto them for as long as she could, her eventual sale of them in 1935 provided her with much-needed funds during the Depression. Although Joyce responded to news of the sale with unjust indignation, his later judgment of Beach, offered after time had granted him more perspective, stands as the truest: "All she ever did was to make me a present of the best ten years of her life."¹⁹² In the published version of her memoir, Beach treated Joyce with kid gloves. Regarding her feelings about the rights to

¹⁸⁹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 320-325.

¹⁹⁰ See correspondence with Joseph Prescott, Box 30, Folders 29 and 30; correspondence with HBD, Box 35; correspondence with Harriet Shaw Weaver, Box 37, SBP.

¹⁹¹ Beach, *Letters*, 85.

¹⁹² Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 350-351, 328.

Ulysses, she wrote simply, “A baby belongs to its mother, not to the midwife, doesn’t it?”¹⁹³

Even after Joyce’s death in 1940, she remained reluctant to posture herself publicly as anything but his faithful handmaiden.¹⁹⁴

Beach and Joyce’s relationship appears more equal on the surface than that of Cole Porter and Bricktop, but Porter and Bricktop’s lack of intimacy at least guaranteed them freedom from the kinds of overt tensions involved in a true partnership. In addition to frequenting her club and bringing his friends, Porter hired Beach as a hostess for parties in his home. Regardless of Bricktop’s skills in this regard, that arrangement ultimately preserved, and perhaps reinforced, the distinction between employer and employee. Moreover, this relationship between a wealthy white man and a black woman with working-class roots replicated American race and class hierarchies – she was welcome in his home as “the help” in an evening gown that he provided, rather than as a guest in her own right. Bricktop and Porter may have shared a mutual goodwill, but her dependence on him for her club’s success also created a barrier that prevented their interaction as true equals.

Bricktop seems to organize her life as “Before Cole Porter” and “After Cole Porter” in her autobiography. As a hostess at Le Grand Duc in the mid-1920s, she gradually attracted a clientele of artists and writers, but once Cole Porter arrived in late 1925, he reigned supreme and brought in a new, more glamorous crowd. Bricktop’s account of first meeting Porter reads like a parallel of Sylvia Beach’s initial encounter with James Joyce – full of reverent humility and awe:

One morning in the late fall or early winter of 1925, a slight, immaculately dressed man came in, sat down at one of the tables, and

¹⁹³ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 205.

¹⁹⁴ The next chapter deals more in-depth with some of Beach’s difficulties in accurately representing her relationship with Joyce.

ordered a place of corned-beef hash with a poached egg on top and a bottle of wine...

I got up to sing and could sense that the man was watching and listening with more than ordinary interest. He applauded when I finished the set...

“Who was that?” I asked Buddy later.

“That was Cole Porter,” he said.

“Oh, my God!” I said. “I’ve just been singing one of his songs!”

The normally unexcitable me was suddenly shaken. It’s one thing to take someone like [socialite] Fannie Ward in stride. It’s quite another to find out you’ve just performed in front of a giant-sized talent like Cole Porter – and performed one of his songs!¹⁹⁵

In addition to visiting her club, Porter hired Bricktop to teach his friends the Charleston at his house parties, and these friends soon followed suit at parties of their own, all eager to embrace the mania for black American music and dance.¹⁹⁶ Bricktop’s entertainment served as a familiar taste of home for Porter and his white American friends, at once exotic and safe after its transfer overseas. For her part, Bricktop had been in the entertainment business long enough to recognize an opportunity when she saw one, even if the terms of their relationship proved less than equal.

Bricktop presents Porter – a gay man – and his wife of convenience, Linda, as her friends in her autobiography, though even her descriptions of this relationship hint at the inequality that remained. After spending time with the couple during their vacation in Venice in the summer of 1926, she notes: “I came to regard the Porters as among my real friends. They were really interested in me. Bringing me to Venice was one way that Cole helped me to make my way as an entertainer to create an identification with his set of people.” After claiming that she did not consider their relationship akin to that of a sponsor and protégé, she admits, “Cole Porter was interested in me, first, because I could dance. Later, I like to think, he was interested in me as a person. He wanted me to be beautifully

¹⁹⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 101-103.

¹⁹⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 101-103.

dressed. Whenever we went out together, he bought me gorgeous clothes.” Nevertheless, the lack of significant references to Bricktop in Porter’s biographies complicates her assertion that she thought of Porter as “one of the best friends I ever had.”¹⁹⁷ Porter clearly enjoyed having Bricktop around him, and he sent her telegrams offering money and support at important moments. However, as part of the large entourage of a rich, gay, white man in the 1920s and ‘30s, she does not seem to have occupied as prominent a position in his life.¹⁹⁸ Even by her own estimation, she needed his patronage, not the other way around. She added to his enjoyment of Paris, but he had already achieved success on his own.

When it came to receiving more practical help in business, both Sylvia Beach and Bricktop looked to other women. The two found that they worked best with those whose personalities contrasted with their own. They also chose women who were not from the United States, which offered them a different perspective from which to consider their work and their patrons. Even though Beach’s relationship with Monnier differed significantly from Bricktop’s relationship with Mabel Mercer, the fact remains that the two women broadly mirrored each other in their preference for another woman’s help and support.

While James Joyce’s importance to Beach’s *fame* remains unquestioned, without Adrienne Monnier, there likely would not have been any “Sylvia Beach of Shakespeare and Company” ready and willing to publish *Ulysses* in the first place. To Monnier, Beach owed not only her first clients – mostly Frenchmen – but also the prime location of her shop and the information and encouragement needed to launch the whole enterprise. Prior to receiving Monnier’s counsel, Beach had made up her mind to open a bookshop in either London or

¹⁹⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 110 -112. See the following biographies of Porter: Stephen Citron, *Noel and Cole: The Sophisticates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William McBrien, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Charles Schwartz, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Dial Press, 1977).

¹⁹⁸ See note from Cole Porter’s secretary to Bricktop, Box 1, Folder 3, Bricktop Papers, EU.

New York.¹⁹⁹ Monnier opened her eyes to the advantages of Paris, and Beach soon recognized the city as the perfect place for her interests and skills.

The secret to Monnier and Beach's long association probably derived from the fact that they never actually established a formal business partnership. Their differences also balanced the relationship: Beach struck friends as chatty and humorous, whereas Monnier had a serious personality, more given to deep reflection. In addition, Andrea Weiss notes that "Adrienne's focus was books and words while Sylvia's was readers and writers. Perhaps it was these different emphases that softened any potential competition between the two establishments, so much so that Sylvia 'always consulted [Adrienne] before taking an important step. She was such a wise counselor, and she was, besides, a sort of partner in the firm.'"²⁰⁰ Monnier's status as "a sort of partner" meant that the two could talk shop, but that business never overwhelmed their friendship.

In her 1983 biography of Sylvia Beach, Noel Riley Fitch made famous Beach's declaration "My loves were Adrienne Monnier and James Joyce and Shakespeare and Company." Fitch lifted these words from unpublished portions of Beach's memoir, and they provide an accurate summary of her life in Paris. After quoting Beach, Fitch admits that "the details [of Beach and Monnier's love story] were and still are little known."²⁰¹ Evidence of Monnier's relationships with other women comes from portions of her writing collected and translated by Richard McDougall as *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, but Beach appeared more reticent to clarify this aspect of her life.²⁰² She and Monnier lived together for several years, and they certainly functioned socially as a couple, but neither woman

¹⁹⁹ SB to Cyprian Beach (hereafter, CB), July 11, 1919, Box 6, Folder 1, SBP.

²⁰⁰ Andrea Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman*, 31.

²⁰¹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 11.

²⁰² Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 315-317.

offered explicit comments on the romantic nature of their relationship. Perhaps, with many more openly lesbian women like Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney as friends, the two did not feel the need to make the exact nature of their partnership known, or they may simply have valued their privacy. Like many of her contemporaries, Beach did not seem to regard her sexual orientation as fixed. While Monnier and Beach's relationship as lovers has become a common assumption, Fitch uncovered another unpublished portion of Beach's memoirs in which she does clearly admit to a lesser-known attraction to Robert McAlmon. Much like Porter, McAlmon – a not-so-closeted gay man – would enter into a marriage of convenience with a wealthy lesbian friend of Monnier's and Beach's, the English writer Annie Winifred Ellerman, or Bryher. Nothing ever seems to have come of Beach's feelings for him.²⁰³

As for Bricktop, she shared both a friendship and a business partnership with Mabel Mercer, a black soprano from England who had come to Paris around the same time as Bricktop. When the latter expanded her business to a new location in 1931, she knew that she needed help, and claimed that her “first and only choice was Mabel Mercer.”²⁰⁴ Referring to Mercer as a “very shy and reserved, a lady,” Bricktop sensed the benefits of finding a partner who would complement her and make guests feel at ease while she attended to the demands of running a larger club. In her autobiography, she quotes Cole Porter's assessment of their partnership: ““If you want to talk social, talk to Mabel; if you want to talk money, talk to Brick.”” It took some time for Mercer to feel comfortable at the club, but

²⁰³ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 86.

²⁰⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 159.

Bricktop encouraged her to develop her skills as a performer, and she soon attracted a following of her own.²⁰⁵

In addition to her work at the club, Mercer became all the more important to Bricktop as a friend during the darker moments she faced in the Thirties, including her mother's death, her separation from her husband, and the difficulties of finding work during the Depression. During lean summers, the two even traveled around France together in an effort to make ends meet when many of their clients left Paris for the resort towns on the coast.²⁰⁶ Whereas Adrienne Monnier served as a mentor to Sylvia Beach, Bricktop played the dominant role in relation to Mercer. Although their business collaboration only lasted a few years, the two remained friends long after they parted ways professionally.

Joyce and Monnier, Porter and Mercer, each brought a certain amount of fame and help to Beach and Bricktop, respectively. Still, the fact remains that the real secret to each woman's success lay in her specific approach to doing business and interacting with customers. Bricktop's certainly thrived on positive word-of-mouth publicity from celebrity patrons, but Porter and his friends came because of something about *her* and how she ran her club. In addition, while Mabel Mercer's singing became one of the draws for Bricktop's club, it was Bricktop's independent success and opportunity for expansion that made it necessary for Mercer to become her business partner.

Similarly, Sylvia Beach would never have met James Joyce if she had not already established herself in Paris's literary world. She had made a name not as a writer herself, nor as a critic or publisher, but as a bookseller – and a female bookseller in a foreign country, at that. Joyce lent Beach notoriety as the publisher of a book deemed too “obscene” to publish

²⁰⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 160-161.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 187-189.

through the usual channels, but she, in turn, guaranteed the enduring fame and wider audience for one of the twentieth century's most studied authors. Obviously, Adrienne Monnier did much to help Beach from start to finish, but she had her own shop to run, and Beach managed Shakespeare and Company on her own terms. Thus, while both Bricktop and Beach benefitted from the help and patronage of others, they achieved and maintained success due to their own talents.

* * *

As business owners, Beach and Bricktop participated in the traditionally male arena of commerce; as hostesses, they balanced this with the conventionally female domain of the home. In interwar Paris, foreign women like Sylvia Beach's American friends Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney, as well as the Nardal sisters from Martinique, increasingly shared the mantle of hostess.²⁰⁷ By the 1920s, French women had already established a long tradition of hosting cosmopolitan gatherings in their homes. From the time of the Enlightenment, intellectuals, artists and writers had met at these salons and engaged in conversations both serious and light. Indeed, the upper echelon of French society had developed a reputation for sharp wit, lively repartee, and brilliant wordplay in these contexts.²⁰⁸ Bricktop and Beach both engaged this tradition via the public settings of their businesses rather than the private settings of their homes. Yet each woman's close personal identification with her business informed her choice and ability to play hostess as well.

Significantly, the titles and content of both Bricktop's and Beach's recollections reflect this blurring between life and work. Beach's *Shakespeare and Company* bears the name of her shop and does not even have a subtitle identifying her as the proprietress to

²⁰⁷ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 8-9.

²⁰⁸ For more on salon culture, see Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

unfamiliar readers. The memoir primarily centers on her career, with most chapters focusing on her relationships with selected famous customers. Important details about her personal life – most notably, her internment by the Nazis during World War II – take up much less space than do stories related to *Shakespeare and Company*.²⁰⁹ Additionally, for much of her life in Paris, Beach lived in an apartment directly above her shop; when not there, she stayed with Monnier in her flat down the street from both bookstores, and rented out her apartment to the American composer George Antheil and his wife Böske. For Beach, home and work always occupied either the same building or the same street, and she seems to have spent more time in the shop than anywhere else.²¹⁰

The title of Bricktop's autobiography, *Bricktop*, reflects the fact that she named her club for herself, and it links her public identity to her work. For Bricktop, the club functioned more symbolically as an extension of her home, and thus she associated herself more directly with it.²¹¹ In calling her establishment "Bricktop's," she claimed not simply ownership of the club in a business sense, but also created a personal space for guests to enter, in the same way they might enter her home. She opposed altercations in her club on the grounds that "Starting a fight at Bricktop's was like starting a fight in somebody's house."²¹² Moreover, Bricktop often portrays herself as a motherly or sisterly figure in this environment in her autobiography. As newcomers – black and white – came to Paris, she welcomed and advised them. She highlights F. Scott Fitzgerald and Josephine Baker as the young Americans she most explicitly "mothered," and she must have done a fairly good job

²⁰⁹ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 216.

²¹⁰ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 122.

²¹¹ At one point in her memoir, Bricktop claims, "There's a big difference between a woman and a nightclub," but this is specifically in reference to a jealous bride's disapproval of her husband's desire to get back to Bricktop's after their wedding (Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 162). In many other places in her memoir, the line between where "Bricktop" ended and "Bricktop's" began seems more blurry.

²¹² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 156.

of it, since the two became successful symbols of Jazz Age Paris. In her attempts to create a home away from home for her guests, Bricktop also had her mother's example as a boardinghouse and restaurant owner for guidance.²¹³

After leaving Paris in 1939, Bricktop attempted to recreate her Paris club in several other places. Her efforts initially met with some success, due to her American clients' desire to relive "the glory days." Bricktop certainly realized that for many, she had become "a symbol of their Paris," but also that the unique aspects of Jazz Age Paris had collapsed and would be impossible to recapture. Still, because her own identity remained so entwined with her business, Bricktop could never abandon her work as a club owner altogether, and she spent the next twenty years establishing various incarnations of Bricktop's in Mexico City, Paris, and Rome. Reflecting on her feelings of disorientation as she considered retirement in the 1960s, she writes, "The club, wherever it was, had become part of me, and I couldn't imagine life without it."²¹⁴ As they wrote their books, both Sylvia Beach and Bricktop sensed that the public connected them with particular people and a particular place and time, and the two each sought to deliver on that expectation.²¹⁵

The French context in which both women lived adds to the sense of a close connection between the home and the workplace. As just one familiar example, French cafés and restaurants often advertise themselves as "Chez _____," which translates equally as "At the place of _____" or "At the home of _____." Even today, etiquette requires the customer to issue a general greeting of "Bonjour" upon entering all but the largest of

²¹³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 96-97, 107.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209, 279.

²¹⁵ Discussion of audience expectations and the place of both Bricktop's and Shakespeare and Company in popular memory appear in more depth in Chapter Three.

French shops or restaurants, even if no other person is in sight.²¹⁶ It seems plausible that Bricktop, drawing inspiration from Jack Johnson's European-inspired Café Champ in Chicago and nearby establishments in Montmartre, adopted a similar idea attitude about the relationship between business and personal space when it came to operating her own club.

As successful business owners, both Beach and Bricktop lived their lives in spaces they controlled as women. Yet race and class dictated that they did not occupy those spaces in the same way. For one, Bricktop's European clubs tended to occupy less physical space than those in which she worked in the United States. At first, the smaller size of European clubs discouraged her, but she soon realized the benefits of a more intimate setting.²¹⁷ A smaller space allowed Bricktop the advantage of keeping an eye on everything going on inside the club at once – from entertainment to drinks to money to people. She could easily assess who walked in and out of the club, and what kind of experience they had while there. This intimacy also allowed guests to feel her presence more strongly throughout the evening. Most significantly, perhaps, the size of the club had a direct effect on the atmosphere of exclusivity that Bricktop sought to cultivate. If there was not always enough room for everyone to “get in,” they had to come early and often in order to guarantee their spot at a table. In Bricktop's estimation, a line outside the door meant that she had done her job well.²¹⁸ Becoming a regular patron also meant forming a relationship with Bricktop, as she favored a club setting that allowed her to mingle and visit tables freely throughout the night. Once she left Paris for the United States, she realized that her particular style of entertaining

²¹⁶ If the greeting does not clearly reach the ears of a shop owner or attendant prior to the customer's posing a question or attempting to transact any business, or if it is not re-directed specifically as “Bonjour, Madame” or “Bonjour, Monsieur” upon opening a conversation, the resulting service – or lack thereof – will bear this out!

²¹⁷ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 85.

²¹⁸ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 159.

would not work as well, as the size and volume of the entertainment in American clubs often trumped the more intimate relations with customers that she preferred.

Bricktop's status as a black woman and business owner also probably affected her ability to recreate her Paris successes elsewhere. In France, Bricktop had run a business for an *integrated* clientele, in which she had the power to call the shots. Her word stood as law – even against that of white men. While she may have deferred to some white people in social interactions, when it came to her business, *she* remained in charge. Thus, white patrons inside the space of the club encountered her not simply as someone hired to amuse them. Of course, Bricktop did hire out her services as a hostess to others, and worked in other people's homes, but even here, clients like Lady Mendl, the Porters, and the Duke of Windsor and Wallace Simpson gave her control over the entertainment.²¹⁹ It is worth considering whether they would have recognized this kind of authority had they not first encountered Bricktop as a business owner in her club, a question that points to the importance of integrated black-controlled spaces.

Like Bricktop, Sylvia Beach inherited an interest in playing host from a parent. During the Beach family's years in Paris, her father Sylvester had invited students to gather at their home. Fitch writes that Beach's "most vivid memories of these years were to be of creative and charismatic artists who performed at the student atelier reunions, supervised by her father."²²⁰ Narrating her own "home influence," Beach described his efforts as a host: "Every Sunday evening, in a big studio in Montparnasse, American students came under home influence. That is, Father gave a sensible talk, and some of the most brilliant singers of the time, such as Mary Garden and Charles Clark, the great cellist Pablo Cassals [*sic*] and

²¹⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 120, 103-104.

²²⁰ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 24.

other artists gave their services to this work.”²²¹ For Beach, the later opportunity to play hostess herself to many of Europe and America’s great writers and artists represented a dream come true. In the bookshop’s first days, she counted herself fortunate to have made the acquaintance of so many of her literary heroes.²²² More importantly, Beach’s association with many French and American authors began prior to their acceptance by mainstream readers, for several of them owed *their* fame partly to *her* encouragement, networking skills, and efforts to widen their audience.²²³

If Beach is most famous for her work on Joyce’s behalf, she acted more broadly as an unofficial ambassador between American and French cultures, working with Monnier to foster mutual appreciation by and for each. Indeed, Monnier’s ideas about the potential power of bookshops as spheres for cultural and personal exchange must have had an influence on Beach. In many of her writings, Monnier alludes to the idea of unanimism, which her translator Richard McDougall defines as “essentially a social doctrine” based upon the principle that “any group has a spirit, a collective consciousness, that transcends and is more than the sum total of the personalities of the human beings that compose it; individual lives can receive their full value and meaning only as parts of a group.”²²⁴

Monnier’s formation of an intimate circle of special friends, called the “*potassons*,” served as an expression of the unanimist spirit. Monnier defined a *potasson* as a “variety of the human species that is distinguished by kindness and its sense of life.”²²⁵ As her closest friend, Monnier declared that Beach “formed all by herself a class [of *potasson*] that was a bit wild” – probably a reference to Beach’s almost profligate generosity with her time and

²²¹ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 4.

²²² SB to HBD, February 09, 1920, Box 7, Folder 4, SBP.

²²³ These authors included Ernest Hemingway, Thornton Wilder, and, of course, James Joyce.

²²⁴ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 17.

²²⁵ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 38, 39, 69.

energy. Those who possessed the qualities of a *potasson* became favored patrons in the two bookshops on the rue de l'Odéon, and Monnier wrote at length about the animating spirit of "Odéonia." An essay on her own shop, *La Maison des Amis des Livres*, opens with the assertion: "Business, for us, has a moving and profound meaning... This immediate and intuitive understanding, this private fixing of the soul, how easy they are in a shop, a place of transition between street and house!" This "place of transition between street and house" explains perfectly why Beach and Monnier both treated visitors as honored guests in their space of business, rather than simply as potential customers.

In another section on Odéonia, Monnier observes, "What must be created, what must be assisted are the bookshop-libraries that do not tend to satisfy a large public but rather a group that it may be possible to know individually and to serve perfectly."²²⁶ Beach cultivated just this type of knowledge of her patrons, and her work with Joyce shows that, when called upon, she certainly did seek to "serve perfectly." In addition to her work for Joyce, she also placed herself at the service of the American composer George Antheil. As Antheil readied his *Ballet Mécanique* for its world premiere in 1925, Beach let her small apartment above the shop to him and sought support for him from among her friends. She later declared, "I entered into all of George's problems," which seems hard to imagine, given her other duties and preoccupations, but Antheil does not appear to have taken advantage of her as Joyce did.²²⁷

Beach never could fully recover the time and money she invested in Joyce, but many of her other friends recognized her sacrifices and sought to help her as best they could. In 1936, when the bookstore's future looked uncertain, several of Beach's close acquaintances

²²⁶ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 74.

²²⁷ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 25.

– led by French authors like André Gide, Jules Romains, and Paul Valéry – formed a committee to try to keep her in business. The Friends of Shakespeare and Company offered special opportunities to hear notable authors like Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot read from their latest works-in-progress at the bookstore for a subscription fee payable to Beach. Because of her friends’ efforts, she managed to keep her business open until the Nazi occupation of Paris.²²⁸

Such support exemplified the spirit Beach and Monnier sought to cultivate in their little world of Odéonia – on the surface, the “country of books,” as Monnier termed it, but also a place in which the two women nurtured cross-cultural exchanges between writers and artists from Europe and the United States.²²⁹ The English novelist Bryher claimed, “There was only one street in Paris for me, the rue de l’Odéon,” and she described Beach as “the perfect Ambassador” who surpassed all others in “spread[ing] knowledge of America abroad.”²³⁰ To her adopted homeland of France, Beach introduced the promise of a new school of American writers, and to her American visitors and the reading public back in the United States, she raised the profile of lesser-known British and French authors. In the midst of her numerous projects and duties throughout the years, she remained personable and welcoming to all who came to see her and request her help.

Scholars have made much of the many “names” that passed through both Bricktop’s and Beach’s doors, but accounts like Tyler Stovall’s *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* or Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940* have generally focused on one community or the other, ignoring possible shared experiences and

²²⁸ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 209-211.

²²⁹ Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 69-75.

²³⁰ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 86.

relationships between them. While connections between the black and white worlds of Paris sometimes appear in passing, evidence drawn from the lives of Beach's and Bricktop's friends and customers points to a need for more intentional surveys that re-integrate the city's interwar physical and social geography. Reading Bricktop's and Beach's lives and careers side-by-side shows that the two communities did not exist in isolation from one another, as several of their patrons crossed back and forth between the Left and Right Banks of Paris.

It is worth noting that no concrete evidence exists to prove that Sylvia Beach and Bricktop knew each other personally or ever visited each other's establishments. Andrea Weiss has highlighted the lack of friendships between black and white women in Paris, and that relationships with men most famously connected Sylvia Beach and Bricktop.²³¹ One reason for the paucity of interracial friendships among women no doubt stems from the fact that fewer black women than black men lived in Paris, and that those black women who did reside there tended to be married women. Busy with the affairs of home and family, these women would have had less time for the kinds of literary and artistic pursuits in which many of the Left Bank's white women participated. It also remains possible that they would not have enjoyed the same access to education as their white counterparts.

However, while we do not know if Bricktop or Beach ever met, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars* offers glimpses of two black women who knew both. Beach's friendship with Paul Robeson's wife Eslanda appears in her memoirs and correspondence, but Sharpley-Whiting's study of Robeson's life reveals that she also knew Bricktop well and spent time with her at Bougival, Bricktop's country estate outside Paris.²³² Sharpley-Whiting also uncovers another

²³¹ Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman*, 23.

²³² Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris*, 151-152.

mutual acquaintance and patron – the Harlem Renaissance poet Gwendolyn Bennett. In fact, it was likely Eslanda Robeson who introduced Bennett to both Bricktop and Beach, the latter of whom Bennett would join for a Thanksgiving dinner.²³³ Still, unlike Robeson, the average person likely could not have served as this type of link between Bricktop and Beach. Even if they had scraped up enough money to get to Paris, such a person had to belong to a certain spending class or possess some amount of fame that would render them known to *both* white and black expatriates. Ironically, these class limitations applied at Bricktop's more than at Sylvia Beach's, since Beach's bookshop would have been a more affordable place to socialize for people of either race.

The American author Robert McAlmon and his friend Kay Boyle stand as the foremost patrons who moved between the worlds of Sylvia Beach and Bricktop. McAlmon and Boyle appear in both Bricktop's and Beach's autobiographies, and vice versa. A passage in Boyle's part of *Being Geniuses Together* clearly shows that those who had the stamina and the money found it possible to enjoy both worlds: "After Adrienne's party [following a reading of Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* from *Finnegan's Wake* in its French translation] I took the doctor to Bricktop's."²³⁴ Aside from casual references to her club in *Being Geniuses Together*, Bricktop appears as herself in McAlmon's *roman à clef* entitled *The Nightinghousls of Paris*.²³⁵ While Beach counted McAlmon, especially, as a close friend, she could not often join him in his jaunts around town. Privately she expressed her disapproval to McAlmon's wife Bryher over the degree to which McAlmon's revelry interfered with his work, but she tiptoed around the subject in her memoirs, noting, "My occupation was a

²³³ Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris*, 99 – 101.

²³⁴ Boyle, in McAlmon and Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together*, 316. The lengthy description of Bricktop that follows this sentence appears in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

²³⁵ Robert McAlmon, *The Nightinghousls of Paris*, ed. by Sanford J. Smoller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 45-53, 61.

daytime one, and a long daytime at that, so I didn't go on to the night clubs with my friends, but the occasional rounds I made were quite bearable with Bob McAlmon in his cups to entertain us."²³⁶

F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda also figured prominently in both Beach and Bricktop's circles. Beach recalled that "One of our great pals was Scott Fitzgerald... We liked him very much, as who didn't? ... He streaked across the rue de l'Odéon, dazzling us for a moment."²³⁷ Bricktop claimed that Fitzgerald's entourage predominated at her club at one point, and this had made her famous even before Cole Porter and his friends began frequenting it. She also described Fitzgerald in strikingly similar terms as Beach.²³⁸ "It was impossible not to like him," she remembered, "He was a little boy in a man's body." Indeed, Bricktop claims that she often found herself acting as a mother-figure toward the carefree Fitzgerald, extricating him from difficult situations and driving him home when he had too much to drink.²³⁹

In the club's early days, Bricktop wrote that many of the expatriate community's artists and writers filled her club. Acquaintances of Beach's, such as Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, and T.S. Eliot, stand out among the names Bricktop mentions. Yet she also remarks that "After the Cole Porter crowd started coming in, the Montparnasse crowd just faded away. Montparnasse and St. Germain didn't mix." Bricktop portrays herself as the one who continued the social mixing, particularly when she speaks of going to

²³⁶ Beach, *Letters*, 114; Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 26.

²³⁷ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 116.

²³⁸ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 98.

²³⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 95-97.

Montparnasse's famous cafes with fellow entertainers after work.²⁴⁰ The busy and practical Sylvia Beach does not discuss Montmartre's clubs in any comparable detail in her memoirs.

Paris offered two very *different* experiences for black and white people on many levels, but as shown above, these experiences were not completely *separate*. Even if they never met, it seems impossible that Beach and Bricktop would not have at least known of each other's names and businesses, for they counted several people as mutual friends and patrons. Institutions like Beach's bookshop and Bricktop's club, with their emphasis on creating a "home away from home" for expatriates created space for connections.

* * *

The expatriate communities of interwar Paris mastered the art of networking long before it became a twenty-first century buzzword. Whether in personal or business contexts, the men and women who found themselves in Paris during this time capitalized on the proliferation of "names" swirling about in bookstores, cafes, studios, bars, and publishing houses. Becoming a regular at these establishments guaranteed them a new list of contacts in the present and illustrious bragging rights into the future.

As American businesswomen in Paris, Sylvia Beach and Bricktop not only broadened their own networks through business and serving as hostesses, but also created spaces for their fellow expatriates to connect with people from other nations, races, and classes. In addition, they took their stand as independent women engaged in commerce and culture, and they intentionally involved other women in this work. Even after the successful appearance of *Ulysses*, Fitch notes that Beach chose not to pursue the many promising publication requests that came her way, committed instead to "remain a port of call for writers, where for

²⁴⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 98-99, 95.

twenty-two years artists met for tea, tips, and the sound of their native tongue.”²⁴¹ Both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach faced many challenges as American businesswomen living in France between world wars and amidst financial upheaval, but due to their capable handling of both traditionally male and female roles, each woman looked back with gratitude at the full lives they had led and the people they had known.

²⁴¹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 18.

CHAPTER 3: Memories and Myth-making: The Crowded Recollections of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach

*“Looking back, I know that a lot went on, but I really can’t remember many specifics. I probably would have seen more if I didn’t like Rémy Martin so much.”*²⁴² – Bricktop

*“I should never have written memoirs without a memory.”*²⁴³ – Sylvia Beach

For many, Paris is a place that exists on two levels – in reality and in memory. As Ernest Hemingway famously said, “There is never any ending to Paris and the memory of each person who has lived in it differs from that of any other. We always returned to it no matter who we were or how it was changed or with what difficulties, or ease, it could be reached.”²⁴⁴ Indeed, perhaps no other city has the same cultural association with the idea of remembrance. On the surface, it attracts sightseers to its countless monuments and memorials of significant moments in France’s long history. On a psychological level, as Hemingway noted, Paris consistently lives on in the memories of its visitors and inhabitants, no matter how distinct or personal their experiences there.

Parisian nostalgia also occupies a special place as a beloved trope of American popular culture. From Humphrey Bogart’s famous line in *Casablanca*, “We’ll always have Paris,” to Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s 1940 song “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” to more recent films like *Forget Paris* and the Jazz Age time travel fantasy *Midnight in Paris*, it is difficult to think of many cities in the United States possessing a comparable hold over Americans. This love affair with the City of Light reached its peak in the 1950s, when many films with a Parisian setting appeared, such as *An American in Paris*, *Funny Face*, and *Sabrina*. With the inauguration of the atomic age, the 1950s were a time of uncertainty and

²⁴² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 157. A reference to Bricktop’s preference for Rémy Martin champagne cognac.

²⁴³ Beach, *Letters*, 254-255.

²⁴⁴ Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 126.

anxiety in both Europe and the United States, making a return to “Gay Paree” all the more inviting. As World War II ended, and the Cold War began, many Americans seized on the desire to recapture something lost from an earlier time. Serving in the armed forces during the world wars had introduced Europe to many Americans who might not have had the money to travel there otherwise. Whereas “the grand tour” had previously excluded all but the wealthiest, a tour of duty democratized the continent, making Paris a site of memory for a larger and more diverse group of Americans than ever before.

This decade also saw a proliferation of autobiographies and memoirs dealing with interwar Paris. Sylvia Beach’s memoir *Shakespeare and Company* appeared in 1959, joining similar works by many of those in the literary modernist circle in which she moved. Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* stands as perhaps the most celebrated example of the genre. In *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture Between the World Wars*, Brooke L. Blower discusses American expatriates’ need, beginning in the 1950s, to remember the Paris of their youth, calling the city a “deeply personalized space.”²⁴⁵ For many Americans, Paris represented the place where they had come-of-age as adults – a safe place to “find themselves” – familiar, while also worldly and “over there.” Moreover, accounts of time abroad had long offered a tailor-made format for representing oneself to the public. Some of an author’s acquaintances can likely corroborate the basic outline of the stories told, but most could not have been present at every moment; this provides an author the freedom to embellish and represent many things differently from how they really occurred. Thus, such written reflections actually prove ripe for misremembering and myth-making, especially when composed after a long period of time has passed.

²⁴⁵ Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 262-263.

The words “memoir” and “autobiography” have slightly different meanings, but both genres depend heavily on memory. Most basically, Pierre Nora defined an autobiography as the “psychological and literary history of an individual’s inner life,” whereas a memoir serves as a “linear narration of an *external* history.”²⁴⁶ Of course, not all autobiographies and memoirs conform to these standards, and authors will often even use the terms interchangeably to refer to their own work. Many works, such as Sylvia Beach’s *Shakespeare and Company*, occupy a space in between the two genres. While Beach spoke of her book as her “memoirs,” the narrative is not strictly linear, and she sets the story of the bookstore up similarly to an autobiography, with information about her early life and family. Describing his own years growing up during World War II and the Nazi occupation of France, Pierre Nora calls the experience “an adventure inscribed in the flesh of memory,” a phrase that one could use to describe both memoir and autobiography broadly.²⁴⁷

For Sylvia Beach, Ada “Bricktop” Smith, and many of their fellow Americans, the memory of living in Paris served as a perfect canvas for creating a slightly more mature *bildungsroman* – a grown-up growing-up story. Even so, Bricktop’s eponymously titled autobiography and Sylvia Beach’s memoir both highlight the tensions involved in writing about one’s past self and one’s past world. Stephen Butterfield’s *Black Autobiography in America* speaks of autobiographical writing as a genre that occupies a space between “objective fact and subjective awareness. It is a dialectic between what you wish to become and what society has determined you are. In response to a particular historical period, the

²⁴⁶ Pierre, Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire, Vol. 1: The State*, trans. by Mary Trouille (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 425.

²⁴⁷ Nora, *Rethinking France*, vii.

autobiographer examines, interprets, and creates the importance of his life.”²⁴⁸ Both *Bricktop* and *Shakespeare and Company* are highly mediated texts that focus chiefly on their authors’ lives as American women in interwar Paris. Written across many years, these texts did not spring fully-formed from either woman – they had other hands involved in shaping their narrative, and a specific portrait to paint for a target audience. In both works, the authors meditate on various facets of their respective identities, including race, gender, and nationality. In doing so, though, each woman has to carefully balance the private memories of her past with the present need to represent herself in a way that will stay consistent with her reputation. Thus, both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach write performatively, selecting events and feelings carefully from their personal recollections in order to maintain the familiar public persona that readers will recognize. The paradoxes of Bricktop’s autobiography appear as her voice shifts back and forth between the public and the private – she sometimes proclaims that she has muted certain aspects of her life, calling attention to an invisible veil. For Beach, such ruptures reveal themselves when she treats significant topics briefly and nonchalantly, or when she compares the official story she tells with the stronger feelings she expresses in her personal correspondence with friends and family.

Neither Bricktop’s nor Sylvia Beach’s recollections of their days are always consistent with the actual facts of what happened, but the works do appear mostly faithful to the ways each woman viewed and approached life. As David Thelen notes in an article on the relationship between history and memory, an inaccurate memory may trouble the historian concerned with studying the particulars of an event, but the same misremembrance

²⁴⁸ Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 1.

reveals much about the person relating the event.²⁴⁹ Both women, for example, describe their relationships with famous men in ways that clearly do not represent the whole truth, but each has good reason for sustaining their mythical portrayals. Ironically, perhaps, Bricktop, the black woman writing with a co-author, strikes the reader as more liberated in her book, more in control of her own story. Her personality comes through vividly, as though she were telling the story orally with wandering changes in direction, proud declarations of her own success, and feisty observations about life and business. Clearly, Bricktop relished the chance to entertain in a new medium. As for Beach, in her writing, as in her life, she took pains not to offend and often focused on pleasing others to her own detriment. While *Shakespeare and Company* offers gentle humor and an embarrassment of riches in the form of anecdotes about Beach's famous acquaintances, it does not always line up with Beach's private revelations in letters to family and close friends. She, too, performs, and her silences speak as loudly as Bricktop's bubbly revelations.

* * *

While Sylvia Beach worked at writing her memoirs on her own for several years, Bricktop's autobiography always had a co-writer attached to it. *Bricktop* appeared in 1983, one year before its subject's death, under her own name and that of James Haskins. Haskins and Bricktop worked on the book for several years before its publication, but the project of telling Bricktop's story had actually begun in the early 1960s, with another co-author. Letters between Bricktop and this first collaborator, David Hanna, reveal an obvious disconnect between her wishes and his efforts. He often wrote to her optimistically about how the work was taking shape, but her annotations of his letters testify to her distrust of

²⁴⁹ David Thelen, "Memory and American History," (*The Journal of American History* Vol. 75, No. 4, 1989), 1119.

Hanna's portrayal of certain aspects of her life, especially her relationship with her mother.²⁵⁰ Hanna, a white public relations man, had written biographies of many celebrities, such as Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner, by the time he and Bricktop began her project. Bricktop even paid him at one point for what they had completed; however, in the end, she did not feel comfortable enough with the drafts he produced to continue the collaboration.²⁵¹

In his "Introduction," Haskins relates his first meeting with Bricktop, and the rigid interview process she employed when thinking through the possibility of writing her life story a second time. Haskins recalled, "She began the interview with a barrage of questions for me – where was I from, who were my family, where had I gone to school, what did I do besides write, had I traveled much, where, when, with whom, what had I seen, what had I learned?" Even after an hour of grilling, Bricktop took "months" before finalizing the decision to entrust her story to Haskins.²⁵² At the age of eighty-five, she clearly knew what a goldmine of information she sat on and its likely commercial value, but she would have rather taken her stories to her grave than allow the wrong person to handle them. The correspondence between Haskins and Bricktop reads as affectionate, but more professional than her exchanges with Hanna.²⁵³ The two worked on the book in person at Bricktop's apartment in Harlem, and that process also seems to have gone much more smoothly than did her efforts with Hanna.

It comes as no great surprise that Bricktop fared better working with Haskins. Throughout his career, Haskins produced many works on black culture and history, and as an African American man himself, likely earned Bricktop's trust more easily than Hanna. In

²⁵⁰ Bricktop Papers, Correspondence with David Hanna, 1961-1969, Box 2, Folder 17, SC.

²⁵¹ Bricktop to David Hanna, September 14, 1971, Box 2, Folder 18, Bricktop Papers, SC.

²⁵² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, xiii.

²⁵³ Bricktop Papers, Correspondence with James Haskins, Box 2, Folder 19, SC.

1969, Haskins had published his first work, an account of his own reflections of working in New York City's public schools entitled *Diary of a Harlem Schoolteacher*. Twelve years later, he wrote *The Cotton Club*, a chronicle of the popular hotspot in 1920s Harlem. Unlike Hanna, then, Haskins had more familiarity with Bricktop's world, as well as what it would have been like to try to communicate one's personal experiences and memories in print. In addition, the prospect of working with the author of biographies on Martin Luther King, Jr., Winnie Mandela, and Hank Aaron, meant that Bricktop stood in good company as the subject of a Haskins project.²⁵⁴

While Bricktop's autobiography does not bear witness to an especially vocal political or racial consciousness, she must have trusted Haskins as a legacy-maker of sorts for fellow African Americans. Indeed, Haskins claims that he had known her name from his childhood in the South because "Negroes who had made it were a common topic of discussion... It was a peculiar fact of existence for the average American black to be on intimate terms with the stories of those few of us who had managed to burrow out from under" racial prejudice and discrimination.²⁵⁵ Haskins's inclination to hold up Bricktop's life as a success story dovetailed with her own preferences as well as characterizations of her life in letters and interviews. As a co-writer, she could depend on him to be generous in helping her to tell her story in a positive light. Even at the end of their collaboration, Haskins wrote, "Over those months I had become as fascinated by the flesh-and-blood Bricktop as I had ever been by the legend."²⁵⁶ In fact, much of the "Introduction" serves as Haskins's space to pay homage to Bricktop and to confirm all of the claims she will make in her own "voice" throughout the

²⁵⁴ All biographical information on James Haskins taken from his obituary in the *New York Times* by Mel Watkins, July 11, 2005: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/11/books/james-haskins-an-author-on-black-history-dies-at-63.html?_r=0.

²⁵⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, xi.

²⁵⁶ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, xii-xiii.

rest of the book. In helping Bricktop to tell her story, then, Haskins encountered not only Bricktop's memories of her past, but also his own memories of hearing about her as a youth.

Trust in Haskins proved especially important as Bricktop navigated the tensions of sharing the story of her life as a black woman living and working in mostly white settings.

The question of how much to share, and in what ways would never have been too far from her mind. As Butterfield explains, "What makes [autobiography] an especially attractive genre for the black writer is that it lives in the two worlds of history and literature. Black writers also live in two worlds: American and Black, public mask and private face."²⁵⁷

Although the American racial landscape had undergone important changes throughout her life, the necessity of masking some aspects of her experience would have affected Bricktop's choices in telling her story. Bricktop's mother's presence flavors her entire tale, and her early lessons about how to present oneself in public also shaped how Bricktop decided to perform on the grand stage of the printed word. This was especially true when it came to talking about possibly sensitive subjects, such as her relationship with her husband, or her real feelings toward the privileged white society in which she moved. As with most autobiographies, much of Bricktop's audience would have already known some things about her and expected her to discuss certain facets of her public and private life. Recognizing this, she does touch on subjects like the break-up of her marriage and instances of prejudice, but she never does so in a way that would ruffle any feathers or take away from the larger story she tells about herself as a welcoming hostess for rich white celebrities.

In choosing how to narrate her life story as a black woman who came to fame in a mostly white world, Bricktop negotiates a "veil within a veil," to use Joanne M. Braxton's

²⁵⁷ Butterfield, *Black Autobiography*, 284.

phrase.²⁵⁸ Unlike a fellow expatriate such as Ernest Hemingway, for example, she was neither white nor male, and had to adjust her version of the American in Paris story accordingly. In *Dancing on the White Page: Black Women Entertainers Writing Autobiography*, Kwakiutl L. Dreher notes a clear difference between famous black and white women's autobiographies. Of course, she grants, white female celebrities have written tell-all autobiographies full of various types of struggle,

But the racial dynamics dancing in the United States pre-and post-civil rights movement of the 1960s do not touch white stars. Audiences wait anxiously to see a lavish dress or suit worn by a white guest on the Ed Sullivan Show, but whisper whether Sullivan will kiss Dorothy Dandridge. Hotels welcome white performers through the front door while ushering black entertainers in through the back door.²⁵⁹

While Bricktop at times seems to go out of her way to claim that she did not experience many instances of outright prejudice in the United States, she writes indignantly of the times when she does. This is especially true after her return from Paris, when she expected her fame to exempt her from the treatment that all other black women experienced. This expectation is on display in a story she relates about visiting Cole Porter at his New York apartment and receiving the cold shoulder from his concierge, who questioned her presence there.²⁶⁰

For the most part, though, Bricktop's autobiography is unlike most other black autobiographies of her time in that it does not deal very explicitly with racial conflict. Growing up black in turn-of-the-century West Virginia and Chicago, she certainly would have experienced prejudice and "separate but equal" conditions, both on the fringes of the

²⁵⁸ Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 3.

²⁵⁹ Kwakiutl L. Dreher, *Dancing on the White Page: Black Women Entertainers Writing Autobiography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 199.

²⁶⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 208-209.

South and in the urban North, but she privileges memories of racial harmony in a small country town and a melting pot neighborhood in the city. Spending most of the years from 1924-1965 outside of the United States, much of Bricktop's later life strikes the reader as even further removed from the Jim Crow atmosphere in which she grew up. And when she did return to the US, she converted to Catholicism, cutting herself off from a vital unifying force in many black communities – the Protestant church. At times, Bricktop seems almost reluctant to connect her life to the larger narrative of the black freedom struggle, and mentions knowing Ralph Bunche and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the same fashion that she drops other “names,” without any explicit indication of their work.²⁶¹ While she proudly refers to herself as “100% American Negro,” she also relates fielding a loaded question from Bunche: ““Brick, what do you tell those Negroes when they say you want to be white?”” Her response focuses on gender politics and fears of miscegenation, sidestepping Bunche's subtler implications that she had tried to pass as white:

I said, “I tell them I'm one of the few successful Negro women they've got who never married a white man. And I never lived with one. I'd say to those other successful women – the ones with white men – “What do you want with him?” “Well, he's my manager,” they'd say. “I never had no white man for a manager,” I'd say. “Yes, but you had all those famous people ---” I'd interrupt. “They came looking for me. I never looked for them.”²⁶²

As usual, Bricktop portrays herself as a person apart and turns the conversation into an opportunity to highlight her independence and success. Bricktop did not mind name-dropping in order to link herself with particular groups of famous celebrities, but in passages

²⁶¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 281-282.

²⁶² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 132.

like this, she also downplays the reality of her reliance on an elite white male clientele to show that she possessed something special that drew these people to her.

Bricktop's strong insistence about the portrayal of her mother, Hattie Smith, similarly centers around her concern that readers understand Smith's ability to manage for herself and her family. Haskins seems to have let Bricktop have her way when it came to this aspect of her life, as the book contains countless allusions to Smith's wisdom and hard work. In fact, *Bricktop* begins tellingly with a description of the author's mother having to take a break from her job running a restaurant in order to give birth.²⁶³ Ladylike behavior, good manners, and respectability surface as some of the most consistent themes in Bricktop's references to her mother. In several instances, she describes her interactions with the rich and famous—nearly always white—and proudly claims that she “knew how to behave” or “knew her place” or something similar due to her mother's faithful training and model.²⁶⁴ As revealed in the conversation with Bunche, she prided herself on her ability to keep whites at a distance, avoiding the appearance that she had desperately sought their patronage.

Throughout her story, Bricktop calls attention to the reality of black women's ability to find success as independent businesswomen through their intelligence and talents. In addition to her own achievements, she proudly speaks of: her mother's ability to raise a family by herself and run a boardinghouse in Chicago; her sister Blonzetta's real estate dealings; the talents of long-forgotten female performers on the chitlin' circuit of black entertainment; and the accomplishments of black women she knew in Paris like Mabel Mercer and Josephine Baker. While her mother and sister did not achieve the fame that Bricktop did, they both contributed to her success, and Hattie Smith, especially, functions in

²⁶³ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 3.

²⁶⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 6, 130.

the text as the person who enabled Bricktop to claim the opportunities that came her way. Though Bricktop never makes explicit statements about feminism, she clearly enjoys emphasizing the triumphs of these black female friends and family members. Of Baker, for example, she writes, “[Her white manager and husband] Pepito made her a star, internationally famous, but Josephine always remained what she was – a great, great actress – and she played it, and she lived in another world.”²⁶⁵ As with her own story, Bricktop acknowledges that white men often made “stars” of black women, but that women like Baker and herself independently possessed the talents and intelligence to attract such attention and help.

In telling her own “rags-to-riches” story, one gets the sense that Bricktop seeks to pull her mother up with her to a place of honor, to gain applause for her hard work and example. Dreher notes, “Whether penned by herself or a ghost writer, black celebrity autobiographies are not only narratives about a single subject, but also are narratives about a collective of voices and shared experiences, a mark of solidarity with non-celebrity black women.” In recognizing the contributions of other black women in her life, Bricktop is not unique, as Dreher writes that it is typical of “black celebrity auto/biography [to acknowledge] the black mothers and matriarchs who form and shape a black womanhood contrary to that of the mammy/maid stereotype. This acknowledgement expands the dialogue on how stars are made, a credit so often given to Hollywood agent and publicists.”²⁶⁶ Braxton speaks to this as well, when she says that “collectivity, cooperation, collaboration, and celebration” among black women are integral to their lives, and thus, their autobiographies. Of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical works, she notes that “Angelou’s celebration of self derives essentially from

²⁶⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 110.

²⁶⁶ Dreher, *Dancing on the White Page*, 27, 21.

her celebration of the black women who nurtured her.”²⁶⁷ A black woman’s acknowledgment of her roots appears all the more important in light of the fact that success often drew her away from her early support system. Bricktop herself would act as a mentor and publicist of sorts for fellow black women in Paris like Baker and Mabel Mercer. In fact, in Mercer’s case, Haskins’ collaboration with Bricktop—not the efforts of someone in Mercer’s entourage—led him to research Mercer’s life and decide to write her biography.²⁶⁸

Haskins’s work on Mercer underscores how unique Bricktop’s particular brand of fame truly was. In writing Mercer’s biography, Haskins could explain her appeal in a fairly straightforward manner; by all accounts, Mercer was a singer with a lovely soprano voice and a talent for communicating the story behind a lyric.²⁶⁹ Bricktop’s life as a club owner was harder to capture, so she likely felt a need to let readers know just what exactly running, versus simply performing in, a legendary nightclub entailed. Doing so, however, means that Bricktop often looks to others’ words and reputation as a prop. In describing her personal style and success, she resorts to quoting articles or to relating a story or quip from some other celebrity to lend authority to her claims, as if her representation of matters as a black woman could not stand on its own for readers. In one of the most revealing passages of her autobiography, she writes,

I was getting successful in the nightclub business, and a lot if it had to do with someone I really didn’t even know – someone named Bricktop. Ada Smith would sometimes step back and say, “Who is this Bricktop? What’s so great about her?”
For the life of me, I still can’t answer that. There are some things I know. I know that without Cole Porter I wouldn’t have been anything. He created Bricktop, and he and his friends formed a sort of protective cocoon around me.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Braxton, *Black Women Writing*, 204, 197-198.

²⁶⁸ James Haskins, *Mabel Mercer: A Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), xvii.

²⁶⁹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 159-161.

²⁷⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 127.

In her autobiography, as in her career at the club, Bricktop acknowledged the division between public and private spheres. The use of her two names in this passage points to the existence of the two selves she could not quite reconcile – Ada Smith and Bricktop; the girl who had crisscrossed the country doing blackface and vaudeville, and the woman welcoming royalty to her club in diamonds and an evening gown. Rather than pursuing this point more deeply, though, she immediately returns the focus to Cole Porter as the reason for her success. Still, it is also worth noting that Bricktop replicates Porter’s important role in her life in the way she describes her relationships with others, making similar claims about her own assistance in the lives of fellow entertainers like Mercer, Josephine Baker, and even Duke Ellington.²⁷¹ Throughout the autobiography, we see her representing herself alternately as both Bricktop the great and down-to-earth Ada. As one persona, she can talk up her fame and achievements freely, but lest she appear too boastful, she can retreat into humble Ada mode to balance out her self-portrait.

Bricktop clearly saw the entertainment business as one of mutual support and patronage, but it is interesting to reconcile her reliance on the fame and praise of those around her with other claims she and others make about her own self-reliance, which shaped her ability to remain independent and unswayed by celebrity culture. In his “Introduction,” Haskins gushes, “What fascinated me, and still does, is Bricktop’s refusal to be awed by her own life or by the galaxy of people she knew. Far from being eager to enter their orb, she insisted on distancing herself. She was a communication satellite from which they often

²⁷¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 78, 107-110, 160-161.

bounced transmissions to one another, and to themselves; and that is exactly the way she wanted it.”²⁷² At the very least, it is the way she wanted it told and remembered.

While she may have felt more awe than she and Haskins want to confess, Bricktop had other reasons for her constant name-dropping. To begin, Bricktop’s clubs truly did attract the rich and famous, and such names would have interested readers who would have also expected to find tidbits about them in the text. In writing about her work as a club owner, Bricktop could not have helped but mention these people as part of her life. They represented her business both in and out of the club, as she also followed them to resorts during the off-season, and provided entertainment and dancing lessons for them in their homes. Additionally, Bricktop and Haskins often insert names like Cole Porter, the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Warfield Simpson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Josephine Baker strategically, as a way to situate Bricktop herself in history and culture. To the extent that this name-dropping conjures up the image of her clientele, readers get an immediate sense of what her clubs must have felt like without much need for elaboration.

Ironically, crowding her narrative with names allows Bricktop to demonstrate her own independence. Throughout the autobiography, she provides examples of celebrities – both white and black – who admired and loved her, but her whole project remains to represent herself as a person apart, as someone who kept her head and never got caught up in the drama of her clients’ lives. This strategy also acts as a defense of how she narrates her story, especially for those readers expecting a tell-all account of what went on between the rich and famous at her dimly-lit tables. She navigates between peopling her story with instantly recognizable figures and leaving other details vague, with the words quoted above about alcohol’s effect on her memory serving as a sly way to side-step further revelations. In

²⁷² Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, xiv-xv.

describing the tradition of French court memoirs, Pierre Nora claims that for the memoirist, “portraiture relies heavily on the psychology of secrecy.”²⁷³ Bricktop clearly recognized this appeal in appearing knowing, but choosing to withhold information about herself and her clients. She hints at knowledge of a wealth of behind-the-scenes gossip, but claims control over it. Here again, we see Bricktop assuming the persona of Ada, Hattie Smith’s daughter following her wisdom about being a discreet, respectable lady in public.

Folksy details, such as her humble origins, lack of education, and ability to cook soul food pervade Bricktop’s autobiography as a way of establishing herself almost as an anti-celebrity, as well as part of the black American community from which her work removed her. At one point, she even asserts ignorance of the intrigues and dealings that happened at her tables, writing, “I’d forget what I’d heard and seen right away quick. Mama used to say, ‘Anything you don’t want to hear again, don’t even tell yourself.’ It wasn’t my business to know these things. It was my business to make my clients feel at home” – meaning, she provided a space in which these celebrities could relax and socialize without having to perform, even though this meant that she herself was always “on” as hostess.²⁷⁴ Such statements allow Bricktop to claim a high moral ground. She balances this with examples of times she interacted more personally with her clients, but always outside of the club and after business hours. Giving readers the perception that she could have interacted even more intimately with her clients but chose not to, Bricktop establishes that her strong sense of identity came from within herself, rather than from having famous associates. As a black woman, she demonstrates that she did not need white people’s approval and friendship in her personal life, although she appreciated their business and professional support. She presents

²⁷³ Nora, *Rethinking France*, 421.

²⁷⁴ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 157-158.

herself as a capable businesswoman who merited the patronage she received, rather than a breathless hanger-on who owed her success to chance encounters with more talented individuals.

On the final page of her autobiography, Bricktop leaves her readers with the following declaration,

The one thing that really bothers me about being old is that I'm one of the last living persons who knew all those great people. Since they're dead, everybody thinks he or she is going to get some dirt about them out of me, but that's not my style. I wouldn't ever betray the memory of a friend or someone who was nice to me. It's not my business – it's not anyone's business – and I'm not telling it, and that's that. One of the reasons I am at peace with myself is that I've tried very hard to live my life without hurting anyone, and I have no intention of changing at my age. It's a good philosophy. *Ciao, babies.*²⁷⁵

A performer to the end, Bricktop maintains her image as very much in the world of celebrity, but not of it.

* * *

While Bricktop strategically relies on the words of others to describe herself, and seems to have left no compliment unquoted, a resolute guardedness characterizes Sylvia Beach's memoir. As a white woman, she did not need to perform and maneuver in quite the same ways that Bricktop did in order to claim authority and acceptance, but she nonetheless found writing her memoir a difficult and frustrating experience. For Beach, the process proved long and distracted, as she dealt with a change in publisher, frequent migraine headaches, low funds, the deaths of family members and her closest companion, conflicts over the rights to her collection of James Joyce memorabilia, war, imprisonment by the Nazis, and projects such as a book translation, an exhibition on American writers in the

²⁷⁵ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 289.

Twenties for the US Embassy in Paris, and the cataloguing of her vast library collection.²⁷⁶ Even with all of the setbacks she encountered, Beach remained dedicated to publishing her memoir, and the upbeat tone of *Shakespeare and Company* matches its author's determination to keep alive the memory of literary Paris at one of its most celebrated moments.

As Joyce's publisher and as hostess to many of the early twentieth century's most famous writers, Beach, like Bricktop, knew that her work would attract a particular audience – scholars of literary modernism, Francophiles, fellow expats, and fans of authors like Hemingway and Stein. Because she published her memoir so many years after the events with which it dealt, much of the “action” was common knowledge. Beach thus focused more on cataloguing all of the important cultural figures who walked through her doors and sharing her positive personal memories of their interactions. For example, names like Paul Valéry, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Sherwood Anderson appear as eye-catching chapter titles.

Beach had often played the role of a protective sister, and she continued to do so when writing her memoirs. She took pains to get in touch with friends and have them approve what she wrote about them, balancing the responsibility of both her audience's expectations and those of her subjects. The case of Ernest Hemingway represents the clearest example of this burden. Like many of the Lost Generation writers, Hemingway had begun work on his own account of his time in Paris, and while *A Moveable Feast* would not appear until after his death, Beach realized at the time that her portrayal of Hemingway would need to fit in with both the existing persona he had created as well the forthcoming

²⁷⁶ Beach, *Letters*, 181.

narrative he was shaping.²⁷⁷ She had to ensure that her portrait of Hemingway was consistent with his, rather than contradictory.

In the summer and fall of 1955, she reached out to Hemingway several times and expressed a desire to have him tell her, as she wrote, “whether the ‘Hemingway’ is o.k.”²⁷⁸ Other letters indicate that she asked his permission to use photographs and quotes from their letters; inquired whether Harcourt, Brace had sent him the extracts that concerned him; and proposed a meeting to collaborate on the task of his portrayal.²⁷⁹ Even after all of these offers to keep Hemingway abreast of how things progressed, the hand-wringing continued, much to her editor’s displeasure. Beach’s correspondence with Hemingway at the time reveals that her main concern had to do with Hemingway’s first wife, Hadley, and the circumstances that led to their divorce. As she wrote in 1956:

After [the proofs] had gone off, I realized, too late to make any changes, that perhaps some should be made, and I think you will agree with me about this. A certain number of references to your domestic life in the days when I first knew you could easily be spared and should be deleted. I left these untouched – they were written years ago – when you said the other day to ‘go ahead’, but I do feel that in the present circumstances they have no particular interest. I know you will understand and the others too.²⁸⁰

A Moveable Feast shows that – for all his own mythmaking – Hemingway looked back on his marriage with Hadley fondly at the end of his life, and did not mind the world knowing it. Thus, his reply to Beach, scrawled on an envelope, read: “‘Cable Sylvia – anything she writes OK. Perfectly OK about Hadley – EH.’”²⁸¹ Clearly, Beach had gone above and beyond to demonstrate that she wanted to portray this literary giant in the best light, and

²⁷⁷ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 412.

²⁷⁸ SB to Ernest Hemingway (hereafter, EH), August 29, 1955, Box 22, Folder 9, SBP.

²⁷⁹ SB to EH, November 06, 1955, Box 22, Folder 9, SBP.

²⁸⁰ SB to EH, September 08, 1956, Box 22, Folder 9, SBP.

²⁸¹ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 412.

years of friendship had given him reason to trust her. For a man so famously devoted to constructing and maintaining a certain public image, Hemingway's full confidence in Beach says much about the strength of their relationship.

Beach, like Bricktop, led a full life and had many celebrated acquaintances and friends, but she too chose not to reveal as much as she could have about more private matters. Whereas Bricktop hides some of her claims in plain sight, Beach simply does not address or elaborate on significant aspects of her life. On the subject of her closest relationships, Beach often deals in generalities. For example, while her letters contain hints of tensions with all members of her family but her sister Holly, her memoir focuses overwhelmingly on the positive moments the Beach family shared.²⁸² Sylvia Beach probably had reason to restrict her comments on close familial relationships.²⁸³ She wrote near the end of her life, and had only a sister living at the time. Yet the Beach name had a long history in Princeton; for generations those sharing it had acted as pillars of the community and the church, and such a reputation might have suffered more in the 1950s.²⁸⁴ Various mentions of scandal had fluttered around the family name for decades, and Sylvia had no inclination to add fuel to those fires.²⁸⁵ Though her identity as a white woman from a privileged background meant she navigated social norms in distinctly different ways than Bricktop, Beach likewise embraced a racialized politics of class respectability.

Understanding Beach's other silences requires more probing. When it came to romantic relationships, Beach completely muted her experiences. As we have seen, French

²⁸² CB to SB, January 16, 1923, Box 6, Folder 2, SBP. Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 260-261.

²⁸³ Bricktop's letters do not contain any evidence of the type of family strife that appears at times in Beach's correspondence.

²⁸⁴ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 23-24.

²⁸⁵ In addition to possible gossip surrounding Beach's publication of the "obscene" *Ulysses* and her relationship with Adrienne Monnier, there were other delicate matters, such as Sylvester Beach's possible affair with a parishioner; Eleanor Beach's life apart from her husband, as well as her eventual shoplifting and suicide; and Cyprian Beach's relationships with women (see Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 28-29, 260-261, 294, 410).

bookseller Adrienne Monnier and Beach shared an intimate relationship that likely had many dimensions, including a sexual one, although neither identified the other explicitly as a lover in their writings. Circumstantial evidence, such as Beach and Monnier's friendship with famous lesbians like Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney, and Monnier's own allusions to a preference for women in her writings, support the assumption of a romantic attachment between the two women. Moreover Beach did dedicate her book to Monnier's memory.²⁸⁶ Noel Riley Fitch, Beach's biographer, offers another reason for her relegation of Monnier to a lesser role in her life. Beach once told another friend, "I didn't really say in my book what I wanted to about Adrienne Monnier. She was such an interesting person that I was afraid she'd take the whole show."²⁸⁷ Monnier's own writings do bear witness to her extraordinary talents as a bookseller, translator, and essayist, but fear of being overshadowed probably does not fully account for Beach's comparatively slight treatment of her relationship with her closest friend in *Shakespeare and Company*. Perhaps Beach worried that revealing the degree and character of her intimacy with Monnier would tarnish the family name, or perhaps she just embraced the selective nature of constructing a memoir and chose to keep that part of her life private.

Anticipating her audience's expectations, Beach says much about James Joyce in her memoir. At the same time, her dealings with Joyce represent the most obvious area of silence in her text. Their relationship began and continued warmly for many years, but Joyce's demands on Beach's schedule and finances proved a strain over time. Joyce's

²⁸⁶ Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman*, 23, 31. Monnier, *Very Rich Hours*, 315-317. Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, vii.

²⁸⁷ Jackson Matthews, "Conversation with Sylvia Beach & Company," *The Kenyon Review*, no. 22 (1960), 135-150.

withdrawal of Beach's rights to *Ulysses* in 1931 only complicated things.²⁸⁸ Beach also had to respond to things that had already been published. Prior to the appearance of *Shakespeare and Company*, Joyce scholar Stuart Gilbert had published a collection of Joyce's correspondence, revealing some negative remarks Joyce had made to his patroness Harriet Weaver about Beach. Beach was friends with both Weaver and Gilbert. Indignant at how the latter had characterized her dealings with Joyce, Sylvia told her sister Holly, "Luckily my book will be more truthful."²⁸⁹

For all her intention to set the record straight, Beach faced a dilemma. To many, including herself, the connection to Joyce represented Beach's greatest claim to fame. She was, after all, a bookseller who ran with a prominent literary crowd. The cover of Noel Riley Fitch's definitive biography of Beach features a photograph of her and Joyce, and the covers of various editions of *Shakespeare and Company* give Joyce pride of place as well. The story of her life as an American expatriate in Paris, her bookstore, and all of the shop's other interesting patrons could have made for a fascinating tale, but Beach knew the importance of Joyce and *Ulysses* in her professional success, as well as to her status among the American expatriate community in Paris. Not to cover that most illustrious aspect of her career would have left an unthinkable, gaping hole in the account. Beach went so far as to title early drafts of the memoir *Ulysses in Paris* and *James Joyce at Shakespeare & Co.*²⁹⁰ Thus, she faced the challenge of having to portray those years accurately, yet discreetly.

Although Joyce and his wife Nora had died by the time Beach began to work more seriously on the book, his executrix Harriet Weaver took great care to protect his reputation,

²⁸⁸ For more on Sylvia Beach's dealings with James Joyce, see Chapter 2: "Night and Day: Sylvia Beach and Bricktop as Businesswomen and Hostesses in Paris."

²⁸⁹ SB to HBD, March 14, 1957, Box 35, Folder 20, SBP.

²⁹⁰ "Drafts," Box 82, Folder 1, SBP.

which strained the close relationship that had always existed between herself and Beach. After corresponding with Weaver about drafts of *Shakespeare and Company*, Beach wrote Holly in frustration, “She was quite upset when I showed her what I had told in my book about the second edition of *Ulysses*. I was sorry to upset her but when she told me that Joyce assured her that Mlle. Monnier and I made plenty of money with his works I thought she ought to know the truth.” After mentioning some other misconceptions Weaver held about her relations with Joyce, Beach concluded, “Well, this is darned pretty, and I shall simply skip it in my book, for who cares?”²⁹¹ Clearly, Beach *did* care, but she ultimately chose to keep the peace. She writes affectionately of Joyce and his family—as well as Stuart Gilbert and Harriet Weaver—throughout her book.²⁹²

Even so, Beach does allow hints of the financial and physical toll of Joyce’s dependence on her to emerge every once in a while. In a chapter entitled “Away, Away...,” she addresses frequently needing to leave Paris in order to escape Joyce’s demands. However, even when she took holidays in the country, he continued to hound her for help and money. In her absence, Beach writes, he “usually managed to get something through Myrsine [Moschos, Beach’s shop assistant at the time], who was left in charge of Shakespeare and Company. As she well knew, whether anything was left in his account or not, we had to look after the author of *Ulysses*.”²⁹³ In such instances, Beach’s tone reads ambiguously, leaving her reader to assess the costs of supporting the great artist without explicitly complaining.

²⁹¹ SB to Holly, November 01, 1956, Box 35, Folder 20, SBP.

²⁹² Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 144-145, 74-76. Beach dedicates a whole section to Gilbert, entitled “Our Friend Stuart Gilbert,” and she writes on Weaver in a section called “Saint Harriet.”

²⁹³ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 196.

Beach remains more guarded as to the personal sense of betrayal she felt toward the end of their formal relationship in 1931. Joyce did not inform Beach explicitly of his desire to take back the rights to his novel in order to have it published in the United States. Instead, a friend of his announced it to Beach and claimed that she was “standing in the way of Joyce’s interests” by insisting on the terms of their original contract. Beach relates the shock of this revelation, and how she contacted Joyce immediately and offered him the rights to *Ulysses*, which he accepted. Beach must have written the rest of this section with a grimace:

Joyce himself informed me, when *Ulysses* came out . . . that he had already received \$45,000 from the publishers . . . I felt an immense joy over his good fortune, which was to put an end to his financial troubles. As for my personal feelings, well, one is not proud of them, and they should be promptly dumped when they no longer serve a purpose.

Neither of our contracts was of the slightest use to me. There was some mention in them of an arrangement with Shakespeare and Company if these works were taken over by other publishers, but the transfer of both *Ulysses* and *Pomes Penyeach* took place quite independently of their original publisher. However, in the case of *Ulysses*, I gave Joyce leave to do whatever he wished. And, after all, the books were Joyce’s. A baby belongs to its mother, not to the midwife, doesn’t it?²⁹⁴

Beach’s “personal feelings” are just what the reader would like more of here, but she carefully edits the memory of one of the saddest moments of her life. She dutifully slips into the subordinate female role of the midwife for the public, even though she certainly did not relish this turn of events in private.

If Beach cautiously reveals some of her trouble working with Joyce, the rest of the book testifies to her high regard for his genius and her fond memories of better times. Beach obviously considered their association one of the highlights of her life, even though it also hurt her, threatened her livelihood, and sometimes overshadowed her other work in the expatriate literary community of Paris. Writing positively of Joyce in much of *Shakespeare*

²⁹⁴ Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, 204-205.

and Company, Beach did not invent a history that had never existed; she simply employed selective memory to enshrine its best moments. As Fitch notes, “Her complimentary judgments of Joyce and her patrons were nonalcoholic, to use her own term, they presented her public diplomacy of goodwill and not her private, occasionally bristling wit. Her friends agree that contrary to the star-struck attitude that her memoirs convey, her genius lay in knowing precisely how to choose and discriminate.”²⁹⁵ Beach, like Bricktop, consciously chose to tell her story in a way that maintained a certain persona, that of the generous friend and longsuffering supporter of geniuses. Toward the end of her life, with this reputation as her only real source of income, it would have been foolish to disrupt that narrative. Since Joyce devotees likely made up much of her audience, she also knew she had to keep them happy with kind words about him.

Besides the unique difficulties involved in handling her relationship with a legendary figure like Joyce, Beach also had to confront the usual struggles involved in writing a memoir. Prior to falling out with Harriet Weaver, she thanked her for correcting an error in the manuscript, and went on to describe the temptation to such errors: “I am given to dwell endlessly on something of no importance, then rattle along in an airy way when I should be paying attention.” In some things, Beach insisted on her recollection of events, such as a detail of her first meeting with Joyce. She related to Weaver how the friend who had hosted the party at which she had made Joyce’s acquaintance contested her version of the evening: “I accepted all his objections quite humbly, except the wine: I am positive there was wine, and about Mr. Pound’s prank. Maybe there was no cheese, and nothing nice to eat which he

²⁹⁵ Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, 412.

asserts, and the dog wasn't his nor was it little: all right, but I told M. Spire I would stick to the wine and it certainly wasn't tea."²⁹⁶

Beach's editor at Harcourt & Brace, Margaret Marshall, anticipated the problems Beach might face in re-telling events from decades before, and advised, "I think it would be a good idea, Sylvia dear, if you did write a prefatory paragraph, as you suggested you would, saying that you have written from memory, and that it's faintly possible that, on occasion there's a lapse. This would disarm the scholars who are always waiting to pounce."²⁹⁷ Since Beach interacted with writers, artists, students, and intellectuals, she had to write for a more academic audience, meaning she had less freedom in this regard than Bricktop the entertainer. In the end, Beach did not follow Marshall's advice, and trusted that those who waited to "pounce" would treat her as gently as she treated her subjects.

Marshall's involvement from afar represented just one aspect of the difficulty Beach experienced in completing her memoirs. The initial thought of recording her story predated its appearance by twenty or so years. As early as 1936, Beach told her friend Marion Peter that "a publisher offered to publish my memoirs if I'd write 'em."²⁹⁸ By 1938, she had begun the work, but was encountering difficulties, as she explained to another friend:

[I am] trying in spite of one headache after another to finish a history of Shakespeare & Co that the publishers asked me to do. They have been waiting over two years and are beginning to wonder whether they are ever going to get a look at them. If I could only work it into some sort of a shape and the history interested these publishers they might pay me something that would help me out during the hard times.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Beach, *Letters*, 254-5.

²⁹⁷ Margaret Marshall (hereafter MM) to SB, April 08, 1959, Box 82, Folder 8, SBP. This represents just one of many examples of this suggestion in Marshall's letters.

²⁹⁸ Beach, *Letters*, 176.

²⁹⁹ Beach, *Letters*, 182-183.

The headaches Beach mentioned would continue to plague her throughout the rest of her life, and World War II almost completely interrupted her writing process. However, the end of the war and the impossibility of re-opening her shop meant that Beach chose not to begin new explorations in literature as she had formerly, accepting that her time of greatest influence and usefulness had passed. Instead, she aimed to help preserve the memory and influence of what she considered a golden era of literary creativity and talent. Publishing *Shakespeare and Company* served as the primary way to accomplish this, and the memoir became a consistent focus until she completed it in 1959.³⁰⁰

Yet recalling those happy, busy years proved bittersweet over time. In 1955, Beach faced another setback when Adrienne Monnier, unwilling to continue her painful battle with Ménière's Disease, committed suicide. As Beach mourned the loss of her closest companion, continuing work on her book conjured up poignant recollections of their years together. She confided to Holly that she “didn’t seem to get anywhere with anything in Paris with this continual reminder of my loss.”³⁰¹ A few days later, Beach reported, “It seemed necessary if I were ever to do any work and best to get out of the tearful atmosphere of the Rue de l’Odéon for a while . . . So I just hopped on the train to Blois one day.”³⁰² But even leaving the city could not have completely erased Beach’s memories of Monnier, as she appears throughout *Shakespeare and Company* as Beach’s trusted advisor in the bookselling business.

Once Beach had finished the work, the editing process brought new frustrations. Working from New York, and under a deadline, Marshall informed Beach in May 1959 that the distance made continuing back and forth endlessly about edits no longer an option, and

³⁰⁰ SB to HBD, January 21, 1947, Box 8, Folder 17, SBP.

³⁰¹ SB to HBD, October 11, 1955, Box 8, Folder 5, SBP.

³⁰² SB to HBD, October 20, 1955, Box 10, Folder 5, SBP.

that she would need to go ahead and finalize some of the changes she had previously mentioned in order to have the manuscript ready in time for publication.³⁰³ Reflecting on the last draft she and Marshall had discussed, Beach wrote to her friend Jackson Matthews,

[The exhibition “The Twenties: American Writers and Their Friends in Pars”] has been a good thing for Margaret Marshall’s book – its [*sic*] more hers than mine she’s kneaded it up and smoothed it down – I spose [*sic*] publishers have to do that with young inexperienced writers – but I only recognize a word here and there in it as mine. At least it will have the Harcourt stamp of perfect distinction.³⁰⁴

Some of this “kneeding” seems to have happened as Marshall urged Beach to personalize the memoir and fill in some of the silences surrounding her family, her experiences during the war, and the shop’s closing.³⁰⁵ Marshall correctly foresaw that readers might raise eyebrows at *Shakespeare and Company*’s rosy view of the past, as well as noticeable gaps when it came to Beach’s personal life. Sensing Beach’s disappointment at the changes she had made, Marshall reminded her of the impossibility of continuing to perfect things so close to publication. She countered Beach’s objection that the book’s abrupt ending read too heavily, and implored, “Do be cheerful. *Please*. . . . Do trust me.” On another occasion, Marshall responded to Beach’s complaint that the book no longer felt like her own by saying that it was indeed a “good book – and very much *your* book.”³⁰⁶ After having edited her memories so much herself before putting them to paper, the further pruning and shaping must have caused Beach added frustration.

While Marshall wanted her to write more autobiographically and realistically, Beach seems to have assumed more creative freedom inherent in the term *memoir*. Whereas Bricktop often spoke of her project as her “life story,” Beach actively sought to take the

³⁰³ MM to SB, May 14, 1959, Box 82, Folder 8, SBP.

³⁰⁴ Beach, *Letters*, 280-281.

³⁰⁵ MM to SB, January 17, 1958 and October 03, 1958, Box 82, Folder 7, SBP.

³⁰⁶ MM to SB, July 08, 1959 and July 27, 1959, Box 82, Folder 8, SBP.

focus of her work off of herself. For example, she referred to her memoir by name as “History of Shakespeare & Co” in a 1955 letter to Hemingway.³⁰⁷ It did not seem to occur to Beach that anyone would want to read *her* history as opposed to snapshots of her famous friends, or even aspects of her story that did not relate explicitly to her shop. Writing a memoir that focused on one specific part of her life, rather than a full autobiography, this rather private woman saw an opportunity to reveal some, but not all, of her very full life.

Because she worked in the book business among great writers, Beach also had an interest in producing a decent piece of writing. The written word literally consumed Beach’s life, so she would have felt more invested in the creative side of telling her story. In choosing to write a memoir, Beach embraced a genre that allowed her to engage in a literary pursuit of her own, but one with more relaxed standards. Relating memories of a golden time with golden people presented an untried author with a fairly safe opportunity for success. For all of her legendary humility and generosity of spirit, Beach clearly resented being treated by Marshall like the “inexperienced” writer that she actually was.

* * *

The title *Bricktop* announces that its subject is a person. *Shakespeare and Company* suggests that it is about a space that served as a meeting place for people. The context in which Bricktop and Beach wrote, and the audience they envisioned, had much to do with how they approached their respective works. Bricktop remained busy with club work, performing, and caring for her sister into the 1970s, and by the time she and Haskins began work on her autobiography, many of the people whom she wrote about had died, giving her more freedom both in how she represented her narrative self and others.³⁰⁸ When Haskins

³⁰⁷ SB to EH, August 29, 1955, Box 22, Folder 9, SBP.

³⁰⁸ Bricktop to BSL, April 05, 1973, Box 2, Folder 19, EU.

approached Bricktop to help her write her life story, his stood as the only offer on the table, and there is no indication that she would have pursued the project with anyone else. Beach, on the other hand, had had her memoirs in the back of her mind since the late 1930s, and once all hope of re-opening her shop had died, writing and publishing *Shakespeare and Company* became her focus. She died three years after its publication, aware that some family and several longtime friends were still alive and interested in her long-awaited work.³⁰⁹ Thus, of the two women, Beach seems to have felt that there was more at stake when it came to the reception of her book.

Unlike Bricktop, whose career had taken her to many places over many years, most of Beach's memoir revolved around a relatively short period of time in one small shop, with a specific group of people. Her audience would have come to her book with much more expectation of reading about certain people and events, and because she was tied so exclusively to that context, she likely felt much more pressure to fulfill it. Bricktop also performed for her audience but linked her story to others in different ways. Foremost, she took care to protect the reputations of fellow black women. Writing performatively in her autobiography, however, also meant making sure that her audience knew about all of the celebrities who walked through her club's door, and then saying she could not have cared less because she did not need people to validate her. For Beach, it meant making sure that her audience knew that her reputation as the generous, large-hearted friend extended even to how she told her story.

While Bricktop's self-revelations often came in veiled form, she wrote more candidly about those she knew. For one thing, she could not claim the same degree of familiarity with her patrons as Beach could because she had a highly mobile career that often

³⁰⁹ See correspondence with Katherine Anne Porter, Alice B. Toklas, HBD, and EH, 1959-1960, SBP.

depended on the social season. If readers decided to take issue with how she described a person, she could always shrug that she had not really known them that well, a luxury Beach did not have. For all of the claims Bricktop made of either ignorance or being above salacious gossip, she had no qualms about making frank comments about people she felt had not earned her loyalty. She went out of her way to defend F. Scott Fitzgerald and fawned over Cole Porter, but she dismissed fellow hostess Elsa Maxwell by saying, “[she] could be a bore sometimes.”³¹⁰ And whereas Beach could not do enough to paint a rosy portrait of Hemingway, Bricktop’s judgment of him read, “A lot of people were raving about him, but I never took to him. I wasn’t the only one. He just wanted to bring people down, and he had a way of doing it, and he was liable to punch you at the same time. . . . I didn’t like the way he baited people, especially Scott [Fitzgerald].”³¹¹ While Bricktop did not reveal her friends’ *private* secrets, she clearly did not mince words about a person’s *public* behavior.

Both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach achieved fame as women who excelled at running the show from behind the scenes – or perhaps, rather, from among the audience. While it is true that Bricktop had made her start as a performer, and sang a number or two many evenings at her club, during her glory years in Paris, she did not usually command center stage. For both women, putting their remembrances in print allowed them to bring their work out of the shadows, and lift the curtain on the everyday complications of maintaining successful careers as American businesswomen in Paris. Above all, Beach and Bricktop built their businesses and lives around people – often very well-known people – and their writings reflect this.

³¹⁰ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 125.

³¹¹ Bricktop and Haskins, *Bricktop*, 98.

As Bricktop and Sylvia Beach considered the memories of their public lives, they relied on Jazz Age Paris's mythical atmosphere of larger-than-life characters to distract from any gaps in their private narratives. Thus, in their respective works, the action often revolves around the notable individuals in their lives, giving *Bricktop* and *Shakespeare and Company* a parade-like structure, or the feeling of a gallery of portraits, much like those of the illustrious patrons proudly displayed in Beach's shop. Rather than simply being a bookseller and a club owner, Sylvia Beach and Bricktop saw themselves as professional hostesses, and their books conjure up the intimate, convivial atmosphere of the perfect dinner party full of interesting guests. However, even in the midst of very crowded stories, neither of these women relinquished their agency – or at least, not totally, and not without a fight. Both women worked hard and made the most of the opportunities that came their way, holding their own among some of the twentieth century's biggest names. Whatever restraints either they or others may have chosen to place on the public's access to the details of their stories, in *Bricktop* and *Shakespeare and Company*, each woman's particular brand of social genius emerges, allowing the reader a fascinating glimpse into the public and private worlds of expatriate Paris.

CONCLUSION: A VIEW FROM THE REVIEWS

Both Bricktop and Sylvia Beach died less than three years after the publication of their books, but not before they would have had the chance to read reactions to their work. *Bricktop* and *Shakespeare and Company* each received mixed reviews. For Beach, the criticisms often included some unfavorable comparison between her career in the world of literature and her personal strength as a writer. “Altogether, this book will probably have some success, through its interest in the Great who cross its pages, rather than in the author whose obviously large talents as a bookseller seem to have too little to do with literature,” one typically acerbic reviewer opined.³¹² Whereas Bricktop’s association with co-writer James Haskins likely absolved her of many literary sins, Beach had to weather the expectations and the reception of the book herself. This she appeared to do with her usual good humor, claiming, “One of the criticisms of my book that interested me most was the one that said, ‘It’s strange that a woman who has lived among such fine writers never learned to write, herself.’ That’s splendid. I never considered myself a writer at all, I don’t have to say so, even. I am just telling...it’s the chronicle of my bookshop, that’s all.”³¹³ Unfortunately, Bricktop’s thoughts on her book’s reception are unknown, but it seems safe to say that she would have held on to the praise, while shaking her head imperiously at any negative comments.

The news was not all bad, though. Reviewers seemed to find both books interesting records of an exciting time and place. References to “name-dropping” appear consistently in reviews of both *Bricktop* and *Shakespeare and Company*, as do disappointment at the “reticence” and “discretion” of the authors with regard to their famous friends and

³¹² *Kirkus Review of Shakespeare and Company*, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sylvia-beach/shakespeare-and-company/>

³¹³ Matthews, “Conversation with Sylvia Beach & Company,” 135-150.

themselves.³¹⁴ Bruce Tucker's comments on Bricktop show particular insight, and could also apply to Sylvia Beach:

...frank judgments are disappointingly rare; the cavalcade of stars goes by so fast that the reader has a sensation akin to watching a glamorous movie composed entirely of long shots. ... Perhaps her term "hostess-entertainer" best describes the genial discretion that marks this book throughout. Her relaxed, unpretentious prose invites you in, introduces you to a glittering cast of characters, shows you a pleasant time, and gently ushers you out before the private party begins. The next morning you remember having met a lot of famous people, but nothing of what they said.³¹⁵

Because the books lacked deep revelations of their subjects' private life, reviewers tended to employ the same types of adjectives to describe Bricktop and Beach, respectively. Bricktop struck readers as tough – even "crusty" – and straight-shooting, while Beach appeared simple and cheerful.³¹⁶ In this sense, it seems each woman succeeded in constructing a public self that fit her intentions and stayed true to how she wanted to be remembered, even if it left readers with oversimplified portraits of their complex personal histories.

Of course, generalization has long been part of the study of interwar Paris, but a closer look at the lives of Bricktop and Sylvia Beach reveals that matters such as national identity, race, class, and gender complicated the relationships between the expatriate communities on each bank of the Seine. Making surface-level distinctions between black and white Paris, or "authentic," "bohemian" Left Bank and "posh," "commercial" Right Bank, seems legitimate, but such an approach misses the rich, full view. As Chapter 1

³¹⁴ Margaret Manning, Review of *Bricktop*, *Boston Globe*, August 11, 1983; Robert Martin Adams, Review of *Shakespeare and Company*, *Hudson Review*; Carl L. Anderson, Review of *Shakespeare and Company*, *Books Abroad*, 34 (2), 176; Bruce Tucker, "Living Metaphors: Recent Black Music Biography," *Black Music Research Journal*, no. 3 (1983), 58-69.

³¹⁵ Bruce Tucker, "Living Metaphors," 58-69.

³¹⁶ *Kirkus Review* of *Bricktop*, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/bricktop-with-james-haskins/bricktop/>; Sylviane Gold, Review of *Bricktop*, *New York Times*, March 4, 1982; Marcia L. Perry, Review of *Bricktop*, *Library Journal*, 108 (13), 1378; Adams, Review of "Shakespeare and Company"; James Johnson Sweeney, "For Browsers There Was *Ulysses*," *New York Times*, September 13, 1959, BR1.

demonstrates, Paris offered Bricktop and Beach freedoms even as negotiating class, gender, and race continued to impose limits.

As American businesswomen in Paris, Bricktop and Beach cultivated and made possible relationships across boundaries – both boundaries that existed in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as those that scholars have reinforced in our ideas of interwar Paris. Chapter 2 shows that both women found ways to successfully balance the traditionally male role of businessperson while also engaging feminine roles like hostess, sister, and mother. Considering the representative patrons who frequented Bricktop's and Shakespeare and Company clarifies our picture of interwar Paris's foreign residents and how they might have interacted.

In addition to their parallel roles in Paris's expatriate community, Bricktop and Beach also joined their contemporaries in writing remembrances of their time in the city. This compulsion to look back on Jazz Age Paris and engage in dropping notable names stands as another link between the two sides of the Seine. The heady atmosphere of Paris during *les années folles* affected its visitors indiscriminately, and the shared experience of that time and place inspired recollections by a cast as diverse as Josephine Baker and Ernest Hemingway, not to mention their "older sisters," Bricktop and Beach. The worlds of the club and the bookstore dominated Bricktop and Beach's published remembrances, and each book also hosts a dazzling array of celebrity friends and patrons within its pages. The third chapter of this thesis considers how each woman's careful negotiation of the public and private aspects of her life affected the way they presented themselves and their relationships in their books.

These two women inhabited a crowded moment, and scholars thus have ample room to say more about them and their connections. Her relationship with James Joyce means that Beach has never wanted for at least peripheral attention, but the same cannot be said for Bricktop. In spite of its silences and performative qualities, Bricktop's autobiography remains the best source on her life, especially when it comes to the period prior to her relocation to Paris. Even T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's *Bricktop's Paris* does not fully examine Bricktop, merely using her as a frame for talking about the experiences of many other black women in Paris. Unfortunately, Bricktop's papers do not offer nearly as much to the scholar as do Beach's. Yet, as this thesis has argued, there remains much to say about this captivating, if enigmatic, woman.

Ada "Bricktop" Smith DuCongé and Sylvia Beach may owe some of their notoriety to their famous patrons, but they merit attention in their own right. In the end, each rested on her accomplishments as a determined, capable woman who carved out a place for herself in a time and setting already overflowing with larger-than-life characters. As a single African American woman supporting herself in the "rough" part of a foreign city, Bricktop achieved a unique level of success and earned the respect of her clients as the manager of her club. Flouting some of the conventions of respectable black American womanhood, she nevertheless followed in her mother's footsteps as a strong and independent businesswoman and hostess with a devoted following – one that even included royalty. Sylvia Beach also turned expectations and perceptions on their heads. A "simple" minister's daughter with little formal education, she participated in some of the most important literary episodes of her time and managed to keep her underfunded and overcommitted bookshop afloat despite difficult personal and professional odds. She also shrewdly managed the explosive egos

around her and maintained a stubbornly generous disposition, such that all remembered her fondly as an exceptionally kind person, even if they had occasionally clashed with her.

While many have treated these women as interesting because of the famous people they knew, we should recognize how Bricktop and Sylvia Beach also contributed to the celebrity of others. Claiming a connection to Bricktop's or Shakespeare and Company legitimated what numerous literary, artistic, musical, and social celebrities said about their own presence in this unique time and place. The exceptional agency and influence of these two *américaines* in Paris thus deserves both recognition and restoration in our well-worn "tales of the Jazz Age."³¹⁷

³¹⁷ This phrase taken from the title of a short story collection by Beach and Bricktop's mutual patron F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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