France and the U.S. talk race, identity and culture at Festival Albertine

THE CULTURAL SERVICES’ FESTIVAL ALBERTINE
Curator Ta-Nehisi Coates and French Cultural Counselor Bénédicte de Montlaur discuss culture, identity and ideas at the Albertine bookshop

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Dear Friends,

For the diplomatic community, much of the month of October has been focused on attempts to find a path toward peace in Syria. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development Jean-Marc Ayrault met with American authorities in Washington, D.C., and took part in the United Nations Security Council’s efforts to find a solution to this terrible crisis.

But as we deal with difficult diplomatic negotiations, we are also constantly at work on the programs that aim to build peace and friendship between France and other nations. This month, I spent time promoting educational exchange, in which France has a long history dating back at least to the famous 8th century Frankish King Charlemagne. He spread access to basic education and encouraged exchanges with other cultures and thinkers to enrich the learning. This tradition continues today in France, where we take pride not only in the rich and varied French culture, but in recognizing the beauty of other cultures.

Both France and the United States benefit from the international exchange of ideas we have built at our universities. In October, the Embassy signed an historic agreement with the Université Paris-Saclay to promote mobility for Ph.D. students between France and the United States. In San Francisco this month, I carried on the work started by Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in September, with a West Coast launch of France Alumni USA. Through this platform, one of our hopes is to help alumni stay connected to the fruitful intellectual exchange that they experienced as students in France. This platform will no doubt greatly enrich both of our countries.

We might sometimes forget the great privilege it is to have access to education. But one of the major tragedies of the Syrian war, beyond the unconscionable killings of civilians in Aleppo and the displacement of millions, is the creation of a generation of students who cannot complete their schooling. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development has established a scholarship program to fund the university education of Syrian students enrolled in French higher education institutions. France received its first Syrian students on October 11. Their presence in France will not only benefit them, but will bring enriching new perspectives to our universities. And so this month, let us together commit to supporting our educators and learning from one another.
ON OCTOBER 8, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Marc Ayrault traveled to the United States to meet with American officials in Washington, D.C., before attending a United Nations Security Council meeting in New York on the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Syrian city of Aleppo. Minister Ayrault has been constantly calling for an end to the civil war, which has seen severe civilian casualties.

The Security Council debated a French- and Spanish-drafted resolution demanding an end to all aerial bombardments and military flights over Aleppo and urged unrestricted humanitarian access throughout the country.

In his introduction of the proposal, Minister Ayrault deplored the international community’s lack of action in Syria, asserting that Aleppo could soon lie in ruins, “abandoned to its executioners.” Minister Ayrault compared the humanitarian catastrophe to Guernica, Sarajevo and Grozny, describing the situation as “unacceptable, shocking and shameful.”

Heading into the meeting, it was clear that Russian opposition would be the greatest difficulty in passing a resolution. Minister Ayrault explained that “the idea is not to get a Russian veto, but to have a proper discussion with them on ending the violence, enabling humanitarian access and putting a mechanism in place to enforce the ceasefire.”

Nevertheless, the Russian veto ultimately prevented the adoption of the much needed resolution text, despite 11 affirmative votes (nine are required to pass a resolution) and only the abstentions of China and Angola in the Security Council. After the vote, Minister Ayrault reaffirmed that “France will not step down, my determination is firm,” and declared that “the Russian veto is a gift to the terrorists.”

Minister Michel Sapin at the 2016 meetings of the IMF and World Bank.

ON OCTOBER 8-10, Michel Sapin, French Minister of the Economy, Finance, and Industry, traveled to Washington for the 2016 meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Minister Sapin began his visit at a gathering with American industrial investors at the American Chamber of Commerce to discuss the business climate in France. During this event, he highlighted reforms made in France to increase competitiveness, and underlined France’s wish for a strong transatlantic commercial partnership in the wake of the British referendum to leave the European Union.

Afterwards he visited 1776, a global startup incubator that focuses on government-driven markets and is hoping to build stronger links with France. Minister Sapin ended his day co-chairing a roundtable discussion on budgetary transparency alongside the NGO International Budget Partnership.

On October 7, the minister’s agenda included bilateral exchanges with other finance ministers, such as those of Benin and Egypt. The minister also attended a Development Committee lunch and an International Monetary and Financial Committee introductory meeting. Minister Sapin closed out his visit with an IMF Early Warning Exercise, part of the IMF’s efforts to strengthen surveillance. These meetings aim to assess risks to the global economy and identify policies to mitigate them.
Bénédicte de Montlaur, French Embassy Cultural Counselor

Bénédicte de Montlaur came to New York to serve as Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy and Permanent Representative of French Universities in the United States after serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary for North Africa at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. The French Cultural Services promotes the best of French arts, literature, cinema, language, and higher education in the US.

November 2-6, the Cultural Services in New York hosts the third annual Festival Albertine, which explores the changing nature of identity and how the arts interrogate national, social, and cultural labels today in France and in the U.S. We spoke with Bénédicte de Montlaur about cultural exchange and the Festival Albertine.

What is the current state of cultural exchange between the United States and France?
French-American artistic and educational exchange is thriving. But we must always keep active, so that the American affinity for French culture does not become outdated. Even if we all love Versailles and Impressionism, and we continue to promote France’s rich cultural heritage, our challenge is to also help Americans discover contemporary French culture. For example, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music we recently brought a show from France’s new circus movement, “Minuit” by Yoann Bourgeois, which was so creative, everybody was amazed. It was really a mixture of theater and circus, and was a huge success.

How does the Festival Albertine add to the ongoing dialogue between France and the U.S.?
Albertine Books, located within the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, has become an invaluable asset for our work. The bookstore hosts over 100 events each year featuring authors, artists and other cultural figures. What we are trying to achieve with Festival Albertine is to make French voices participate in the American conversation. We are bringing the best French intellectuals, authors, and artists to discuss topics that are relevant to Americans.

How was Festival Albertine curator, Ta-Nehisi Coates selected, and what is his role?
I met Ta-Nehisi Coates a year and a half ago, before he published his book, “Between the World and Me.” He is a strong voice in American culture, and also an American who is very curious about France; exactly the kind of person we seek to guide conversations at Albertine. He’s very prominent at the moment, addressing subjects that are very important for Americans: issues of race, labor and identity. Together we’ve created a program that brings the best of American and French intellectuals and artists to explore those topics.

His role was to help identify the general theme of the festival and to invite American speakers. The festival represents his personality and his interests. For instance, there is a panel about high art vs. low art; this is a subject of interest to him because he writes graphic novels, and he’s good friends with David Simon, creator of the TV show “The Wire,” who will participate in the festival.

What are some panels where you see an exciting exchange between our two countries?
The panel “When Will France Have Its Barack Obama?” on November 2 on the election process will be really interesting in this regard because it will examine what conditions allowed the United States to elect a black president and when will the conditions be right for a French president from a minority group.

The cinema panel, “Blacklisted: From Hollywood to Paris” on November 4, is also interesting following the recent #OscarsSoWhite polemic around the lack of diversity in the 2016 Academy Awards. I think the French have something to say in this debate because French cinema has always been open to world cinema, supporting directors from all around the world. Last year, for instance, the French candidate for the Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards was a French-Turkish co-production in Turkish called Mustang. The director, Deniz Gamze Ergüven, was educated in France at La Fémis [French film school].

I think it will also be very interesting to hear Benjamin Millepied speak about dance and ballet. Part of what he criticized while working in France, and what he will speak about during the festival, is how ballet has been slow to open up to diversity. On some points we will see commonalities, but on other points the French have to learn from Americans and vice versa.

What follow-up are you expecting around the themes discussed during the festival?
Diversity is really a theme that is at the center of all of our work. For instance, we want to encourage more students from diverse backgrounds to travel to France, which is really a direct follow up to the theme of the conference.

We will also do a program on the centenary of WWI, with the National Museum of African American History and Culture here in Washington, D.C. We want to help emphasize the history of African Americans in WWI who fought in the French ranks.

What is something that has surprised you in the role of Cultural Counselor?
I think what surprised me was this high level of Francophilia. Whenever I go to a museum, to a university, the directors have been to France, very often they speak French. I didn’t expect it to be at that level.

I was also surprised by the increasing demand for bilingual education, it’s a very big trend. Lots of people want their children to be bilingual and we want to make sure they are bilingual in French.

En chiffres...

The number of new schools that have opened French-English dual language programs in the U.S. in the past year.

The number of French companies that conduct business in the U.S., providing over 650,000 American jobs.

The original number of stripes on the mărinière shirts worn by Breton sailors, one for each of Napoleon’s naval victories against the British.
In Depth

French startups flourish in the United States

SINCE THE DAYS OF THE MINITEL, a predecessor to the Internet, France has grown a reputation for technological innovation. In 2013, the French government launched its French Tech initiative, based on the belief that startups generate employment opportunities and important economic value. Any French startup can be part of the movement. The French Tech philosophy is not to control or direct French startups around the world, but to promote and support them, to “showcase what they are doing, and create a snowball effect.”

Many measures have been implemented to make France an attractive startup environment, such as a special tax status for accredited innovative new companies that exempts startups from corporate tax, and French Tech offers numerous incentives and funding opportunities.

Now, Paris ranks as one of the top three startup hubs in Europe, “quite simply bubbling with activity, with over 40 business incubators, 80 co-working spaces, close to 1,500 startups being set up annually, and a growing number of success stories,” according to the French Tech team.

The city of light and love will soon be home to the world’s largest digital incubator, Station F, set to open in 2017. With a €200 million investment from Xavier Niel, a French entrepreneur who revolutionized France’s mobile telecom with his company Free, Station F will provide space for more than 1,000 startups.

As many entrepreneurs launch their innovations in Paris’ tech environment, others have looked to expand their companies abroad. While joining the startup scene is immensely challenging, organizations including the French Embassy in Washington, D.C., in partnership with its consulates, have organized several strategies for tech startup acceleration in the U.S.

Partnerships bring French Tech wave to the U.S. French Tech sends multiple business owners and startup entrepreneurs to Las Vegas’s annual Consumer Electronics Show (CES), an important industry conference for startups, as one way to showcase French Tech in the U.S. The program also encourages incubators to pair with small firms and major French companies. Business France’s CEO Muriel Pénicauda says that small incubators and conferences such as the CES allow the French to learn from and cooperate with their American counterparts.

It is hard to become recognized when you are coming from abroad, speak a different language and do not have a diploma that is known internationally.

—Alban Denoyel

The French American Digital Lab, co-produced by the French Embassy’s Cultural Services in New York, and Business France, in its second year of hosting entrepreneurs, is an opportunity for French startups in the creative and cultural industries to step into the U.S. tech spotlight and enter an already thriving market. From October 17-26, six French startups met in New York City for a 10-day workshop where they met leaders from New York tech scene and cultural institutions. In December, the first French version will take place in Paris for American startups.

French startups in the United States

Startups are all about creativity. For tasks like buying concert tickets, sharing videos instantaneously, or creating a coloring book from a photo, the aim is to create a product that improves quality of life and catches the attention of consumers. Finding this creativity in any environment is difficult, but French entrepreneurs in the United States face another challenge: “It is hard to become recognized when you are coming from abroad, speak a different language and do not have a diploma that is known internationally,” says Alban Denoyel, a French entrepreneur living in New York.
Denoyel was frustrated that 3D artists had to resort to using boring screenshots to display their work. In 2012, with help from French government incentives, he co-founded Sketchfab, a company that provides an online platform to publish, share, and discover 3D content online. Despite the challenges, Denoyel moved to New York from Paris two years ago, joining the growing ranks of startups chancing it in the U.S. Now, Sketchfab enjoys overwhelming success in New York City’s startup scene, raising over $7 million for its 3D software in 2015.

French-American startups often base their business models on each other’s: many French entrepreneurs in the startup world workshop their product on the West Coast, develop in Europe and come back to set up shop in the U.S., demonstrating not only the fluidity of business, but the benefits of cultural exchange. There is also a growing movement among U.S startups to do the same.

**Success in the U.S Market**

Specializing in areas like online advertisements, online payment methods (eCommerce), and software, French startups have achieved enormous success in the U.S. Many of these, including Criteo, a personalized target company that works with Internet retailers to create a personalized online display for advertisements, were among the first French startups to appear on the NASDAQ stock market listing.

For most French startups, the possibility of acquiring investors is one of the largest reasons for expanding their companies abroad, along with the possibility to tap new consumers. Sketchfab’s Alban Denoyel explained that access to capital was an essential factor in his decision to move to New York, a decision that added to his undeniable success.

**Where Do All The Techies Go?**

With hopes of bringing their products to the American market, a wave of French expatriates and hungry tech gurus has settled in even the most hidden corners of the U.S. Many French and New York are still the main destinations for French startup incubation, with more than 100 French startups in the two cities combined. In Brooklyn, a French quartier is growing in Bed ford Stuyvesant’s cafés, Carroll Gardens’ bistros and the dimly lit bars of Williamsburg. Amongst Brooklyn’s quaint brownstones, French startups are spreading throughout the borough.

Likewise, San Francisco, the American hub of all things tech, has attracted French entrepreneurs. Skander Larbi, founder of Techshower, the first French Web TV and tech news site in Silicon Valley, stresses the industry’s pragmatism on the West Coast: "Silicon Valley is six to 18 months in advance" for solutions, Larbi emphasizes, with startup firms in California already setting specific goals for how they can improve their products and customer satisfaction months before their initial design is even tested. French Tech has added Los Angeles to its officially designated French Tech hubs abroad, an indication that where cities become startup friendly, creative French entrepreneurs will surely follow.

Screenshots from a Sketchfab 3D model of “Young Girl Playing Astrolakai” (knucklebones), dating back to 150 AD © 2016 Greek toys (Sofia Pavlaki)

**Left**: A typical San Francisco streetscape; the city draws French startups to Silicon Valley’s tech and startup friendly climate.

**Top right**: Brooklyn, where many French startups are adding to the neighborhood’s flair.
French “micro-bakery” startup
Le Bread Xpress brings fresh baguettes to America

WHILE AMERICAN consumers have long enjoyed unique vending machines like automatic cupcake and burrito dispensers, the Land of Liberty only recently welcomed its first baguette vending machine. Last July, Le Bread Xpress opened its first location in San Francisco’s Myriad Market, generating impressive buzz across the U.S. and all the way to Asia.

Though Le Bread Xpress might be a novel concept on American soil, it was inspired by one Frenchman’s simple desire for a better baguette. Company founder and CEO Benoit Hervé moved to Silicon Valley from France 18 years ago, finding work with high-tech startups in marketing and business development roles. Introduced to the automatic baguette dispenser through the French invention contest “Concours Lépine,” Hervé became optimistic that the invention could be successful in tech-crazed and foodie-filled San Francisco.

After reaching out to the initial developer, Hervé acquired one of the machines and overhauled it to work on American electrical current and correspond to American regulatory standards. Hervé’s modifications were only half the battle, however; more than 100 different types of flour were considered, before an original (top-secret) recipe was decided upon.

At the end of every day, the dispenser is filled with over 100 half-baked loaves from nearby Petits Pains & Co. Throughout the next day, the machine’s oven component periodically finishes cooking batches of baguettes at a piping 446 degrees. A fresh baguette from Le Bread Xpress costs $4.25 and takes around 20 seconds to be fully baked upon purchase.

While Le Bread Xpress continues to expand, Hervé outlined several challenges to the company’s long-term growth: “Americans have been sold a negative image of bread recently, whereas the French consider bread as a necessary ingredient to their mornings.” He believes Americans can be brought around by showing them his company’s dedication to high quality ingredients. In the meantime, Le Bread Xpress hopes to spread throughout California and in major cities across the U.S.

New technology transmits Internet signal through light waves

IT IS NOW POSSIBLE TO CONNECT to the Internet through light waves, thanks to a new technology pioneered by French light communications company Lucibel. LiFi Luminaire, recently unveiled by Lucibel and Scottish partner PureLiFi, works by plugging a USB LiFi module into a user’s computer, which communicates with the luminaire device to provide a wireless internet connection.

The innovative technology behind LiFi has the potential to make the internet safer and more accessible around the globe. Because it works without transmitting the potentially harmful electromagnetic waves of traditional WiFi, it is particularly valuable for hospitals and schools.

LiFi Luminaire is also ideal for crowded work spaces, like offices or airports, because it can accommodate more users at once than typical WiFi networks. LiFi is also advantageous for those concerned with cyber security because it cannot be hacked remotely.

The product will be manufactured exclusively in France at Lucibel’s industrial site in Barentin in the Haute-Normandie region in northern France. Edouard Lebrun, Lucibel’s Chief Innovation Officer, attributes LiFi’s success to its French manufacturing location. “Thanks to the relocation of its manufacturing facility in France,” he said, “Lucibel has been able to co-develop, industrialize and market its LiFi solution in less than 15 months, which makes it the only solution on the market easily integratable into a building.”
Street art museum Art 42 opens in Paris

During “Nuit Blanche,” a night-long art festival held in Paris on October 1, philanthropist Xavier Niel and street art collector Nicolas Laugero-Lasserre debuted their newest project, a street art museum called Art 42.

The exhibition is the first of its kind and features 150 works by 50 artists, spanning three floors of Niel’s self-described “anti-school,” Ecole 42. Ecole 42 is a programming school in Paris’ 17th arrondissement, unique because it is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to students who are not required to take France’s college entrance exam, the baccalauréat, or to pay any tuition.

Just as Niel saw the potential in atypical students when opening Ecole 42, he is now giving street artists a similar opportunity to succeed by displaying their work at Art 42. Among the artists featured is Futura, a New York graffiti artist, who got his start illegally painting the subway in New York. His work reflects Lasserre’s vision for the project, which is to present the street as a place for art, beyond museum walls.

Lasserre’s goal is to show that art is not reserved to the top strata of society, but is accessible to all. In Lasserre’s own words, he wants to “democratize access to art.” In keeping with this vision, the museum will be completely free, but admission is by appointment only on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

A mural by street artist Jef Aérosol, one of the Art 42 artists.

Slam-rapper and singer Gaël Faye’s impressive literary debut

Born in Burundi to a Rwandan mother and French father, up-and-coming singer, rapper and now novelist Gaël Faye has enjoyed an unusually meteoric rise.

Faye’s first novel, “Petit pays,” published in August 2016, has dominated best-seller lists in France and was in the running for France’s prestigious literary prize the Prix Goncourt after capturing the Prix du Roman Fnac in September. Though Faye did not win the Prix Goncourt, his presence among the ranks attests to the power of “Petit pays.”

The novel presents the life of 10-year-old Gabriel and the destabilizing consequences of the Burundian civil war and Rwandan genocide on his comfortable childhood in an expatriate community in Burundi. Amid violence and chaos, Gabriel is forced to confront his mixed cultural background (French and Tutsi) and construct his own personal identity.

Evidently, the context and personal struggle mirror the author’s own. Also of a French-Tutsi background, Faye grappled with his mixed identity at a young age, especially after he and his family fled genocide in Rwanda and settled in France in 1995. Nevertheless, Faye affirms that Gabriel’s story is absolutely not his, that he chose to center the text around his own questioning as a young boy and the theme of paradise lost.

Active on the slam-rap scene as a teenager, Faye has explored issues of identity and race since his youth. Along with fellow rapper Edgar Sekloka, Faye formed the slam, hip-hop group Milk Coffee Sugar in 2008; four years later, he released an EP entitled “Pili pili sur un croissant au beurre,” exploring his mixed racial identity. “Petit Pays” is currently being translated into more than 15 languages.
ETRETAT, A FRENCH TOWN SITUATED ON THE NORTHERN COAST of Normandy, is known worldwide for its stunning limestone cliffs or falaises calcaires. Visitors will recognize the iconic geological formations, including three natural arches and a “pointed needle,” from the works of Impressionist painters like Claude Monet and Gustave Courbet, who painted on the beaches of Etretat during the second half of the 19th century. At the peak of the town’s eastern cliffs sits the Notre-Dame de la Garde chapel. Behind the chapel stands a 79-foot-high arrow erected to commemorate French aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli, who disappeared in the Atlantic while attempting the first transatlantic flight aboard their plane, L’Oiseau Blanc. With only around 1,500 residents, Etretat’s attraction is predominantly due to the area’s natural beauty and hiking opportunities along the coast. Nevertheless, the town itself has several upscale hotels, resorts and historical landmarks, including Le Clos Lupin, the home of famous French writer, Maurice LeBlanc. Small cafes and bistro’s populate the waterfront, where tourists can try a wide range of fresh seafood, including the ubiquitous moules-frites—fresh mussels and fries.