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LES DAMES, GRAND AND SMALL,  
OF MONTMARTRE

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*The Paris of Bricktop*

In Paris, within the last decade, one after another three colored women have risen to reign for a time as the bright particular stars of the night life of Montmartre. And all three of them have been American colored women. Princes, dukes, great artists, and kings of finance have all paid them homage (plus a very expensive cover charge) in brimming glasses of sparkling champagne lifted high in the wee hours of the morning.

—Langston Hughes, “Adelaide Hall New Star of Paris Night Life: Her ‘Big Apple’ Glows Over Rue Pigalle”

Play it for the lords and ladies,  
For the dukes and counts,  
For the whores and gigolos,  
For the American millionaires,  
And the school teachers  
Out for a spree.  
Play it  
Jazz band!

—Langston Hughes, “To a Negro Jazz Band  
in a Parisian Cabaret,” *The Crisis*

“The last night I saw the Paris of Bricktop. . . it was pouring down rain. The car drove through the dimly lit streets at a snail’s pace, and I looked out at the city I loved and wondered when I would see it again.”

—Ada “Bricktop” Smith Ducongé

On her last night in Paris, October 26, 1939, on the eve of World War II, those were Ada Smith Ducongé's parting words. Gazing at the *hôtels particuliers*, illuminated architectural marvels, and the twinkling lights of the grand boulevards, she said goodbye to the city that she had called home for over fifteen years, "the Paris of Bricktop." The Paris she had found upon her arrival was certainly different in spirit from the Paris she was leaving behind.

With the signing of the Armistice in Compiègne, France, on November 11, 1918, the Allies declared victory over Germany. The Negro jazz bands, led by the likes of James Reese Europe, Noble Sissle, and others, as arms of various colored infantries, played throughout the streets of cities in France to celebrate. While newspaper headlines from New York to Paris celebrated the signing, the mood of the citizens of the great republic of France was antinationalism of any sort and antiwar. The success of Abel Gance's 1919 silent film *J'accuse*, which captured the suffering of World War I, highlighted the blight the Great War had left on the French psyche. In the immediate aftermath of the war, real wages had stagnated and disease, mortality, and poverty were widespread in the rural areas. With a high male mortality rate due to war and illness, widows and single women entered the workforce in droves. Influenced largely by Coco Chanel, cloche hats, cigarettes, cropped hair, and shorter skirts became a signature style among newly independent, working French women. The French lost over three hundred thousand soldiers at the battle at Verdun. Fertility rates were now at a low; and the sale of contraception was prohibited in 1920, while Mother's Day was inaugurated to celebrate mothers of large families as part of national anti-low birth rate efforts.

Despite the hardship and poverty, culture thrived. Paris was a magnet for foreign laborers in search of work and French peasants whose agrarian lifestyle was disrupted by the war. In search of all manner of diversion, the French sought out café concerts, the theater, and movies houses. With protectionist measures in place for the film industry, French cinema began rebuilding, experiencing a golden era with the popularity of colonial films and comedies. Art and literature flourished, and intellectuals gathered in coffee houses to debate Dadaism and surrealism and Marcel Proust. France once again became the destination for foreign writers and artists—its openness to creativity and resistance to censorship making it a haven. On Sunday afternoons, the parks—from Luxembourg to the Bois de Boulogne—were filled with flâneurs and couples. The crazy years of the 1920s morphed into the twilight years of the 1930s and a global recession, eventually giving way to the bleakness of impending war and the occupation of France.

But Bricktop had arrived just when Paris and the French were opening their arms to embrace all and sundry distractions. She left as she had arrived—on an ocean liner and flat broke. As the poet laureate of the

Negro race, Langston Hughes, noted in 1937, "She made several fortunes, so they say, and lost them, or spent them. Or maybe gave them away, the goddess [sic] of her heart being almost a legend in Montmartre."<sup>1</sup> Bricktop had sailed to Paris on the Cunard line's *America*, docking May 11, 1924. She was twenty-nine. She left on the *Washington* in October 1939. She was forty-five years old. Her journey from a small town named after a Baptist preacher in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, to Europe's cultural capital was a circuitous one.

Born on August 14, 1894, in Alderson, "West-by-God-Virginia," as she affectionately referred to the state of her birth, Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith was christened with five middle names so that her parents, Thomas and Harriet "Hattie" Elizabeth Smith (*née* Thompson), would avoid offending the neighbors who all wanted to name the Smiths' fifth and last child. Ada, Etta, Ethel, and Robert were the Smiths' surviving four children; and like most black families, their complexions ran the gamut of the color spectrum.<sup>2</sup>

Harriet Thompson was born into slavery in 1861, two years before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. A lithe woman with blue-gray eyes and blondish hair, Hattie and her dark-brown-skinned husband Thomas passed on complexions and hair color ranging from high yellow with red freckles and red-gold hair (Ada) to rich nut brown with a head of deep, dark waves (her older brother Robert). Ada's eldest sister by eleven years, Etta, was called Blonzetta because of her blond hair and light eyes.

A barber by trade, Thomas Smith comfortably supported his family of six on wages and tips from his exclusively white clientele in Alderson; Hattie stayed at home and doted on the children like any respectable, middle-class wife of the post-Reconstruction era. Thomas Smith's trade conferred on him social respect and financial independence in the segregated town of Alderson.

He had joined a profession whose history of black male participants dates back to colonial America. As Douglas W. Bristol writes in *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom*, it was also a profession that "illustrated the tensions at the heart of race relations." Bristol continues,

With a flick of the wrist, nineteenth-century black barbers could have slit the throats of the white men they shaved. . . . [T]hey used their trade to navigate the forbidding terrain of a racist country. . . . They consolidated their hold over the trade in the early Republic by exploiting the stigma that white men increasingly associated with personal service. . . . Even though other skilled trades excluded black men during the antebellum period, black barbers competed against white barbers for white customers,

and they won, dominating the upscale tonsorial market serving affluent white men. . . . Barbering grew out of the courts of European society, lending the trade positive connotations that black men appropriated for their own purposes. Rather than seeing themselves as despised menials occupying a marginal economic niche, black barbers conceived of themselves as heirs to a tradition that made them men of the world. . . . Their achievements in business, however, represented only a means to an end, for they sought to establish a basis for a black middle-class identity.<sup>3</sup>

Through the upscale tonsorial trade, Thomas Smith was able to lift his family out of the maelstrom of slavery's legacy to most Southern blacks—sharecropping—and into the middle class. His association with white male elites also afforded the Smith household some protections from the rabblousing element of whites who saw the family's ascension as a threat to white economic security and indicative of black uppitiness. Alderson was a peaceable town where each racial group heeded the exigencies of the color line. However, by the time Ada was four years old, the semblance of black middle-class life that her father and mother had achieved in Alderson was disrupted when Thomas Smith died suddenly of a series of strokes in 1898.

At thirty-seven years old, the young widow Hattie sought to start life anew with the assistance of a relative who was passing as white in Chicago, Illinois. Working first as a domestic for affluent white families, Hattie settled the family at 171 East Chicago Avenue. Hattie Smith eventually moved on to running her own rooming house in a tumbledown, working-class section on Chicago's Southside made up of migrating blacks and immigrant whites looking for cheap housing. Located at 3237 State Street, the rooming house was in the thick of Chicago's burgeoning Black Belt and its vice district with gambling houses, prostitution, and saloons in abundance. As Bricktop remembers:

Crime was no stranger to State Street, or to anyone who lived on it. People got into knife fights there. . . . Thinking back, I realize that a lot of the fights started in the saloons. . . . Saloons were a part of our everyday life. . . . I knew the back doors of most of the nearby saloons, but I wasn't interested in them. It was what went on behind the swinging doors up front that fascinated me.<sup>4</sup>

Hattie's entrepreneurial undertaking afforded her the opportunity to again stay at home with her four children; the move from 171 East Chicago Avenue to State Street also exposed the young, wiry Ada to the entertain-

ment culture in the saloons and the front stage of the theater, namely the Pekin Theatre owned by black powerbroker and gambler Robert Mott.

Chicago at the turn of the century had its fair share of theaters with marquee-name stars as well as raucous saloons with backrooms where entertainers and working girls plied their trade. The Pekin Theatre, “The Temple of Music,” was the only black-managed and operated playhouse in the city. Mott had passed time in Paris and was greatly impressed by the performances at the Café Chantants music hall during his 1901 visit.<sup>5</sup> He opened the Pekin in 1905. Once Ada took in one of its matinees, she “became stagestruck” and “more interested in the Pekin Theatre than the State Street saloons.”<sup>6</sup>

A natural dancer and enthusiastic singer, at the age of sixteen, Ada Smith began traveling with blackface minstrel troupes and playing in vaudeville houses throughout predominantly white Southern towns in Illinois and in bordering states. The repertoire of crowd-pleasing songs included the popular “Coon! Coon! Coon!”:

Coon! Coon! Coon!  
 I wish my color would fade.  
 Coon! Coon! Coon!  
 I'd like a different shade.  
 Coon! Coon! Coon!  
 Morning, night and noon.  
 I wish I was a white man  
 'Stead of a Coon! Coon! Coon!

Written by Gene Jefferson, the song was a hit for white vaudeville and blackface performer Lew Dockstader in 1901. That black performers would incorporate the popular song in their lineup to the delight of their audiences signaled a very low barometer in American race relations.

Ada continued working the black entertaining circuits through the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), also known during that era as Tough on Black Asses. She crisscrossed the country as part of the Oma Crosby Trio, landed for a while at boxer Jack Johnson's Chicago cabaret Café de Champion, moved onward to California where she sang and danced with Jelly Roll Morton, trekked to New York and back to Chicago where at the Panama Café she formed the Panama Trio with Cora Green and Florence Mills.

Along the way, she adopted the name “Adah,” believing the “h” added a bit of theatrical flourish only to have her mother send her a letter admonishing her with the correct the spelling. She continued to use the spelling in various correspondences throughout her years in Paris.<sup>7</sup> A chance encounter

with the portly Barron Wilkins, owner of the Harlem club Barron's Exclusive at 7th Avenue and 134th Street, led to her taking the name Bricktop in 1911. When Wilkins spotted the underage young woman in his club, he asked her her name and then told her he would call her Bricktop because of her red-gold mane. Hattie Smith again objected. An Irish prostitute who resided in Chicago went by that moniker because she, too, had red-gold hair. Years later, Mrs. Hattie Smith's ire was further piqued when the French called her daughter "Madame" Bricktop, an ignoble merging in her mind of the Chicago prostitute and a brothel madame.<sup>8</sup>

When Ada Smith returned to New York in 1922 to work at Barron's Exclusive Club with its "only light-bright Negroes need apply" and "white and famous black clientele only welcomed here" policies, the high-toned Smith had fully embraced the one-name moniker "Bricktop" and fancied herself a hostess and performance artist. It was the Prohibition era and she was twenty-eight years old. Her stint at Barron's was rapidly followed by her headlining debut at the equally race and color conscious Connie's Inn. But by 1924, a telegram from Paris sent by the American expatriate and manager of the Le Grand Duc cabaret in Montmartre, Eugene Bullard, requested her presence in the City of Light; at least this is Bricktop's version of her life-changing journey to Paris.

Eugene Jacques Bullard was born in Columbus, Georgia. As a youth he stowed away on a ship heading to Scotland, working his way through the United Kingdom as a journeyman boxer. He ended up in Paris, joining the French Foreign Legion during World War I as a pilot. At the war's conclusion, he received various military distinctions for his service in his adopted country. He remained in Paris where he excelled at managing nightclubs.

In the memoir *Bricktop*, the saloonkeeper recalled the events that led up to her voyage to Paris:

At the time, there weren't more than eight or ten Negro entertainers in all of Paris. . . . There was exactly one female Negro entertainer. She was Palmer Jones's wife and her name was Florence. She was a sharp-dressing little girl, very haughty, and she'd been so popular at a place called Le Grand Duc that she was leaving to headline at a new place down the street.

Florence's leaving gave Gene Bullard . . . the unwelcome problem of having to replace her. Florence's husband, Palmer Jones, had a suggestion. "Why don't you send to New York? There's a little girl over there called Bricktop. She don't have no great big voice or anything like that, but she has the damndest personality, and she can dance. She'll be a big success here." So they cabled Sammy Richardson, who was in New York at the time

and asked him to find me and make me an offer. Sammy tracked me down in Washington [DC] and followed me there. . . . There was nothing left to do but accept.<sup>9</sup>

As with the fabled tale of utter disappointment surrounding her arrival at Le Grand Duc, whereby she cried upon entering the tiny cabaret, the “how” of the decision to come to Paris in the first place has become part of Bricktop lore, repeated time and time again in oral histories and newspaper accounts of her life. Bricktop assures us that her rendezvous in Paris was by invitation. It was like an unexpected beckoning.

Nonetheless, fellow Chicagoan, longtime Bricktop friend, and renowned blues singer Alberta “Bert” Hunter, who would later venture to Paris, throws freezing cold water on Bricktop’s story of a fortuitous confluence of events. In *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*, an authorized posthumously published biography, cowriters Frank C. Taylor and Gerald Cook relate after an interview with one of Hunter’s closest friends, Harry Watkins:

And one could miss golden opportunities by not being in New York. That was the case with an offer to go to Paris. It happened while Alberta was out of town. Gene Bullard, manager of a little bistro in Paris called Le Grand Duc, at 52 Rue Pigalle, tried to get a singer from New York to replace Florence Embry. . . . Bricktop, in her autobiography . . . says Bullard sent for her.

Alberta had her own version of the event, which she learned of several years later. She personally wouldn’t tell Bricktop but expected Harry Watkins to do so. He would talk about it only after Alberta’s death. Even then he looked heavenward and said, “Now, don’t you all hit me.” According to him, Kid Coles (a black American Harry believes was Florence’s husband) sent the telegram for Bullard to Alberta c/o Eva Blanche, a former chorus girl who served meals around the clock to black entertainers in the large dining room of her Harlem apartment and held messages and mail for them when they were on the road. Bricktop picked up the telegram for Alberta, saying she was going to deliver it, read it instead and then took off immediately for Paris. As Harry said, “In those days you had to survive. You got a job wherever you could, however you could.”<sup>10</sup>

The conflicting accounts add more color to the notoriously rancorous and competitive but close relationship between Brick and Bert. The friendship began while they performed at the Panama Club in Chicago. Hunter, a native of Memphis who ran away to Chicago as a young teen, worked

the crowds of gritty, blues-seeking club revelers. Ada, along with Florence Mills and Cora Green, tweeted and danced as the Panama Trio to a more restrained audience on another floor of the club.

Did Bricktop's admitted "restless[ness]"<sup>11</sup> in New York and career ambitions collide with the auspicious arrival of a cablegram from Paris requesting another singer? That Sammy Richardson, a saxophonist, not a pianist as Bricktop describes him, happened to be in New York from Paris and had been tasked with tracking down Bricktop in Washington is also plausible. Many black entertainers worked the New York circuit in the winter months and Europe during the spring and summer tourist season. Richardson was playing at the Accacius Club in Paris in the summer of 1923 with renowned singer and banjoist Opal Cooper.<sup>12</sup> By Easter 1924, he could very well have made his way stateside.

The details as told by Harry Watkins, though, lend some credence to Alberta's account. Kid Coles, a musician, was indeed in Paris at the time and could have sent the telegram for Bullard to Alberta in care of Eva Blanche in New York. Watkins was also an acquaintance of Bricktop's. Together they participated in a series of interviews with Delilah Jackson about their lives as entertainers in the 1920s through the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> According to Hunter's biographers, before her departure from Paris, Florence Embry Jones informed Alberta about Bricktop's cable-grabbing skullduggery.<sup>14</sup> The original cablegram no longer exists; however, Eugene Bullard provides the last word on the Le Grand Duc affair in a letter from Paris to the *Chicago Defender* on April 4, 1925:

Miss Ada Smith, Bricktop entertainer is still at the Grand Duke at 52 Rue Pigalle singing as before. There has been no change in her employer. I, Gene Bullard, am no longer at the Grand Duke. When I left August 2, 1924, Bricktop remained with my previous partner as a singer and entertainer, as was understood when I engaged her from America to work for me.<sup>15</sup>

Though she would later employ him at her own club, Bullard and Bricky had a perfectly stormy relationship as well due to his quick temper and foul mouth. Bullard's eminence as a club manager and talent scout was waning by this time just as Bricktop's reputation was beginning to burnish. He had written the letter to the *Defender* to establish two points: that Bricktop, whom the paper covered with regularity, was not the manager of Le Grand Duc but an employee; she had been erroneously reported as running the nightclub, much to Bullard's irritation. The second point of clarification related, of course, to Bullard's being the party primarily responsible for her growing success since he had initially extended the invitation





ILLUSTRATION 1.1. Panama Trio, 1916, Cora Green, Florence Mills, and Ada Smith. Courtesy of Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.



ILLUSTRATION 1.2. Bricktop, Paris, Le Grand Duc, 1925. Courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

to her. Bullard's letter sheds some light on the intrigue surrounding the alleged "purloined" telegram; this incident would represent one in a series of clashing narratives of Paris offered up by Bert and Brick. And generally, Brick would be on the receiving end of Bert's pointed criticisms thanks to Florence Jones's pot-stirring.

The coveted spot at Le Grand Duc had been vacated by Jones. In his homage to the three American colored queens of Montmartre, Langston Hughes writes,

[P]etite Florence Embry, lovely vision in brown, was the reigning queen of Montmartre after midnight. Today, even after her death, "Chez Florence" is still a fashionable club. And the memory of the very pretty, very reserved little brownskin woman who paid attention only to royalty or to people with a great deal of money, still lingers in the minds of international nightlifers.<sup>16</sup>

A native of Bridgeport, Connecticut, Florence Embry was born in 1892; she was married to pianist Palmer Jones, not Kid Coles, whom Harry Watkins thought may have been her husband.<sup>17</sup> She left Le Grand Duc to perform at a club/restaurant owned by Louis Mitchell. Mitchell was a musician who had worked at the Casino de Paris. Along with his band, Mitchell's Jazz Kings, Mitchell purportedly assembled the first recording of jazz in Paris in 1922 for Pathé, the French cinema and production company.<sup>18</sup> That recording included the iconic ditty "Ain't We Got Fun."

Embry Jones was known to be difficult but nonetheless riveting in her performances. And so much so that Mitchell renamed the club Chez Florence instead of Mitchell's. Jones also merited a short article, "Chez Florence," in *Time* magazine in 1927, where she is described as follows:

Ivory-white [teeth], lipstick-red, and a suave, tawny brown are the colors of Florence Jones. These were colors good enough for smart, expatriate Americans of both hemispheres. . . . The fact that this handsome Negress . . . keeps the smartest *boîte de nuit* in Paris, was evident again last week, when His Royal Highness, 27-year-old Prince Henry of Britain, strolled into Chez Florence, atop Montmartre, at 3 a. m., with a highly unofficial entourage.<sup>19</sup>

Embry Jones's status as the only "Negress" in Montmartre with the "smartest" nightclub in Paris would be slowly upended first with the entrance of Bricky, then Josie, and concluding with Bert by 1927.

The less than fairytale-like confection of Bricktop's arrival in Paris has been recounted, too, multiple times, or at least the highlights of it: her

utter dismay at the 52 rue Pigalle's Lilliputian cabaret and her encounter with a busboy by the name of Langston Hughes who offered her some food as comfort upon witnessing her teary outburst. In between those details are many unpromising others that would have seemed to signal that Paris was not the glamorous cure for her New York *ennui* but a colossal mistake.

May 11, 1924, was gray and windy. Between seasickness from the eleven-day transoceanic journey, the loss of her purse containing her life savings totaling twenty-five to thirty dollars, and an opening night to an empty club, Bricktop's first week in Paris ended with an emergency hospitalization for an appendectomy.

Over the course of two nights nonetheless, Bullard introduced her to Paris nightlife and the handful of Negroes in Paris, who could be found, for the most part, either performing or eating after-hours in the clubs and restaurants along rue Fontaine, rue de la Trinité, rue Pigalle, and rue des Martyrs, the beating heart of Black Montmartre. Bricktop lived in a succession of apartments in the area. Her first was at 36 rue Pigalle; by 1929, she had settled for a few years at 47 rue Trudaine, then moved on to 35 rue Victor Massé in 1935.

The northern part of Paris, Montmartre, or La Butte or the hill, rises above the Paris cityscape. Situated in the eighteenth arrondissement on the Right Bank, just above the lively quarter, sits the Sacre Coeur Basilica at its summit. From its lofty perch, the late-nineteenth-century monument has been a witness to the many vices and artistic transformations of the district. As a quasi-outpost of Paris, the hill attracted artists, thespians, bohemians, and those in search of more decadent offerings. While Pablo Picasso lived for a while on La Butte in a colony of artists, Toulouse-Lautrec's Moulin Rouge series of posters featuring French cancan dancers Jane Avril and La Goulue captured the irrepressible spirit of Montmartre. The trickling in of the black expatriate community added a rare and flavorful gloss to the district's distinction. An almost melodically written twenty-four-page account by British writer Henry Hurford Janes describes Bricktop's Montmartre and the invasion of jazz on the hill:

The second invasion of Montmartre was already underway, and little Harlem was springing up next to little Russia. Negro bands were gaining a fanatical following, and Paul Colin's witty black posters showing only white teeth, white eyes and shiny trombones drew people up the Butte to see drummers throw their sticks in the air and beat six drums at once. Trombones blared, saxophones wailed and the bands jerked up and down in fascinating rhythms. No one quite knew where the men and music had come from, but they pushed into Bricktops [*sic*] and Florence and Mitchell's

and came away crazed with jazz. . . . Jazz was the coming thing,  
a compulsive beat that still hadn't found its dance.<sup>20</sup>

Overrun with prostitutes, gangsters, and conmen of all stripes and nationality, Montmartre had also made room for a little Harlem thanks to the Negro jazz bands. And Hurford Janes's passage describes Bricktop's change in luck post-spring 1925. For after an uneventful spring, a chance visit to Le Grand Duc by John Dean, husband of vaudeville and silent film actress Fannie Ward, significantly changed the hostess's circumstances. Though she had been able to earn a comfortable living on the few stragglers who dropped into Le Duc, the Dean-Ward discovery of her unique performing charms bolstered Bricktop's verve. Tired of Florence Jones's antics at Chez Florence, who would "condescend to their table" for hefty sums of cash, Dean and Ward steered their friends and business to Le Grand Duc, where the "pleasingly plump, freckled-face, reddish-haired young lady who sang well and danced a little . . . treated everybody so hospitably."<sup>21</sup>

Fannie Ward believed Jones had "got excited," that she "need[ed] a lesson." "She's too spoiled,"<sup>22</sup> the actress concluded. Bricktop benefited then from a nifty coming together of white American arrogance and American Negro hubris. That is, part of Jones's international standing in Paris was her elegant uppitiness, which ran directly counter to white American ideas about a black woman's place in social hierarchies. They may have been in Paris where American dictates about race, class, and gender loosened, but these barriers were not altogether abandoned. Ward aimed to bring Florence Jones down a peg through her financial connivance or at the very least show her her place as the entertaining "help" in the hospitality industry. Ward's maneuverings and Bricktop's celebrity windfall were certainly not lost on Jones that spring 1925 and were undoubtedly still stinging by the time Alberta Hunter arrived in Paris in 1927.

Settled with a small but devoted clientele, Bricktop also began sending correspondences to the *Chicago Defender*. As part of their entertainment section, her hometown black newspaper had been following the chanteuse as early as 1916 when she danced and sang on the Chicago club circuit to her engagements out west in Los Angeles. Bricktop's move to Paris was meant to inspire; it was proudly held up to readers in a kind of "look at how our hometown girl made good." While she certainly delighted in talking up her modest success, she also used her correspondences to inform potential travelers in search of the much-ballyhooed racial and financial nirvana in Paris about the realities on the ground in post-World War I France. Bricktop was earnest in her assessment, writing, "I receive so many letters from different bands and entertainers inquiring about jobs over here. Please let them know through your columns that of the thousands of cabarets in Paris but [sic] very

few use American entertainment. Unless one is booked through contract it is foolish for them to come. If they are booked in advance, however, the pay is good and sure."<sup>23</sup>

Her counsel was certainly in keeping with the dismal situation in Paris described by Langston Hughes in a letter to Countee Cullen in March 1924, several weeks after his arrival:

Dear Countee,

I am in Paris. I had a disagreement on the ship, left and came to Paris purely on my nerve, as I knew no one here and I had less than nine dollars in my pocket when I arrived. For a week I came as near starvation as I ever want to be, but I got to know Paris, as I tramped from one end to the other looking for a job. And at last I found one and then another one and yet another!

I have fallen into the very whirling heart of Parisian night-life—Montmartre where topsy-turvy no one gets up before seven or eight in the evening, breakfast at nine and nothing starts before midnight. Montmartre of the Moulin Rouge, Le Rat Mort and the famous night clubs and cabarets! I've just had tea over in the Latin Quarter with three of the most charming English colored girls! Claude McKay just left here for the South. Smith is in Brussels and Roland Hayes is coming.

I myself go to work at eleven pm and finish at nine in the morning. I'm working at the "Grand Duc" where the culinary staff and the entertainers are American Negroes. One of the owners is colored too. The jazz-band starts playing at one and we're still serving champagne long after day-light. I'm vastly amused.

But about France! Kid, stay in Harlem! The French are the most franc-loving, sou-clutching, hard-faced, hard worked, cold and half-starved set of people I've ever seen in life. Heat-unknown. Hot water—water—what is it? You can pay for a smile here. Nothing, absolutely nothing is given away. You even pay for water in a restaurant on the use of the toilette. And do they like Americans of any color? They do not!! Paris—old and ugly and dirty. Style, class? You see more well-dressed people in a New York subway station in five seconds than I've seen in all my three weeks in Paris. Little old New York for me! But the colored people here are fine. There are lots of us.<sup>24</sup>

And by May 1924, Hughes was still sounding the "stay in America" alarm. This time to Harold Jackman:

Stay home! Europe is the last place in the world to come looking for a job, and unless you've got a dollar for every day you expect to stay here, don't come. Jobs in Paris are like needles in hay-stacks for everybody, and especially English-speaking foreigners. The city is over-run with Spaniards and Italians who work for nothing, literally nothing. And all French wages are low enough anyway. I've never in my life seen so many English and Americans, colored and white, male and female, broke and without a place to sleep as I have seen here. Yet if you'd give them a ticket home tomorrow, I doubt if ten would leave Paris. Not even hunger drives them away. The colored jazz bands and performers are about the only ones doing really well here. The rest of us, with a dozen or so exceptions, merely get along.<sup>25</sup>

As Hughes relates, chronic unemployment, onerous work permit restrictions, a readily available cheap immigrant labor source, and virtual poverty were not enough to make Americans, colored and white, flee Paris. Paris was still a cultural haven, an incomparable brew of cosmopolitanism and freedom that America couldn't match on any day. And Bricktop had found a place for herself in it and was doing fairly well. But it was the Montparnasse and Saint-Germain crowd of artists and writers' discovery of her at Le Grand Duc however that sealed her status as the Queen of Nightclubs in the Jazz Age.

F. Scott Fitzgerald described this era of jazz in France in his *Echoes of the Jazz Age* as "an age of miracles, [ . . . ] an age of art, [ . . . ] an age of excess, and [ . . . ] an age of satire"; it was also F. Scott Fitzgerald who famously stated that his "greatest claim to fame is that [he] discovered Bricktop before Cole Porter."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in the short story "Babylon Revisited," published in 1931 in the February 21st edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Fitzgerald's dissipated protagonist, Charles J. Wales, describes endless nights into the wee morning hours and countless dollars spent, "large enough to pay a month's rent"<sup>27</sup> at Le Grand Duc with Bricktop.

Charlie Wales returns to Paris—Babylon—after a lengthy absence that includes a stay in a sanitarium. Like the United States, which is still reeling from the stock market crash in 1929 and the Depression that followed, Paris appears sullen, having been virtually emptied of its American expatriate community. Headlines in the United States announced the continued downward spiral of global markets: "Market Continues Unsettled—Government Obligations Decline Sharply. MOST GROUPS LESS ACTIVE Foreign Loans Slightly Easier, With German International 5 s Off 2 1/8 Points," while the Sunday edition of *Le Figaro* detailed the failures of a commission on unemployment.<sup>28</sup>

No longer in its heyday, from Fitzgerald's (via Wales) jaundiced-eye perspective, it had an Old World feel rather than the New World cheap and exotic exuberance imported by Americans who were now down-at-the-heels:

He was not really disappointed to find Paris was so empty. But the stillness in the Ritz bar was strange and portentous. It was not an American bar anymore—he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France. . . . He was curious to see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days. He bought a *strapontin* for the Casino and watched Josephine Baker go through her chocolate arabesques.

After an hour he left and strolled toward Montmartre, up the Rue Pigalle into the Place Blanche. The rain had stopped and there were a few people in evening clothes disembarking from taxis in front of cabarets, and *cocottes* prowling singly or in pairs, and many Negroes. He passed a lighted door from which issued music, and stopped with the sense of familiarity; it was Bricktop's, where he had parted with so many hours and so much money.

Zelli's was closed, the bleak and sinister cheap hotels surrounding it were dark; up in the Rue Blanche there was more light and a local, colloquial French crowd. . . .

So much for the effort and ingenuity of Montmartre. All the catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale, and he suddenly realized the meaning of the word "dissipate."<sup>29</sup>

Like Ernest Hemingway before him, Fitzgerald had practically declared Montmartre washed up and the era of jazz dead in 1931. Whatever filial bonds Fitzgerald may have felt for Negroes as fellow Americans in Paris, and certainly Bricktop felt a near-motherly tenderness for the writer, whatever bonding they all may have had over jazz in his frequently sloshed exits from Le Grand Duc, by the time he wrote *The Great Gatsby* with its Negrophobic pronouncements, all bets were off.

Bricktop soldiers on nonetheless. By 1926, she had added saloonkeeper to her list of trades with the opening and just as rapid closing of Music Box on rue Pigalle. And by December 1929, she had added the title Mrs. to her name, as in Mrs. Peter Ducongé. By 1931, while everyone around her is closing shop and hightailing it back to the United States or other, more hospitable places, she imprudently, as time would tell, opens a larger club at 66 rue Pigalle and purchases a home in Bougival, a hamlet that impressionist painters made famous, feats remarkably few Americans, black or white, were able to do. There in Bougival she set up a tranquil idyll away from the bustle and hustle of Paris.



The dance the Charleston was her entrée, though, into Cole Porter's rarefied world in the 1920s. As she remembers, "I have to give the Charleston the credit it deserves for launching me on my career as a saloon-keeper. . . . 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."<sup>30</sup> She gives her first Charleston lesson to Porter on the first Monday of May 1926.<sup>31</sup> A July 4, 1926, telegram from Porter to Bricktop from his hideaway in Venice, Italy, attests to the popularity of her private dance lessons: "All fixed for you to give lesson [a]t Excelsior Twice Week Let Me Know Date of Arrival Advise Auguste Will Engage Room."<sup>32</sup>

"They came to Bricktop's and I went wherever they paid me to come,"<sup>33</sup> she wrote in notes for her memoir. Porter and his wife, Linda Lee, invited Bricktop to entertain at 13 rue Monsieur, their luxurious apartment in Paris's seventh arrondissement and at their rented palazzo, Rezzonico, in Venice, and she went gladly; in exchange Bricktop greased the wheels for Cole Porter's entry into Paris's nightlife. Porter biographer William McBrien notes, "Along with Elsa Maxwell, three black entertainers contributed to Porter's social success in the 1920's: Bricktop, Josephine Baker, and Leslie Hutchison."<sup>34</sup> Leslie "Hutch" Hutchison, as he was called, was a native of the island of Grenada. Unlike Paul Robeson, who may have heeded Bricktop's advice regarding the damage a divorce and interracial marriage with an Englishwoman would wreak on his career,<sup>35</sup> the highly accomplished piano player and cabaret performer plunged headlong into an affair with Edwina Mountbatten, a member of the British royal family. It ruined him professionally.

Porter and Bricktop indeed formed a mutually beneficial social relationship that included the composer's spending lavish amounts of money to keep

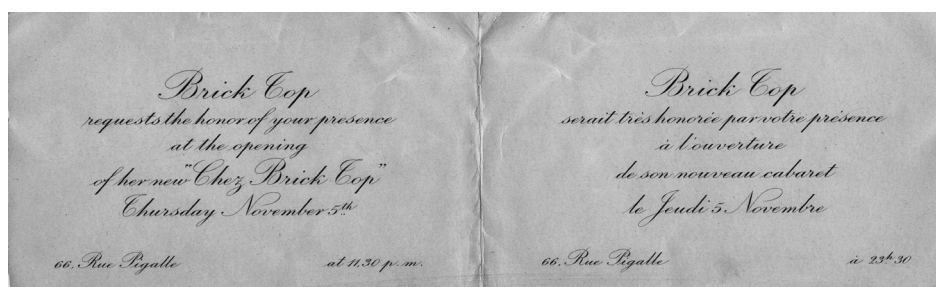


ILLUSTRATION 1.3. Invitation to the Opening of Chez Bricktop at 66 rue Pigalle. Courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

the saloonkeeper in style and her various clubs in vogue and thus in business. Adding to Bricktop's social capital as fashionable was designer Elsa Schiaparelli. The saloonkeeper's success and ballooning bank account also allowed her to indulge a fondness for Cartier. She purchased two diamond rings for tidy sums from the original rue de la Paix boutique in 1928 and 1929.<sup>36</sup>

The friendship did not last however. Though he did host a welcoming party for her initial return to New York, sought her out at her Rome club in 1960, and she would eventually record "Miss Otis Regrets" for the composer, Bricktop's cachet was not portable. Upon her return to New York in the 1960s, she repeatedly attempted to contact Porter, who refused to see her or answer her many calls.<sup>37</sup> And Porter, too, known to be gracious but equally persnickety, may have realized that the social barriers crossed in Europe did not apply in America. It was a classic: "What happens in Europe stays in Europe."

As she was "beginning to consider Paris [her] home,"<sup>38</sup> Bricktop continued her ascent as hostess extraordinaire, moving from Le Grand Duc to Music Box and on to a succession of Chez Bricktop clubs. The last of these latter business undertakings involved a seven-year partnership with the black British-American singer Mabel Mercer, who had begun her career in vaudeville and the music halls in England. According to Mercer biographer James Haskins, Mercer, who spoke infrequently of her youthful years, was born February 3, 1900, in Staffordshire, England, to a white British vaudeville mother who went by the stage name Mabel Lablanche and a black American musician father with the last name Mercer.

She had been abandoned by both parents and pawned off on her maternal grandmother, who in turn sent her to a convent boarding school called Blakely. Upon completion of her studies at age fourteen, Mercer joined her extended family's traveling vaudeville act, the Romany Five.<sup>39</sup> She arrived in Paris in 1920 with the John Payne and Roseman trio, a troupe that sang Negro spirituals. Mercer began singing at the Le Grand Duc in the immediate aftermath of Florence Embry Jones's departure for Chez Florence. Her inability to mimic the style of jazz that was the craze in Paris and her angelic soprano voice left much to be desired in the jazz-crazed twenties. Bricktop eventually replaced Mercer at Le Duc in May 1924. She continued to do pickup work in revues, even performing at Chez Florence once Embry Jones departed permanently for the United States.

Bricktop found Mabel elegant. She believed the singer, with her clipped British accent, would bring an element of heightened refinement to her establishment. And Chez Bricktop was all about refinement and class. It was through Bricktop's sheer will and Cole Porter's melodic tunes that Mabel Mercer became a cabaret star in Paris. Her presence at Bricktop's helped solidify the club's stature.

With Porter's money, Schiaparelli's clothing, and Mercer's to-the-manor-born veneer, Chez Bricktop rose to the very top of expatriates' and tourists' list of places to be seen. Bricktop attributed her success to "my being able to take strangers from all different parts of the world and make a party. In Paris, Mexico, Rome and wherever I was I am a party. I do know I am a presence."<sup>40</sup>

In his Paris memoir with supplementary chapters by Kay Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together: A Binocular View of Paris in the '20s*, American writer Robert McAlmon, who often frequented Bricktop's, describes the savoir faire of the hostess and the cabaret's ambience in a lengthy passage:

At the same time 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 co-ordination of faculties and reflexes, Brick is that person. She is large and firm-fleshed, and although she "lays down the law" while singing her songs, she thinks more of her dancing than her singing. It's a great show to watch her skipping about the floor while rendering "Bon-Bon-Buddie, the Chocolate Drop," or Cole Porter's latest witty



ILLUSTRATION 1.4. Chez Bricktop with Ada "Bricktop" Smith, Mabel Mercer, and guests, 1932. Courtesy of Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

song. She has singing feet, and she puts across her songs with intelligence and wit.

When . . . 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 boyfriend 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 Frenchmen 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 services; and when asked, she began to sing, "Love for Sale," while still 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 joint!" Then she continued the song, having missed but two phrases, and was at her desk again adding accounts.

The quarrelsome lads quieted down, for Brick's admonition had been altogether understanding. She herself liked to drink, and liked an argument, and those of her race understood this. Her reproof had been good-natured, and it somehow suggested the possibility of jokes later, when most of the cash customers would be gone.<sup>41</sup>

McAlmon captures the atmospherics at the nightclub and the diffuse talents of its owner. A consummate multi-taskmaster, in her diary between notations on Florence Mills's arrival in Paris with the revue *Blackbirds*, Charleston lessons for Cole Porter or Lady Mendl, Bricktop enters tabulations for bottles of champagne sold.<sup>42</sup> She did in fact "like to drink," enjoying more than an occasional flute of champagne, which she attributed to the loss of her svelte figure. And so much so that by the late 1930s, she began tracking her consumption: "stopped drink" and "no drink 15 days."<sup>43</sup>

While jazz ruled in the streets of Black Montmartre on the hill during *les années folles*, at the site of the gardens of the Élysée Montmartre at 80 Boulevard de Rochechouart, down a few paces from the hill, and at rue Saint-François de Paule in Nice, a different sound could be heard. Lillian Evans-Tibbs, whose stage name was Madame Evanti, was singing operatic