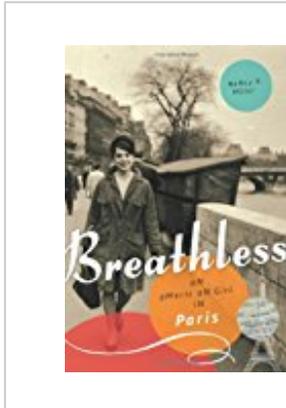


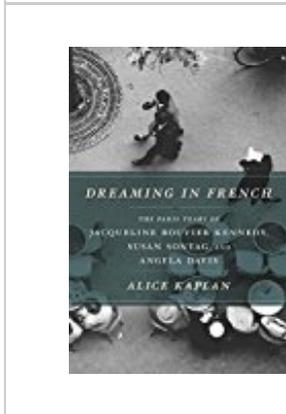
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How To Be Lost: Sex (Race, Class, and Gender) in the City of Light



After graduating from college, I headed to Paris to study contemporary French philosophy -- Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze -- and semiotics with Julia Kristeva. I spent most evenings contemplating the meaning of life while drinking Scotch in a gay bar in the Marais. I lived in a series of *chambres de bonne* with a Turkish toilet down the hall and had a boyfriend in New York, a lover in Italy, and another in London, whose visits to me in the City of Love I expertly juggled. I believed I was following the tried and true path toward a life of an intellectual and sensual *super-sophistiquée*.



The odysseys of American writers and artists in Paris -- Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Baldwin et cetera -- are legendary. But what of the legions of young Americans, especially women, who, like Patricia Franchini (played by Jean Seberg) in Godard's film *Breathless*, came to Paris on study abroad programs ostensibly to attend classes at the Sorbonne, but who really were in search of a degree in the School of Life?

It seems there is a small but growing literature on the subject.

The most comprehensive study is historian Whitney Walton's *Internationalism, National Identities and Study Abroad: France and the United States 1890-1970* (2010). This subgenre's pioneering narrative, however, is Elaine Dundy's classic autobiographical novel *The Dud Avocado* (1958), written the year before *Breathless* was made. It recounts the (mis)adventures of Sally Jay Gorce, middle-class, Midwesterner, and aspiring actress. Sally Jay occasionally goes to a lecture at the Sorbonne, chats with exchange students, and hangs out at Le Select in Montparnasse. Mostly, with her hair dyed pink and wearing her eclectic outfits, she explores Paris seeking new experiences. She goes to "lesbian joints," poses nude for an artist, nurses hangovers at the Ritz bar, and beds a wide range of men. Funny, charming, perceptive, surprising, a master of irony and understatement, Sally Jay is astonishingly real. Her year in Paris is an attempt to reconcile love, sex, career, and respect -- the eternal female conundrum. Wearily she concludes, "it was not easy to be a Woman in these stirring times. I said it then and I say it now: it just isn't our century."

In 1961, Barnard graduate, Nancy K. Miller, now a renowned feminist scholar, left New York in search of intellectual and sexual freedom in Paris. A "real-life *Dud Avocado*," Miller's *Breathless: An American Girl in Paris* (2013) is an account of both her sexual awakening and

her developing feminist consciousness. She begins her Parisian adventure by sleeping with a married doctor, a friend of her parents' charged with looking out for her. While studying French literature at the Sorbonne, she has a several affairs with hapless men. Second wave feminism still a decade away, Miller sees few options: she marries, disastrously, another American expatriot escaping his own "family plots."

"I had hoped that in marrying Jim," she writes, "and living with him in Paris, I would escape my nice-Jewish-girl destiny. I longed for glamour and style, Frenchness, Jean Seberg in *Breathless*, or Jeanne Moreau (even more of a reach) [...in...] *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*." Moving in with Jim, however, she "voluntarily preempted the task of washing his socks." Urged by her female friends to have children, she was told that by not having them she wasn't "delivering as a woman."

Miller's account resembles Mary McCarthy's *The Group* in its bold, frank descriptions of sex, contraception, and abortion, and her acerbic wit and uncommon insight. Her political awareness shifts and broadens while abroad. "From here the situation in Vietnam," she writes to her parents, "seems absolutely insane -- there's a feeling of wonder that American policy can be so blind to reality." Of the Kennedy assassination, she writes: "The French were mystified by how the protection of a president could be so inefficient. They immediately imagined a conspiracy theory."

An affair with a German worker redecorating her and Jim's new apartment leads Miller out of her bad marriage and back home. Miller's zestful, poignant memoir brilliantly evokes how it feels to be a young woman in Paris steeped in desire and confusion, seeking answers and clarity, yet sensing that a state of uncertainty and amazement may be the most thrilling of all.

During the period the French call "*les trente glorieuses*" (the thirty glorious years) -- the post-war recovery years from 1945 to 1975 -- three young women who would later be among the United States' most iconic public figures of the century, spent time studying in Paris: Jacqueline Bouvier, 1949-1950; Susan Sontag, 1957-1958; and Angela Davis, 1963-1964. Their experiences are chronicled in Alice Kaplan's extraordinary account *Dreaming in French* (2013). Kaplan, who explored her own junior year abroad in *French Lessons* (1994), considers three American women from different generations, cultures, and classes. Examining both commonalities and divergences in their Parisian experiences, she sheds fascinating new light on each woman's trajectory and reveals how these exploits significantly influenced them throughout their later lives.

When the twenty-year-old Catholic debutante Jacqueline Bouvier arrived in Paris on the Smith program, French women had been exercising their right to vote for five years and Simone de Beauvoir was about to publish the second volume of her seminal *The Second Sex*. Jackie's immediate interests, however, lay elsewhere. Her grandfather had insisted they were descended from French royalty; though the lie was eventually exposed, Jackie was intent on proving that if not of the French aristocracy, she could certainly run with them. Coming from a wealthy East Coast family, she had all the right introductions and was soon attending dinners and soirées with the Parisian elite, her weekends spent riding and hunting at their chateaux.

She perfected her French. "I have two lives," she wrote to her stepbrother, "flying from here [the apartment she lived in with a French family] to the Sorbonne and Reid Hall, in a lovely, quiet, rainy world -- or, like the maid on her day out, putting on a fur coat and going to the middle of town and being swanky at the Ritz." A decade later, accompanying her husband on his first trip to France as president of the United States, Jacqueline Kennedy dismissed her interpreter so she could speak directly with de Gaulle. Later, as a book editor, she mostly published work connected to French culture or history.

Susan Sontag was more likely to hang out at the Deux Magots or Café de Flore in the Latin Quarter than at the Ritz. After college she had married Philip Rieff, had a baby, David, then left them to go live in Paris with her lover, Harriet Sohmers, who worked for the *Herald Tribune*. Sontag's crowd included Bernard Frechtman, Jean Genet's agent and translator; Allen Ginsberg; James Baldwin; and Cuban actress and playwright María Irene Fornés (also Sohmers's lover). Sontag received a fellowship from the American Association of University Women to study the metaphysical presuppositions of ethics at the Sorbonne. She read contemporary French literature voraciously, went to the theatre, and, above all, the cinema, often seeing several films a day. Then, as now, Paris was a cinephile's mecca offering movies from all genres and countries, at all hours.

Leaving Paris for New York, Sontag began to write for the *New York Review of Books*, primarily on French topics. In 1966 she published *Against Interpretation*, launching her career as "an apostle of the avant-garde." The essay collection, Kaplan writes, "might have been called 'On France': detailed analyses of a whole panoply of French writers and filmmakers and novelists." Sontag wrote about the likes of Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, bringing "French Theory" to America.

Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, Angela Davis, attended segregated schools and lived in a neighborhood nicknamed "Dynamite Hill" because of the incessant bombings by segregationists. To deal with the violent racism she experienced daily, she fantasized she wore a white mask that allowed her to "go unceremoniously into the theater or amusement park or wherever I wanted to go." After she'd had her fun she ripped off the mask, laughing at those she'd duped. Her mastery of French in high school and at Brandeis was an aspect of this mask. France held a mythical power for Black Americans as a place of freedom. James Baldwin had come to Brandeis to lecture in her freshman year. Paris was home to Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and Josephine Baker. Many black American soldiers remained in France after both world wars, finding the country more open and tolerant -- due more to the French mythologizing of black American culture than to their being anti-racist. Actually, when Angela Davis first went to Paris in the summer of 1962, one of the first things she noticed was the ubiquitous racial slurs against Algerians. She joined the pro-Algerian demonstration on the Place de la Sorbonne, later described in her renowned *An Autobiography* (1974): "When the *flics* broke it up with their high power water hoses, they were as vicious as the redneck cops in Birmingham who met the Freedom Riders with their dogs and hoses."

Davis spent her junior year in Paris, the only black student of forty-six in the Hamilton program. Very familiar with the work of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Proust, Camus, and Sartre, she was one

of six students advanced enough for an intensive course in contemporary literature at the Sorbonne. While she was in France, four Birmingham girls -- friends and neighbors of Davis's - - died when a bomb exploded in a Baptist Church, and Kennedy was assassinated.

In 1965, after graduating from Brandeis, she studied in Frankfurt with the social critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno, then worked on her PhD with the political theorist Herbert Marcuse at University of California, San Diego. Much of her reading during the years she was developing her own radical political philosophy was in French: Jean-Paul Sartre on colonialism and post-colonialism, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Henri Alleg on torture, Henri Lefebvre and Louis Althusser on Marxist theory, and Daniel Guérin on anarchism.

Later, when Davis was imprisoned for her alleged role in a California courtroom shooting, four hundred French intellectuals, including Daniel Guérin, Jacques Derrida, Marguerite Duras, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes, signed a letter demanding her release. Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Foucault, Louis Aragon, and Pablo Picasso wrote another letter of protest to Governor Ronald Reagan. In 1971, sixty thousand people marched in Paris for her liberation. Angela Davis's story, writes Kaplan, itself became mythic.

My own memories of my Paris years are rather hazy. Thirty years on, after reading these excellent books on the both familiar and very diverse experiences of young American women in Paris, I realize what I was really learning in the City of Light was how to be -- and stay -- lost: essential training for a writer and a woman.

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