French Lessons: How Paris Changed Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis

By Alice Kaplan

On August 23, 1949, the De Grasse set sail from New York Harbor. Regular ocean crossings for civilians had just resumed the previous year on Liberty ships refurbished for tourists, and the departure of a group of young women from Smith College—the third set of juniors bound for Paris since the end of the war—made the news. They were feted by the French consul in New York, with a luncheon and photo shoot with the society columnist Hedda Hopper. On board ship they got special attention. The last night of the voyage, the captain asked them to sing Edith Piaf's "La vie en rose," the hit song they all knew by heart, whose simple words lulled them with dreams of a happiness that was unattainable in any other language. One of the girls in their group was asked to sing a verse of her own. Perhaps it was because her name was French, or because she looked glamorous. Though she was from Vassar, not Smith, she had been accepted into Smith College's rigorous Junior Year in Paris. The other students knew about her triumphant Newport debut and about the New York gossip columnist who had named her "Queen
Deb of the Year," but where they were going, it didn't matter.

Jacqueline Bouvier's 1949 trip to Paris was a flagship voyage, the harbinger of a golden age of study abroad that began in the aftermath of the Second World War and continued for three decades, sending thousands of American students into French homes and French universities. She was the first of three exemplary women whose lives were transformed by a year in France, and who, in turn, transformed the United States. What Jackie Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis owed to their time abroad, and how their American fame reverberated back to France, is a triptych of three young women's cultural, academic, and social lives in Paris, and a study of influence in several directions. They differ from the best-known expatriates of the last century—Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Josephine Baker—because they lived in France as students, their careers uncharted. They each crossed the threshold of the Sorbonne between 1945 and 1964, during the period the French call the country's "thirty glorious years," les trente glorieuses. Glorious for some, violent and reactionary for others, this long quest for modernization and affluence stretched from the postwar recovery in 1945 to 1975.

Two of the students were French majors in college, and the third had imbued herself with French literary and cinematic culture on her own terms. Each woman had a unique beauty and a perception of the world that was unmistakably hers, and each made Paris her own.

Jacqueline Bouvier went abroad on the Smith College Junior Year in Paris in 1949-50, became first lady of the United States, and later, a successful book editor. Susan Sontag went to Paris by way of Oxford, on a fellowship from the American Association of University Women in 1957-58. She was a prolific essayist and novelist, a controversial New York intellectual who spent her summers in Paris. Angela Davis arrived in Paris for the Hamilton College Junior Year in France in 1963-64. A philosopher and an activist, she survived imprisonment and a murder trial, and became a university professor with an endowed chair.

If you reduce them to identity labels, they are the soul of diversity: a Catholic debutante, a Jewish intellectual, an African-American revolutionary, from the East Coast, the West Coast, and the South. They have often been reduced to their images: a sheath dress and a double strand of pearls, a mane of black hair with a white streak, an Afro and a raised fist. They have been part of the national conversation, the subject of fascination, the object of wildly divergent interpretations.

The France where each of them lived as a temporary resident with a carte de séjour changed from 1949, when Jacqueline Bouvier arrived, to 1964, when Angela Davis left. Jacqueline Bouvier's France had been drained by the German occupation and scarred by the camps. It was a damaged place, rebuilding its economy with American funds from the Marshall Plan. While Susan Sontag was in Paris in 1957-58, France was shattered over the question of Algerian independence, the Fourth Republic crumbled, and Charles de Gaulle returned to power. Angela Davis, in 1963, lived in the aftermath of the loss of Algeria. The France she knew was a Gaullist France, a newly postcolonial France where the dark monuments of Jacqueline Bouvier's and Susan Sontag's Paris began to be scraped clean.
All three women dreamed about France long before they ever crossed the ocean. Paris, and the French language, existed in their imaginations, even in their parents' imaginations, so that they went abroad accompanied by the ghosts of ancestors and the echoes of public conversations. Jacqueline Bouvier arrived with her upper-class connections; Susan Sontag, the self-invented European, with her opinions; Angela Davis, with her sense of justice and her fearlessness. They were in their 20s, reaching that existential threshold where you start to see what you can do with what you've been given. France was the place where they could become themselves, or protect themselves from what they didn't want to become, as products of their families, their societies.

Their Parisian years offer a glimpse of Jacqueline Bouvier, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis before they became public figures. Were they always extraordinary young women of whom the greatest things were expected, or has fame distorted the stories of their youth? It is touching to imagine them before their images were frozen in the public mind, before they learned to pose or avoid photographers, when they still had the luxury of being students, though not exactly ordinary students. Jacqueline Bouvier had her discerning eye for all things beautiful; Susan Sontag her diaries full of lists and observations and endless movies seen, books read; Angela Davis her analytic tools, her understanding of politics and language. They couldn't know what the future held.

I have listened to them speak French, in radio and television archives, looking for clues. There are no recordings from their student years, but many from the years of their prominence. Jacqueline Kennedy, interviewed as first lady on French television, spoke in a slow, singsong whisper, plaintively—a schoolgirl French, with each syllable carefully chosen. When she didn't know the grammar, she knew just how to disguise with a winning grace what she hadn't mastered. Susan Sontag, who frequently appeared on cultural broadcasts, stumbled in her first French interviews, then learned to speak fluently, with an absolute confidence and a total disregard for native intonation and accent because her own sense of language was so firmly intact. (She drove her French translators crazy because she was convinced she knew the language better than they did.) Angela Davis returned to Paris on a book tour more than 10 years after her junior year abroad. Interpreters sat with her in interviews, but she ended up giving them the words. Her grammar and vocabulary were advanced, and she had an artful control of her intonation, placing the emphasis exactly where she wanted. When she was arguing, her voice grew higher, faster, more urgent. They were, in French, as we all are in a foreign language, faithful translations of their American selves.

The men came, too. Norman Mailer, Chester Himes, William Styron, Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, Arthur Miller, S.J. Perelman, James Baldwin, Art Buchwald, James Jones, Irwin Shaw, and George Plimpton came to France on the GI Bill, on Guggenheims, on Fulbrights; they explored their demons, went native or not, got rich or stuck it out in maids' rooms and cheap hotels. They produced an oeuvre, an expatriate literature of the postwar era that is gritty, irreverent, macho, frequently alcoholic, and as far as imaginable from the experience of women abroad. The odyssey of American men in Paris, from Hemingway to Richard Wright, is canonical, as familiar to us as a ride on a Bateau Mouche.
For the female students of the same generation, no matter what their destinies, the traces of their experience are harder to convey. They resonate sometimes with the grand houses and marriage plots of Edith Wharton, sometimes with the everyday language play of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. Like Patricia Franchini, the study-abroad student in Godard's *Breathless* who betrays her gangster lover, they want to know what "dégueulasse" means. These young women are determined not so much to "embrace irresponsibility"—James Baldwin's idea about the expatriate student—as to embrace a new language and master a highly coded way of life. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis called the young women abroad "the slight expatriates ... swaddled in sweaters and woolen stockings, doing homework in graph-paper cahiers."

You can define them in those postwar years by what they were not: They weren't veterans studying on the GI Bill, men who were world weary, restless, made older than their years by military experience. The women spending their junior year in Paris were often not yet 21 when they left their sheltered colleges. During their time abroad they may have looked demure and regimented, but the experience was life altering to them. Their *œuvre* consists of their diaries, their letters home, their snapshots, their word lists, fading in countless attics. Their stories have not had a place in the great American tradition of expatriate literature.

In 1947, a few months before Jacqueline Bouvier entered Vassar College as a freshman, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir visited 20 American campuses as an official *missionnaire* of the cultural services of the French Embassy. She was as excited about discovering the United States as any American college student discovering France. Her stops included the women's colleges Smith, Wellesley, Mills, and Vassar, institutions with active French departments and large numbers of students schooled in the language who were eager to learn about Paris. Beauvoir, during those months in the United States, listened to the many young Americans who were listening to her. She practiced and honed her propensity for cultural generalization about women, young people, and intellectual life in general, and later she transferred many of those generalizations to her sociological study *The Second Sex*, which founded contemporary feminist thought.

She had the ambition, which became Susan Sontag's and later Angela Davis's, to construct theories about culture and to grasp, through the strength of her thinking and by means of philosophical tools, the truth of a given situation.

Reviewing the diary Beauvoir published about her trip, the American writer Mary McCarthy made fun of the French writer's knee-jerk leftism, her exaggerated sense of the wealth of Vassar girls, and her naïve ideas about American capitalism. McCarthy ridiculed Beauvoir's idea that the shops on New York's Fifth Avenue were "reserved for the capitalist international," that "there was no friendship between the sexes; conformity reigned." She complained that Beauvoir thought Vassar was for aristocrats, whereas she, McCarthy, had gone there on scholarship. Beauvoir was untouched by the criticisms; her diary was a record of one consciousness, her own: "This is what I saw and how I saw it. I have not tried to say more."

The American women traveling in the opposite direction would have observations just as trenchant, analyses just as pressing as Beauvoir’s. Living on Paris time, six hours later
than their friends back on campus and their families at home, they would experience, over a period of many months, an isolation from much that was familiar, and a particular form of solitude. With that solitude came the greatest luxuries: the time to read, the opportunity to wander, and the chance to think new thoughts.

France secured them. For Jacqueline Bouvier, for Susan Sontag, and for Angela Davis, the year in Paris changed their relationship to their bodies, to their words, and strengthened their sense of being in the world. This other country brought them new friends in a new language. And in the end, for completely different reasons, France gave each of these women a deep and lasting confidence, confirmed their spirit of adventure, and guaranteed their freedom from home constraints.

What happened to them during their Paris years was an alchemy made of discipline and distraction. The deep history of their transformation involved smells and tastes and visions—fleeting sensual experiences not easy to capture in a conventional life story. You have to imagine Jacqueline Bouvier in her red traveling skirt, joking with her women friends about the hatpin device she'd perfected for protection on the trains; Susan Sontag in a tiny Paris movie house or in her favorite cafe, recording the slang she was hearing in one of her journals; Angela Davis taking pleasure in a new suede coat, in the taste of couscous in the Latin Quarter, even in something as simple as taking notes on index cards printed with squares rather than lines.

You have to imagine, too, the way the French saw these young women, for if there is anything common to all three, it was beauty, a theatrical way of presenting themselves in public that was both a performance and a protection. To use an old-fashioned expression, they cut quite a picture: Sontag, literally, in her walk-on part in *Le bel age*; Davis in the student restaurant where young men jumped up for a chance to light her cigarette; Bouvier dancing, or sitting in the Brasserie Balzar after class. Where else but Paris is there so much space that is designed simply for being seen, and how different from the isolating private spaces of American highways and suburbs.

What they made of those Parisian spaces was unique. In an interview in the 1960s, Susan Sontag said about her time in Paris that although she was surrounded by English speakers, "*J'ai senti la ville.*" The verb *sentir* can mean either "to feel" in the most sensual, tactile way, or "to know" as in sentience, perception. Each of the three American women in Paris had her own feel for the city—from Jacqueline Bouvier's painterly vision to Sontag's lists of cafes, authors, and expressions to Angela Davis's political reading of signs. Their access to France was different in each case. For Jacqueline Bouvier, it was a foregone conclusion that she would cross the ocean as a young woman, since European travel was part of the ordinary experience of her class. Angela Davis earned her trip through scholarships and work-study and through the sacrifices of her parents, who had valued their own educations and wanted even better for their children. Susan Sontag was the scrappiest of the three, the self-made student who couldn't afford a junior year abroad. Her trip to Paris after marriage and the birth of her child was belated, and she was isolated, for better or worse, from any institution.
For the rest of their lives, each woman maintained an ongoing relationship, an ongoing dialogue, with France. Jacqueline Bouvier, faithful to the arts, worked with André Malraux to bring "Whistler's Mother" and the "Mona Lisa" to the United States, and later, as an editor, helped her writers make the court of Louis XIV and the Paris of the 1950s come alive. Susan Sontag unlocked French avant-gardes for her American audience and became the kind of writer normally found only in a Parisian universe of cafe arguments and street life. Here Angela Davis is the exception, for despite her mastery of French literature and French philosophy, despite the importance for her of Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault, the force of attraction between France and herself worked mainly in the other direction. Sixty thousand people marched for her liberation in Paris, in 1971, in a single demonstration. Thirty-six years later, a nursery school was named for her, the École Maternelle Angela Davis, in Aubervilliers in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, a multiracial community with its theaters and festivals, its creoles and slangs—a school for the France of tomorrow. As far as I know, there is no school or street in France named after Susan Sontag or Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and no commemorative plaques commemorate their Paris sojourns.

As representatives of the aspirations of three generations, these women might be said to typify the aesthetes, the bohemians, the political activists. By following them in their travels, we can witness an entire intellectual and cultural history of France: the transition from the aesthetic values leading up to World War II, to the iconoclastic formalism of the avant-garde 1950s, to political revolt in the 1960s, when France was re-establishing its historical values, experimenting with the new, and striking out, at the height of its affluence, against oppressive authority. French writers and artists changed guard alongside the three Americans: Juliette Greco, Simone de Beauvoir, and Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Jacqueline Bouvier and Susan Sontag's generation gave way to Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault in Angela Davis's. Classical France yielded to swinging France, to the France of high concepts and of deconstruction.

In traveling to France, these three women were touched differently by the great political events of the postwar decades—the emergence from four years of German occupation; France's loss of her colonial empire; and, most dramatically, the long, bitter Algerian "war without a name" and the return of de Gaulle to power to handle the national emergency engendered by that war. You have only to read the Salmagundi, the student newspaper at Miss Porter's, to understand how fervent was the idealism, the sense of making a better world, that Jacqueline Bouvier took with her to Paris. Susan Sontag's radicalism, formal in the 1960s, political in the 1970s, was inspired by the bohemian circles that so excited her artistic and sexual imagination in Paris. Angela Davis's belief in equality and justice, rooted in her family's tradition of political activism, took on a new urgency the day she picked up a newspaper in Biarritz to read about the church bombing in her hometown, Birmingham, Ala. Distance brought clear vision and anger.

The French people encountered by Bouvier, Sontag, and Davis in their student years and beyond saw these women, at least in part, as expressions of an American national character. From the Liberation to Vietnam, the United States was a cipher, positive or negative, for France's own aspirations. Writers like Sartre and Beauvoir could disdain American capitalism while adoring American music, American film, and the American
rebel who sought freedom in France. Foucault, Genet, Agnes Varda rallied to the
defense of the Black Panthers. If French intellectuals—from Gaullists in the International
League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism to communists in the party's youth league—
Marched for the liberation of Angela Davis, if Francophone writers were inspired by her
Story, it was because they felt on some level that her struggle against American empire
was theirs. You might accuse them of romanticizing American radicals when in fact they
were hitching them to their own wagon.

There was of course overlap in what the three women learned in France, if only because
the French literary canon, the sense of what matters in arts and letters, has remained
remarkably consistent throughout the 20th century, and still today. Like all serious
students of French before and after them, they read Marcel Proust. All three shared a love
of this literary philosopher of memory and analyst of desire, jealousy, and social class. It
says something about the versatility of his genius that he became meaningful to all three.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy read Proust on the campaign trail as a consolation for time
lost and as a field guide to the underside of Camelot. Susan Sontag wrote about him in a
diary from her senior year in college: "I have almost finished Swann's Way and there are
moments during my reading, of exhilaration so painful that my head begins to ache, my
hands tremble, and tears crowd in my eyes." She was only 18 at the time. She would
return to Proust again and again, first through her friend Richard Howard, who was
translating him; then through her lover Nicole Stéphane, who bought the film rights to À
la recherche du temps perdu; and later still through her study of photography, one of
Proust's abiding passions. Angela Davis also came to Proust at the age of 18, in her
freshman and sophomore years at Brandeis. He honed her sense of social reality and, later,
strengthened her in her solitude. He even came to her defense in court.

Educated by modernists, receptive to avant-gardes, the three women were attuned to the
New Wave and the New Novel that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s. Angela Davis
read Robbe-Grillet in her advanced literature course at the Sorbonne. She returned to
Brandeis and wrote about Robbe-Grillet's phenomenology just before Sontag began to
Jacqueline Bouvier was in France too early to be exposed to either of those literary trends,
but by 1961, Robbe-Grillet and Alain Resnais were well-enough known to have
Jacqueline Kennedy screen their Last Year at Marienbad at the White House. In 1966,
when Sontag was interviewed in France about the French translation of her novel The
Benefactor, she had to insist that Robbe-Grillet hadn't influenced her. For any French
journalist who wanted to evoke a cutting edge of fiction in 1965, his was the first name
that leapt to mind.

Bouvier, Sontag, and Davis could admire the same writers or filmmakers, but for
different reasons. For Jacqueline Bouvier, influenced by Malraux's aesthetic theories,
artists and writers were in conversation with one another, across the generations, in a
museum without walls. Susan Sontag's understanding of culture was much more
combative. Translation was a struggle not to betray or be betrayed; art and politics were a
matter of getting it or missing it. Angela Davis was a utopian. She wrote about liberation
and revolution when she was still a student of literature—for her, art wasn't art without a
humanitarian purpose, a revolutionary purpose.

Many of the best things that happened to them in France were independent of their teachers or their schools. Jeanne Saleil, a Smith College study-abroad director, thought that Mademoiselle Bouvier wasn't serious and wondered if she would ever amount to anything. Angela Davis was the best student of the three, but by the time she enrolled in the Hamilton program she had already abandoned French for German, and literature for philosophy. Susan Sontag was the maverick, having dropped her Oxford fellowship to pursue a life in Paris; as Harriet Sohmers reminded me, "Susan was not doing anything academic in those years." By the time they left Paris, each one of them had her own ideas of what counted.

This has been a story of three women and the city they discovered. Each was loyal to Paris in her own way, with many returns, many discoveries. Paris itself changed as they came and went. Over the years, familiar streets acquired layered memories or disappeared altogether. All three experienced the Sorbonne as a single place, a centuries-old building "exuding sacredness," as Angela Davis described it. The reforms of May 1968 fragmented the great medieval university into a series of Paris campuses, though the original Sorbonne still stands, retaining some of its old aura as Paris IV, the Université Paris-Sorbonne, in the heart of the Latin Quarter. Les Halles, the central market that Zola called "the stomach of Paris," would have been familiar to all of them. When I visited Paris during my own junior year abroad, in 1973-74, the market was under construction as a shopping mall, its full belly reduced to an enormous hole in the center of the city, with the tiny restaurants and cafes around it the only reminder of the bustling, smelly place it had been.

The meaning of study abroad, the temporary version of expatriation it offers students, has always been transmitted through these details of everyday life, political events and family traditions, neighborhoods and landscapes immutable or changing. Angela Davis connected the Algerian conflict with the civil-rights struggles in the American South; Susan Sontag puzzled over Racine's Britannicas, as foreign to her as kabuki theater; Jacqueline Bouvier gained an intimate understanding of the war in Europe through her friendship with a Ravensbrück survivor and her daughter. They learned by comparison, and by contrast with their lives at home.

In the United States, what is known of their French legacy? Jacqueline Kennedy remains the eternal first lady, the unique American woman who set standards of beauty and grace for an era. So much so that the expert use she made, throughout her life, of her deep knowledge of French culture and history, especially in her work as an editor, has often been overlooked. Susan Sontag is the ultimate New York intellectual, a handsome warrior of ideas. She is so identified with New York that her debt to France has been glossed over. Angela Davis is best known as an African-American communist intellectual, for her visits to East Germany and Cuba, and for her connection with the Black Panthers. Her deep mark on French culture, on Francophone film and literature, has gone unnoticed.

Now, at a time when ambitions and landscapes are "global" and so much of the world's business is in English, I like to think about how joyfully all three of them took to a foreign language and an unfamiliar city, how much France gave them, and how much
they've given back.

Alice Kaplan is a professor of French at Yale University. This essay is excerpted from her book *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*, published this month by the University of Chicago Press.