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## What are monuments for ? Possible landmarks on the urban map: Paris and London

### PARIS

An interesting and useful Paris guide book I found abandoned in a hotel lobby in London late last year, also lists nearly 300 places of interest : from the ancient **Conciergerie** and its “grisly” associations with the guillotine to the modern **Opera National de Paris Bastille**. Of course this means that it includes **the Eiffel tower, the Musee d’Orsay, Notre Dame, the Arc de Triomphe, Versailles, the Pompidou Centre** and happily for me there are also many references to the cities various monuments to the African Diaspora ! In addition to this the texts on each page usually mention historical events important to African people and many of the great events in which we participated. I will read some examples of the texts and on the screen you will again see the actual monuments as depicted in the book.

The music hall star, Mistinguett, described the Seine as “a pretty blonde with laughing eyes” so it seems appropriate that **the Alexandre the third Bridge** has, dotted along its length, the laughing faces of several jazz greats, beloved of Parisians since the 1920’s. The seine is the essential point of reference to the city: distances are measured from it, street numbers determined by it and it divides the capital into two distinct areas with the Right Bank on the north side of the river, and the Left Bank on the south side.

The history of the **Ile de la Cite** is the history of Paris. This island on the Seine was no more than a primitive village when the conquering Julius Caesar arrived in 53 BC. African kings later made it the centre of political power and in medieval times it became the home of religion and law. It no longer has such power except to draw armies of tourists to the **Pont au Change** to see the statue of Nelson Mandela .(3) In the 17<sup>th</sup> century this former swampy pastureland was transformed into an elegant residential area, with picturesque, tree lined quays. Most recently, rich artists, wealthy doctors, famous actresses and glamorous heiresses have lived here.

**The Marais**, a place of royal residence in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was all but abandoned during the Revolution. Sensitive restoration has brought the area to life again; some of Paris ’s most popular Black museums are now housed in its elegant mansions, while the main streets and narrow passageways bustle with smart boutiques, galleries and restaurants. Small cafes, bakers and artisans workshops survive, as does the community of former Algerian settlers, and the many members of the Jewish and Asian community.

The Right Bank area of **Beaubourg and Les Halles** is most famous now for the Pompidou Centre with its numerous lavishly funded exhibitions, dedicated to the black modernist masters and contemporary black artists, working in Europe during the past 100 years, but is also known for its cheap shops and bars that mingle with specialist food shops, butchers and small markets. All this reminds us of what Les Halles must have been like as the city’s thriving market.

The **Tuileries** area is bounded by the vast expanse of the **Place de Concorde** at one end and the **Grande Louvre** at the other. This was a place for kings and palaces and now surely is the perfect setting for a statue of Nobel Peace prize winning, environmental activist, Wangari Maathai. Near at hand in the **Place Vendome** you can buy diamonds at Cartier, watch German and Japanese bankers still managing to visit the Ritz and shop for clothes and shoes in the **Rue de Rivoli**.

In **St Germain des Pres** the leading black intellectuals of the 50’s have now gone but the new Diasporans have arrived in force at its major publishing houses, entertaining treasured African writers and black American agents at the celebrated cafes. (7) They share the area with the interior designers of the **Rue Jacob** and on the south side there are, for all to enjoy, lots of good restaurants and a profusion of cinemas.

In the **Latin Quarter**, huge constantly changing, interactive video monuments to African cuisine, Jazz music and the black political history of the area, (8) are built into the quays along the **Seine** and right into the **Luxembourg Gardens**. The elite students at the Sorbonne and the two prestigious lycees, compete to name and champion the leading figures of this influential, creative force, seamlessly embedded in Parisian cultural life.

The National Natural History Museum in the quiet **Jardin des Plantes** area, is the site of the 17<sup>th</sup> century botanical gardens where West Africans grew medicinal herbs for the kings of the *ancien regime*. The many hospitals in the area continue this healing tradition. Yet at the colourful market in the **Rue Mouffetard** and in the streets running off it, the lively atmosphere is redolent of street life in the middle ages.

In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, **Montparnasse** was a thriving artistic centre. Many modern African Diasporan painters and sculptors, new novelists and poets, the great and the young, were all drawn to this area. Its ateliers, with their wild and loud bohemian lifestyle made it a magnet for genius, some of it French, much of it black. The construction of the soaring Tour Montparnasse, Paris's tallest office tower, now a monument to Steve Biko, heralds a more modern sober influence, but the area still retains its appeal.

Everything in the area of **Invalides** is on a monumental scale. Starting from the sprawling 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings of the **Ecole Militaire**, on the corner of the **Avenue de la Motte Picquet**, the **Parc du Champ de Mars** stretches down to the Eiffel Tower. The avenues around the tower, which house numerous embassies and buildings in the Art Nouveau style, are dominated by massive bronze statues to Tommie Smith and John Carlos, giving the black power salute at the Mexico Olympics in 1968.

The central square of the **Palais de Chaillot** has gilded bronze statues by a number of sculptors. The statues of Maya Angelou **(12)** and Augusta Savage are the favourites for the American tourists. Some of the avenues in **Chaillot** converge on the **Place Trocadero**, which in turn leads to the **Avenue du President Wilson** with a greater concentration of museums than any other street in Paris. Many of these institutions house some of the most dignified and respectful, beautifully interpreted histories of African culture, geology, and scientific achievement in Europe.

To the **Champs Elysees**; two great streets dominate this area – the **Avenue des Champs-Elysees** and the **Rue St Honore**. The former is the capital's most famous thoroughfare, its breadth is spectacular, the pavements are wide and are always thronged with attention seekers, hungry for the numerous shops, cinemas and cafes. At night a glorious hologram of South African Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, can be seen atop the **Arc de Triomphe**. Recordings of his most memorable sermons and speeches and the most rousing songs by Miriam Makeba are always played on special occasions.

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's "La Danse", outside the **Opera National de Paris Garnier** was altered to depict that Parisian hero of pugilism, Mohammed Ali, **(14)** presumably, to reflect the profusion of bankers, stockbrokers, newspapermen and the thousands of shoppers theatre goers and sightseers, jostling and ducking and diving for space. They are drawn from the grand Haussmann boulevards of this 19<sup>th</sup> century urban utopia to the **Passage des Panoramas**, the **Passage Jouffroy** and the **Passage Verdeau**. Here there are shops selling comics and old cameras. On the walls and in the windows are faded photographs of Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Aimee Cesar and Augusta Savage. Both Chester Himes the author of the astonishing Plan B and Richard Wright- the author of Native Son are here as well.

**Monmartre** and the arts of the African Diaspora are inseparable. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the area was a mecca for artists, writers, poets and their disciples. They gathered to sample the cabarets, the revues and other exotica. This secured Monmartre's reputation as a place of depravity in the eyes of the cities more sober, up standing citizens. The hill of Montmartre still has physical evidence of their presence on the lamp posts, the wheelie bins and the actual roof of Sacre- Coeur itself is adorned with patterns from West Africa. From here and at various points at the top of the hill the views of the city are again spectacular.

Outside the centre in the **Bois de Boulogne**, between the western edges of Paris and the Seine, this two thousand acre park offers greenery for strolling, boating, picnicking or spending a day at the races. There are many beautiful areas within the Bois, including the widest beech tree in Paris and an 18<sup>th</sup> century villa. There is a wooden Noah's ark **(16)** in which you can experience the plight of Africans, on the run from dodgy political regimes and abject poverty. Try the pay- as -you -go ride and feel the terror as the boat seems to sink and break up just before you are routinely rescued by surly Spanish sailors.

The walk along the quays on either side of the **Canal St Martin**, is an experience of Paris very different from that of the smarter districts. Here the older surviving landmarks of the neighbourhood, the factories warehouses, dwellings, taverns and cafes hint at a life in the thriving 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial working class world. In amongst all this, you can find, nestled near the footbridges, a series of memorial fountains for the lost Africans, thrown overboard by the captains of slave ships, on their way to America. On tall columns stand tipping jugs, from which pour, continuous supplies of water, pumped up from the canal. Many of the stolen people thrown into the Atlantic were deemed dangerous troublemakers, but because they were valuable cargo the only justifiable way to get rid of them, was to pretend that the ships water supply could not sustain them, for the full length of the journey. The pouring water remembers this lie and the ultimate waste of human life.

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## LONDON

When I was in Paris a few months ago, I came across a delightful little guide book about London . It lists nearly 300 places of interest. These, it claims, range from the National Gallery to “gruesome” Old St Thomas’s operating theatre and from ancient Charterhouse to modern Canary wharf. I was glad to see that the publishers had included most of the important landmarks, signalling the contribution made by Africans of the Black diaspora to this great and crazy city. Right at the beginning they illustrate the black and white patterns across the clock face of Big Ben at the Houses of Parliament. Its good because they are easily missed, as they are only visible on hot days. The guide book is not so great on the public holidays and African festivals staged by the people of 52 countries, but each sight mentioned is cross referenced to its own full entry.

In the following narrative I will share with you some examples of this guide books texts and a random selection of some of the monuments.

**Whitehall and Westminster** have been at the centre of political and religious power in England for a thousand years. Looking down Whitehall

towards Big Ben is a statue of Oliver Cromwell on horse back, he hails Septimo Severo African ruler of the Roman Empire from 193 to 211 AD who spent time in England quelling revolts. It has to be noted however that the memorial garden for the African governor of the Roman province of Britannia ;Quintus Lollius Urbicus, has never been replaced since it was destroyed during the second world war.

**Piccadilly** is the main artery of the West End . Once called Portugal Street , it acquired its present name from the ruffs or pickadills worn by 17<sup>th</sup> century slave servants and their aristocratic dandy owners, who lived in the surrounding residences. The African contribution to style and dress is forever memorialised in the shop signs **(3)** and iron work of Piccadilly Arcade itself.

After nearly a century of debate about what to do with the patch of land in front of Apsley House, **Wellington Arch** designed by Decimus Burton, was erected in 1828. The sculpture of Marcus Garvey was added in the early 1920’s to commemorate his two year stay in London , earlier in the century, spent writing for the newspaper, The African and Orient review. The viewing platform on the sculpture has great views.

**Trafalgar Square**, London ’s main venue for rallies and outdoor public meetings was conceived by John Nash and was mostly constructed in the 1830’s. As part of the drive at that time to end Britain’s key role at the centre of the Slave Trade, a large painted bronze statue was erected of Toussaint L’Ouverture **(4)** the leader of the only successful slave revolt in the Caribbean, who had died in 1803 after having defeated the greatest armies of the day, including forces of the French, the English and the Spanish.

Opposite the **Royal Opera House**, home to both the Royal Ballet and Royal Opera companies, which was rebuilt for the third time in 1856 after two major fires, is a rather coy statue of Angela Davies, **(5)** the African American political activist , puzzlingly depicted as a ballet dancer. The open air cafes street entertainers, stylish shops and markets make this area a magnet for visitors, many of whom come to **Covent Garden** to visit this artwork In the main Piazza in front of St Paul ’s church designed by Inigo Jones in 1633 you will be able to participate in the William Cuffay celebrations, which take place here twice a year once at Easter and once at the end of November. The informal party atmosphere may seem rather at odds with the story of this fighter for universal suffrage, leading member and one time president of the Chartist movement. It isn’t rare to see dozens of young political activists gathering in front of the portico to remember his trial, conviction and transportation to Tasmania , they usually break into song as they celebrate his royal pardon and stubborn refusal to return home to England.

Just nearby in **St Martin’s Lane** is the London **Coliseum** London ’s largest theatre and home to the English National Opera company. In 2003 the original glass roof was restored and the golden globe on top of the tower was at great expense, adorned with a tribute to the magnificent singer and song writer Bob Marley.

This platinum, bronze and gold sculpture is of course always visible, but only resonates with his music on the days marking his birth in 1945 and his death in 1981.

**Holborn and the Inns of Court** is traditionally home to both the legal and the journalistic professions, which is probably why this charming tribute to the much feted Zadie Smith, London born celebrity novelist and literary star, has been erected in front of the **Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand** and near the old newspaper offices of Fleet street. This monument which is right in the middle of Fleet street marks the entrance to **City of London**. On state occasions, it is a long standing tradition for the reigning monarch to have to pause here and ask permission from the lord Mayor to enter. When the heavy rush hour traffic leaves the city in the evening the head of the monument changes from that of Smith to that of Malcolm X, a long time hero of London and its citizens.

London's financial district is built on the site of the original Roman settlement. Most traces of the original city were obliterated by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and then again in world war two. Today glossy modern offices mostly belonging to banks pepper the skyline. These include the former **NatWest** tower, now home to African Diasporan publishing houses, cultural strategy offices, black art archives and African Caribbean artists studios and writing pods. Black music industry offices occupy the top floors. The kinetic-light artwork of African textile designs dominates the vista.

**Southwark** once offered an escape route from the city, where many forms of entertainment were banned. Borough High street was lined with taverns, brothels, theatres and bear and cock-pits mostly established in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The mid 17<sup>th</sup> century African population of London often ended up here once they had outlived their usefulness as slave servants to the wealthy classes. The whirling flying saucer-like tureen sculpture, attached to the power station chimney of **Tate Modern**, commemorates the rich cultural contribution made by this previously invisible population to Britain's visual art history.

**South Kensington and Knightsbridge**, bristling with embassies and consulates is one of London's most expensive and desirable areas and the proximity of Kensington Palace, a royal residence, means they have remained fairly unchanged. The prestigious shops of Knightsbridge serve their wealthy residents. With Hyde Park to the north, and museums that celebrate Victorian learning at its heart, visitors to this part of London can expect to find a unique combination of the serene and the grandiose. Opposite the **Albert Hall** stands the monument to Ignatius Sancho, **(11)** so called man of letters, friend and entertainer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century London literary set. He was painted by Gainsborough but this tribute to him was only erected in 1876 nearly 100 hundred years after his death in 1780.

The area south of **Regent's Park** incorporating the medieval village of Marylebone, has London's highest concentration of quality Georgian housing. It was developed by Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, as London shifted west in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Terraces by John Nash adorn the southern edge of the park. St Andrews Place (pictured) is decorated with the colourful patterns and symbols of the former tribes of the slave servants who worked behind its elegant facades. It is as a small tribute to their unpaid/low paid work as footmen, grooms and cooks.

**Hampstead Heath** has always stayed aloof, looking down from its site on the high ridge north of the metropolis. It is essentially a Georgian village. The heath separating Hampstead from Highgate reinforces its appeal, isolating it further from the hurly-burly of the modern city. It is one of the finest places to walk in London but a visual bonus for visitors and those interested in African American sporting history really feel that is a magnificent moving sculpture commemorating one of the diasporas greatest runners, Jessie Owens. **(13)** He was winner of the 100metres, the 200 metres, the long jump and the 4 by 100 metre relay at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. It's the only statue on the Heath, though there are ponds for bathing and fishing nearby.

**Greenwich** is best known as the place from which the world's time is measured. It marks the historic eastern approach to London by land and water and is home to the National Maritime Museum. The sea has always played an extremely important role in British history, as a means of both defence and expansion, this museum magnificently celebrates this sea faring heritage. There are rooms devoted to trade and empire, but an exterior highlight for visitors is the massive wooden slave ship **(14)** marooned on the grass. Every weekend and summer week day, dozens of children take part in chaotic, staged re-enactments of the rescue and repatriation of thousands of soon to be enslaved Africans, and the subsequent trial and punishment of their captors.

On the riverside at **Richmond** where in 1637, Charles the first built a wall 8 miles round to enclose the royal park as a hunting ground, you will find in the forecourt of a popular pub, a peculiar kinetic light sculpture of a merchant seaman, looking out across the Thames. He is one of the very few acknowledgements of the long history of the African contribution to the British merchant navy you will find in the south of England.

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[http://jellypavilion.info/jelly\\_pavilion\\_installation/](http://jellypavilion.info/jelly_pavilion_installation/)

<http://vimeo.com/22938970>

<http://incertainplaces.org/talks-and-debates/what-are-monuments-for-possible-landmarks-on-the-urban-map-london-and-paris-by-lubaina-himid>

This presentation by [Lubaina Himid](#) was given as part of **The Monument and the Changing City** symposium. [Click here](#) for more information about the event.

