

Twentieth-Century Paris: A New Literary Age
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Over this summer, I worked with the support of Professor Katherine Dauge-Roth to explore literature produced in Paris during the inter-war years of the early twentieth century. My goal was to answer a series of questions about the intellectual communities of inter-war Paris that went on to produce some of the most notable works of twentieth-century literature: why did this vast array of writers converge on Paris simultaneously? Where in Paris did this community center itself? What connections between different writers were made due to their group involvement with literary circles in Paris, and did these connections become evident in the works of literature that were ultimately produced as a result of the presence of literary circles in inter-war Paris? And most of all, what about the space of Paris specifically inhibit such voluminous literary production?

Being an English and Francophone Studies double major, I felt that many classes I had taken at Bowdoin had helped foster my interest in this type of literary and cultural research, especially the course “Literature, Power, and Resistance”, which originally introduced me to the phenomena of Paris in the inter-war years and the numerous figures who lived in the city to live and write. To pursue my interest, and the questions it produced, I went to Paris for the duration of my grant, to better situate myself within the geography of the city these authors were writing about.

I centered my investigation around Shakespeare & Company, a lending library opened in Paris by Sylvia Beach in 1919. This lending library, and as I also discovered, the library La Maison Des Amis Des Livres located across the street, served as a focal point for the nationally diverse group of authors writing in Paris during this literary era, and studying the patrons of these libraries served as a preliminary insight into who was participating in these communities at the time. From the patrons of these lending libraries, I discovered an array of unique writers and works, many of which have been overshadowed over the span of the twentieth century by the specific legacy of the Lost Generation, a group of American writers who mainly lived in Paris during the 1920s. Engaging with some of these overshadowed texts produced fresh, and for me, often unexpected images and impressions of Paris, particularly as a city with a now widely fixed reputation.

The results of my research provided insight into a highly mystified era of literary community and production. This insight has exposed a set of literature which calls into question popular notions of this literary era and Paris itself, as much of the literature inspired by inter-war Paris was, for writers across many nationalities, an expression of both the miraculous and the difficult, the beauty but also the pain of living and writing in a changing city, in a changing era. And yet, so much more information remains to be gleaned from other overshadowed works and writers who’s writing could not be explored over the course of this summer. Even further, Sylvia Beach’s physical calling cards are now collectivized in a much more extensive physical archive than it’s corresponding digital form, and could further unveil the important people, places, and connections which constitute Paris’ new literary age.

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