

Roundtable: Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games

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One hundred years after Paris last hosted, the Olympic and Paralympic Games were held in the French capital this summer. To mark this centenary, *French History* gathered a group of academics together to write blog posts in response to different aspects of Paris 2024. Their posts, which were originally hosted on the *French History Network Blog*, invited readers to delve into the historical, cultural and sporting references being evoked by the opening ceremonies; to analyse the ways the Games were being used as a vehicle for wider political messages about France and its place in the world; and to reflect on the relationship between the images of France as projected through the Games and realities on the ground. We have collated the blog posts here, lightly edited and updated to reflect conclusion of the Games, and hope readers will enjoy reminding themselves of this very memorable French summer.

AN OPENING CEREMONY AND—EN MÊME TEMPS—A CARNIVAL

Andrew W.M. Smith

President Macron's use of the phrase 'en même temps' has become a political cliché, signalling duality, a need for nuance, or (as his supporters would tell you) a spirit of practical compromise.

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During the carnivalesque opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics, President Macron exercised his favourite catch-phrase again on X (formerly Twitter).¹ He was referring to the singer Aya Nakamura's celebrated performance with the Republican Guard military band in front of the Académie française: a wonderful riposte to the confected race row that preceded her performance.² That performance gives a useful way to interrogate an *en même temps* ceremony. The director of revels was the acclaimed Thomas Jolly, a three-time Molière award-winner who told interviewers: 'France is a story that never stops being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. It's alive, it remains alive.'³ The ceremony's official historian was Patrick Boucheron, chief editor of the celebrated and (in some quarters) controversial *Histoire mondiale de la France* (2017), who spoke of how this was 'not an ideological parade, a demonstration of power [... but instead ...] it used humour and modesty to thwart national stereotypes'.⁴

In the opening montage, Jamel Debbouze ran the Olympic torch into an empty Stade de France, before handing it off to Zinedine Zidane, who in turn looked to some neighbourhood kids and a masked torchbearer. The acclaimed novelist Leïla Slimani, who co-wrote the ceremony, spoke of how this vision of universalism would allow people 'to see different bodies, different colours, different visions of France'.⁵ From the very start, the ceremony played with themes of the grand national story (or *roman national*), but—*en même temps*—subverted these narratives with references to an open, mixed France which is as proud of its immigration and cabarets as its military pomp and institutional heritage.

Unsurprisingly, that narrative provoked reactions from the political right.⁶ Despite the surprising results of the legislative elections at the start of that month, this was still a France in which over twelve million voters cast their ballot for the far-right Rassemblement National. The communication of progressive cultural values could inspire, but ultimately political realities were not in step. For every positive cultural story, like the 'black-blanc-beur' narrative of the 1998 French men's football World Cup victory, with Zinedine Zidane at its heart, there was still the shadow of far-right Jean-Marie Le Pen reaching the second round of the 2002 Presidential election. President Macron had called for a 'political truce' during the Olympics, and some joked that the masked torchbearer was going to be revealed as the president's newly anointed pick for prime minister. After the legislative elections, the president had held off naming a government, and the left-wing New Popular Front alliance's desire to transform its share of seats into political power seemed as likely as an Australian breakdancer scooping gold.

Running through a performance of *Les Misérables*, before being serenaded by the headless aristocrats and heavy metal band Gojira at the Conciergerie, we got a very different sense of republican grandeur in this opening ceremony. As President Macron told *L'Histoire*, his was a generation which 'in terms of history had neither totems nor taboos'.⁷ Perhaps there are still some. When the huge sparkling Phryges gyrated amongst the slippery disco on the Pont Debilly,

1 Emmanuel Macron (@EmmanuelMacron), 'En même temps', Twitter/X, 26 Jul 2024, 8:36pm <<https://x.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/1816920557700751748>>.

2 'France: SOS Racisme manifeste son soutien à Aya Nakamura sous les fenêtres du RN', *RFI*, 25 March 2024, <<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/france/20240325-france-sos-racisme-manifeste-son-soutien-%C3%A0-aya-nakamura-sous-les-fen%C3%AAtres-du-rn>>.

3 Tom Nouvian, 'How Olympics opening ceremony artistic director Thomas Jolly is capturing the essence of France', *The Independent*, 20 July 2024, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-seine-river-paris-moliere-oscar-b2583037.html>>.

4 Anne-Sophie Jahn, 'Patrick Boucheron: "Les JO vont agir comme un court-circuit, un choc visual"', *Le Point*, 26 July 2024, <https://www.lepoint.fr/sport/ceremonie-d-ouverture-les-jo-agiront-comme-un-court-circuit-un-choc-visuel-26-07-2024-2566480_26.php>.

5 Amanda Randone, "'It's a very feminine ceremony": Leïla Slimani on writing for the 2024 Olympics', *Vogue*, 26 July 2024, <<https://en.vogue.me/culture/leila-slimani-interview-olympics-opening-ceremony-2024/>>.

6 'Cérémonie d'ouverture des JO: l'extrême droite est bien la seule à ne pas apprécier le spectacle', *HuffPost*, 26 July 2024 <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/ceremonie-d-ouverture-des-jo-l-extreme-droite-est-bien-la-seule-a-ne-pas-apprecier-le-spectacle_237509.html>.

7 'L'Entretien', *L'Histoire*, 23 March 2017, 12, <<https://www.lhistoire.fr/entretien/emmanuel-macron%C2%A0-%C2%AB%C2%A0r%C3%A9concilier-les-m%C3%A9moires%C2%A0-%C2%BB>>.

they found themselves amongst a controversial reimagining of the Last Supper, culminating in Philippe Katerine's star turn as a blue-painted nude Dionysus. The Olympic organizing committee apologized to critics, though Katrine said 'in France, artistic creation is free, I took advantage of that. There was no desire to pass on militant messages but republican messages.'⁸ There were also strong echoes of the 1989 bicentennial of the Revolution in this ceremony's vision of French history which was open, global and mixed, and as *Le Monde's* historian commentator for the ceremony, Guillaume Mazeau said, these choices were 'both historical and political in the current context of identity and nationalist tensions'.⁹

Ultimately, the Games were as much a celebration of Paris as of France, and a reminder that the Games are hosted by cities not countries. For all the focus on liberty, equality and fraternity, the more pertinent motto was *fluctuat nec mergitur*—storm-tossed yet un-sinking—as befitting a ceremony which took place amid downpour, political drama and a security clampdown. Leaving the confines of the stadium was intended to take the opening ceremony to the people. This entailed extraordinary security measures, however, which necessarily impacted the lives of ordinary Parisians in what some see as an ongoing 'security drift'.¹⁰ The 'grey zones' set up to protect the Olympic opening ceremonies created traffic chaos and a negative impact on businesses.¹¹ There were even awkwardly resonant moments after the sabotage attacks on railways earlier in the day, such as the prominence of a stopped train in the opening torch montage with Zizou, or the masked torchbearer setting the Académie française ablaze to herald the entrance of Aya Nakamura.

Ten golden statues rising from the Seine helped fête the legal, political and cultural defence of rights in the French Republic. News that the statues are to be offered to the city of Paris to help redress the gender balance of statuary (currently 260 men to 40 women) was also a positive note.¹² Historical nuances around these statues were welcome: the introduction of Louise Michel, for example, acknowledged her anticolonial activism in New Caledonia alongside her role in the Paris Commune. Yet, on the same day as the opening ceremony there was a sense of how that gilded tribute to liberty could ring hollow, as the High Commissioner of New Caledonia confirmed details of night-time curfews amid ongoing unrest.¹³

For all that—*en même temps*—the opening ceremony was a theatrical triumph. Yes, it lacked tight coherence and seemed riotous at times; to quote my 8-year-old daughter: 'it's chaotic'. This was, however, the chaos of the *carnaval*: time-honoured inversions of power, poking fun at authority, and painting with a broad historical brush. Clearly, this cultural celebration of an open France could not solve political problems at home. Like the *carnaval*, it might provide a momentary space to forget and celebrate together, though sore heads may follow festivities. Macron's 'en même temps' posited a progressive, open France which was nonetheless proud of

8 'Cérémonie d'ouverture des JO: entre censure et embarras, la performance de Philippe Katerine n'a pas été diffusé dans tous les pays', *BFM RMC Sport*, 27 July 2024 <https://rmcsport.bfmtv.com/jeux-olympiques/ceremonie-d-ouverture-des-jo-entre-censure-et-embarras-la-performance-de-philippe-katerine-n-a-pas-ete-diffusee-dans-tous-les-pays_AV-202407270291.html>.

9 'Live animé: Paris 2024: revivez la cérémonie d'ouverture des Jeux olympiques', *Le Monde*, 27 July 2024 <https://www.lemonde.fr/sport/live/2024/07/26/en-direct-ceremonie-d-ouverture-des-jo-de-paris-2024-les-drapeaux-de-toutes-les-delegations-defilent-entre-la-place-du-trocadero-et-la-tour-eiffel_6258451_3242.html>.

10 Antoine Albertini and Arthur Carpentier, 'Paris 2024: le détail d'un dispositif de sécurité hors normes', *Le Monde*, 22 July 2024 <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/07/22/paris-2024-le-detail-d-un-dispositif-de-securite-hors-normes_6255160_3224.html>.

11 Hayet Kechit, 'Paris 2024: l'asphyxie et la colère des commerçants de la zone grise', *L'Humanité*, 26 July 2024, <<https://www.humanite.fr/social-et-economie/jeux-olympiques/paris-2024-lasphyxie-et-la-colere-des-commerçants-de-la-zone-grise-des-jo>>.

12 'Alice Millat, Gisèle Halimi, Louise Michel ... Qui sont les dix femmes mises à l'honneur dans le tableau "Sororité" de la cérémonie d'ouverture des JO de Paris', *France Info*, 26 July 2024 <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/les-jeux-olympiques/ceremonies-d-ouverture-et-de-cloture/video-ceremonie-d-ouverture-des-jo-de-paris-2024-qui-sont-les-dix-femmes-mises-a-l-honneur-dans-le-tableau-sororite_6688044.html>.

13 Haut-commissariat en Nouvelle-Calédonie (@HC98800), '#NouvelleCalédonie', Twitter/X, 26 July 2024, 4:37am <<https://x.com/HC98800/status/1816679218647888253>>.

its fine traditions. As the ‘Olympic truce’ came to an end, the task of building that France was the work of a government which strained the limits of the president’s ‘en même temps’ politics.

A JOYOUS ENTRY? THE OLYMPICS OPENING CEREMONY AND THE PARISIAN ROYAL PAST

Erika Graham-Goering

As an event that memorably featured the spouting blood of beheaded aristocrats, the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris may not seem an obvious comparison to the rituals of France’s royal past. But the echoes of history were there, in the organizers’ decision to hold the proceedings at the city’s heart rather than in a closed stadium. This staging was a first for the modern Games, but it was in many ways the heir of a much older tradition, when medieval and Renaissance kings (and queens) made their ceremonial entries into the capital city.

From the time of Saint Louis (King Louis IX) in the thirteenth century, French monarchs liked to stage an event known as the *joyeuse entrée* (Joyous Entry). These spectacles celebrated the occasion of a ruler’s first arrival in their biggest towns, and especially in Paris following their coronation or a particularly noteworthy victory. The royal procession followed quite a different route from the 6km travelled along the Seine by the Olympians. The athletes headed west from what used to be the eastern edge of the medieval city to where heads of state awaited them at Trocadéro. The French kings instead stopped first at the magnificent basilica of Saint-Denis, then far to the north of the urbanized area, though today comfortably within Métro reach and a short jaunt from the Stade de France arena. The leading citizens of Paris came out to meet him, and then the entire retinue proceeded south down the Rue de Saint-Denis to the cathedral of Notre-Dame and the Palais de la Cité. These two buildings of course featured prominently during the opening ceremony. The cathedral is still clad in scaffolding after the devastating 2019 roof fire, while the Palais was dressed up as the site of Revolutionary fervour, in many ways a very fitting rebuttal of the authority of kings which was once publicly celebrated there.

So even though the kings of France did not arrive by boat like today’s athletes, our glistening horsewoman Morgane Suquart who galloped back up-river towards the Île-de-la-Cité was in some ways a spectre of the mounted rulers who once paraded towards the same goal. And the entertainments offered en route brought a modern twist to the scenes that might have met the royal eyes. The twelve *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) seen along the Olympic route were very much akin to the types of song-and-dance routines, allegorical scenes and even subversive displays which the organizers of medieval entries presented to their royal visitor. These were always loaded with meaning, commenting on current social and political topics just as the opening ceremony did with its emphasis on embracing diversity—and could be just as controversial. This year’s segments deliberately showcased a range of symbolic values, some typically French, some international, and some (like its call for peace) not out of place in a medieval setting. The cross-over between a good party and diplomatic pageantry is far from new to Paris.

Some of the more formal imagery of the Games would have also appeared familiar to medieval spectators. Christine de Pizan described the entry ceremony of King Charles V in 1364. Christine was the first professional woman author in European history, a noblewoman who wrote on topics from political theory to gender to religion to history, and rightfully appeared in the ‘Sororité’ segment of the opening ceremony as one of the golden statues of France’s great women. She remarked on the great pomp of the king’s entry, from the emblems on the king’s cloak (we might think of the five-ringed flag worn on Suquart’s shoulders during her ride) to the bearing of the royal sword and sceptre, not unlike the progress of the Olympic torch. Emblems and symbols would have decked out the medieval procession route just as those of the Games do much of Paris, sending the message then and now that a special presence had come to town. [Figure 1]



Figure 1. Entry of Charles V 'the Wise' into Paris. Bibliothèque nationale de France, manuscript français 6465, fo. 417r, <https://mandragore.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cgfbt45052g>.

And, of course, Joyous Entries were not just about the sovereign—far from it. They were also celebrations of civic identity and power, and here again the resonances with the opening ceremony really shine through. Royal entries gave the Parisian elite a chance to show off their wealth and status, present demands to the king and formally receive new privileges, called liberties. The modern tendency to conflate the culture of the capital with that of the nation as a whole has little historical basis, but this celebration of Parisian pride does fit in with an older narrative. In particular, the craft guilds who represented and regulated the many trades of medieval industry played a major part in staging these costly royal entries. Amongst these would have been the stonemasons, whose modern-day counterparts had their restoration work on Notre-Dame featured (a medieval process if ever there was one!) The segue into the production of leather Vuitton cases and the Olympic medals themselves—commemorative medallions were made for royal entries at least from the early modern period—likewise highlighted crafts with a venerable history. The symbolism of Paris as a ship, seen at the Palais de la Cité (and on the city's modern heraldry), goes back directly to the thirteenth-century seal of the *marchands de l'eau*, the boat merchants who controlled the city's river trade. Even the visual effect of the contingents of different national athletic teams dressed in their uniforms created the same sorts of colour blocks that the guild liveries would once have done while greeting the king.

In a country that is particularly leery of its medieval past, the opening ceremonies at Paris offered a surprising parallel with French royal history, reimagined for the very different world of the twenty-first century. The innovation of this year's spectacle was arguably more of a revival or continuation, embracing the city's long-accustomed role as the *mise-en-scène* for such a ritual welcome, a moment of both confrontation and dialogue. 'Synchronicité' indeed.

THE SPECTACULAR SEINE: A JOURNEY BACK TO THE SOURCE

Jessica Wardhaugh

Focusing on the Seine rather than the stadium was one of the most self-conscious innovations of the Paris 2024 opening ceremony. 'Bold, original, and unique', claimed the official website. Some of the scenes and characters in the aquatic pageant were explicitly designed to challenge tradition, from the statues of French women rising from their plinths to the tableau of Sequana, symbolic origin of the Seine, steering her metallic steed in a way that both suggested and supplanted Joan of Arc.

The quest for novelty in the opening ceremony sparked lively controversy. Yet transforming the Seine into spectacle also reconnected with a long tradition of fluvial festivities, in which powerful and sometimes provocative projections of national grandeur for an international audience have made extravagant use of technical virtuosity, fantasy and display.

Under the Bourbon monarchy of the *ancien régime*—radically revisited in the headless Marie-Antoinette of the opening ceremony—royal celebrations already privileged the Seine's potential to impress and accommodate the people. Royal weddings and baptisms called for magnificence and munificence: how better to increase the dazzle of fireworks or the ethereal beauty of an illuminated pavilion than to situate these on the Seine, its banks as viewing platforms for the largest possible public? In 1739, as many as half a million crowded the riverbanks for the celebration of the wedding of Louis XV's oldest daughter Marie-Louise Elisabeth to the Infante Don Felipe of Spain, treated not only to the traditional fireworks but also to the novelty of a radiant *édifice du feu* at Pont Neuf. [Figure 2] So deeply did the event etch itself onto national memory as a template for lavish display that in 1987 Maison Hermès, famed for its luxury products, commissioned a floating replica of the 1739 pavilion, 84m high.

Through the French Revolution and the nineteenth century, the Seine remained central to public and political spectacle. On 9 November 1801, second anniversary of Napoléon

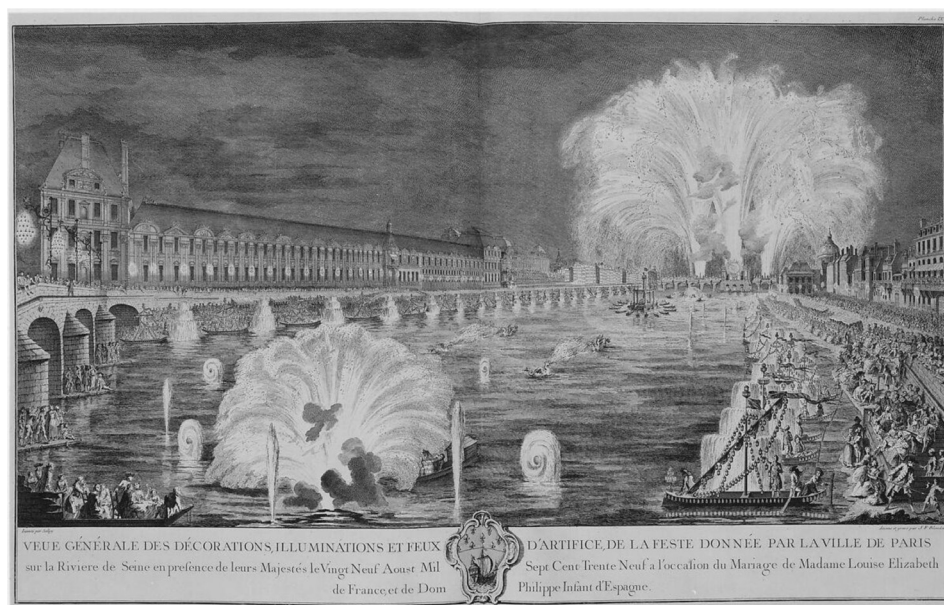


Figure 2. Royal wedding celebrations on the Seine in 1739. Engraving by Jacques-François Blondel, Pierre Soubeyron and Jacques Rigaud, 1740. Public domain via the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](https://www.metmuseum.org), New York.

Bonaparte's coup d'état, Paris hosted a Festival of General Peace in prelude to the short-lived Treaty of Amiens, with barges decorated to represent European nations navigating along the Seine towards the Temple du Commerce. On Place de la Concorde—which, as Place de la Révolution, had witnessed the execution of Louis XVI—a theatrical performance showcased scenes of military strife succeeded by temples of peace, industry and the arts.

During Napoléon III's Second Empire of 1852 to 1870, royal and imperial traditions of free spectacles at the centre of Paris continued. Celebrations of 'Saint Napoléon', coinciding strategically with the Catholic Feast of the Assumption on 15 August, featured plays such as *Les Français protecteurs, ou les brigands de la montagne*, as well as satisfying the customary popular demand for pyrotechnics. One unrealized design for 15 August 1867, now in the Archives nationales, imagines an allegorical pageant with colourful statues of water nymphs, tritons and dolphins on barges and pontoons and a concluding aquatic tableau:

France, personified as a magnificent queen, journeys up the Seine in a chariot drawn by marine deities and accompanied by symbolic representations of day and night, war and peace, agriculture and the seasons. The other nations arrive to greet her—and immediately there is a great explosion of fireworks, as if to express the joy of such powerful fraternity between peoples.¹⁴

Still more brilliant—in every sense—was the Théâtre d'Eau masterminded by architects Eugène Beaudouin and Marcel Lods for the International Paris Exhibition of 1937. [Figure 3] This installation relied on a symbiosis of engineering, electricity and the river itself: the Seine as stage, props and prima donna. Situated at Pont d'Iéna, the theatre comprised 174 floating fountains, 4,800hp pumps, 2,200 nozzles and 800 projectors illuminating the fountains and

14 '28 Mai 1867', Archives nationales, Pierrefitte, F 21 727.



Figure 3. 1937 Exhibition poster by Leonetto Cappiello. Public domain via the [Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon](#), AffM0343.

their surroundings in a kaleidoscope of ever-changing colour. ‘Liquid architecture’, marvelled its spectators, who also found in these fluvial fantasies the floral forms and baroque exuberance of aristocratic gardens (similarly suggested by the pontoons of the 2024 opening ceremony). Sometimes, the theatre coincided with festivals of light and music by composers such as Elsa

Barraine, Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen's *Fête des belles eaux* played on the exhibition's theme of technical innovation: scored for six electronic Ondes Martenot and projected through loudspeakers along the banks of the Seine.

Like the 2024 Olympics, the International Exhibition of 1937 sought to promote international encounter and rivalry while projecting an image of French pride and innovation. Against the troubled background of a divided Popular Front and a rapidly rising far right, partisan enthusiasts placed the exhibition's particular highlights at centre stage. Newspapers across the francophone world from *Maroc-Matin* to *Le Monde colonial illustré* vaunted the Théâtre d'Eau's superiority, whether over a similar installation in Barcelona in 1929 or even the celebrated fountains of Versailles. And the 1937 spectacle featured an additional novelty. Every evening, control of the console operating the display from the Restaurant du Roi George would be given to one of the female diners, to bestow on the fountains whatever forms and colours her fantasy might suggest.¹⁵

As reflected in the 2024 opening ceremony, the association between the Seine, femininity and fantasy also draws on more ancient tradition. In 1933, archaeological excavations at the source of the Seine near Dijon unearthed an original statue of the river goddess Sequana. Around her shrine, votive offerings excavated by 1930s archaeologists revealed the beliefs and creativity of first-century Gauls: bronze models of diseased eyes or disabled limbs crafted in the hope of miraculous cure. By the 1930s, the Second Empire statue of Sequana was so comprehensively covered in graffiti—men and women etching and dating their desires and dreams—that it was due to be replaced by a replica. But as one author tetchily observed in *Les Parisiens de Paris*, any statue would surely need iron railings to protect it from further inscription. It isn't easy to prevent the French from projecting their fantasies onto the Seine.

PARADOXES OF THE PARIS 2024 OPENING CEREMONY: TAKING RISKS OR PLAYING IT SAFE?

Jonathan Ervine

Some 7,000 athletes on 85 boats, 2,000 performers and music from singers such as Lady Gaga, Aya Nakamura and Céline Dion. And then there was the Olympic Cauldron rising into the sky under a hot-air balloon. Hosting the opening ceremony of the River Seine was certainly something of a risk for the Paris 2024 organizers, notably due to logistical and security challenges. However, by locating the event in well-known areas of central Paris and including accordion players, cancan dancers, and references to *Les Misérables* the organizers in other respects played it safe.

Hosting the ceremony on the River Seine was also deeply paradoxical. It made the opening ceremony accessible to some at the same time as making it harder for many people to get close to the river bank. Several times more spectators were able to attend the ceremony than would have been possible at the Stade de France. However, QR codes were necessary in order to set foot in certain areas near the banks of the Seine. Thus, an event which was supposed to mark the beginning of a major celebration also brought with it constraints reminiscent of restrictions which were in place during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Many of the spectators on the banks of the River Seine were actually much further away from the athletes and from the official delegations than spectators normally are when such ceremonies take place in an athletics stadium. Furthermore, the way in which the opening ceremony lasted approximately four hours and saw athletes travel on the Seine from the Pont d'Austerlitz to near

the Eiffel Tower made it almost impossible for spectators on the banks of the river to watch the entire event as it unfolded without depending on large television screens.

Hosting the ceremony on the Seine rather than in a stadium was certainly a break with Olympic tradition. Nevertheless, it placed the focus on traditional locations at the very heart of Paris—the Seine, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre—rather than showcasing areas on the periphery of the French capital that played a key role in the Games. The ceremony began with a video of French–Moroccan comedian Jamel Debbouze turning up for the ceremony at an empty Stade de France by mistake and then passing on the Olympic Flame to Zinedine Zidane. Zidane then travelled via the Métro towards central Paris as the focus swiftly shifted to the heart of the French capital within the first few minutes of the opening ceremony.

The Stade de France has been a key driver in socio-economic regeneration in Seine-Saint-Denis since it was opened in 1998, although it is clear that significant challenges remain in a *département* which includes areas where levels of poverty are well above the national average. If the opening ceremony had taken place in the Stade de France, this would have provided Paris 2024 with a clearer means of embracing the cultural dynamism of the Greater Paris area as a whole rather than celebrating traditional tourist landmarks in the very heart of the city.

Paris 2024 has, however, sought to embrace forms of culture associated with the *banlieues* surrounding Paris. That said, the ways in which they have done so are again somewhat paradoxical. Breakdance—an element of hip-hop culture which notably became popular in areas surrounding major French cities in the 1980s—was a demonstration event. As I argued when this decision was initially confirmed, it's a move that in many ways make sense.¹⁶ Indeed, it would perhaps have made even more sense had the Paris 2024 breakdance events taken place in Seine-Saint-Denis given that the area is seen as the birthplace of French hip-hop.¹⁷

The staging of the breakdance competitions at Place de la Concorde once again saw the emphasis being placed on central Paris rather than the Greater Paris area. Journeys between centres and peripheries in major French cities are part of the history of French hip-hop as performers have sought to rehearse and showcase their talents in a range of locations. In a Parisian context, this has included doing so in places such as Les Halles and Trocadéro. Nevertheless, by staging the breakdance events in a chic part of central Paris the organizers largely removed the sport from the socio-political context in which it is rooted. To a certain extent, some contextualization concerning the history of urban culture in France is provided at the Spot24 centre. However, this medium-sized temporary exhibition centre is also located right in the heart of central Paris, a mere five-minute walk from the Eiffel Tower.

Despite this sense of disconnection, the organizers of Paris 2024 in many ways successfully redefined relations between sport and the arts within the ceremony. Prior to the event, Paris 2024 organizing committee boss Tony Estanguet talked about how the event would break with tradition for this reason as well as due to it taking place on the Seine. He pointed out that traditional Olympic opening ceremonies have involved an artistic part that precedes the arrival of the athletes, whereas the Paris 2024 ceremony combined these two elements.

The ambitious and creative ways in which the worlds of sport and the arts interacted in the Paris 2024 opening ceremony were in keeping with the way that this year's Cultural Olympiad involved a highly eclectic cultural mix. This included a Rhapsodie Sportive combining classical

16 Jonathan Ervine, 'Why Paris is the perfect city to introduce break dancing to the Olympics', *The Conversation*, 22 February 2019 <<https://theconversation.com/why-paris-is-the-perfect-city-to-introduce-break-dancing-to-the-olympics-112269>>.

17 'Urban culture in Seine-Saint-Denis (Paris region)', Seine-Saint-Denis Tourism website <<https://uk.tourisme93.com/urban-culture-seine-saint-denis-paris.html>>.



Figure 4. Poster for the Rhapsodie Sportive event. Author's own photograph.

music, breakdance and BMX, a performance mixing wrestling, poetry and theatre, as well as an actor delivering a monologue on stage to a horse.¹⁸ [Figure 4]

The fact that the risk of staging an opening ceremony on the River Seine seems to have paid off will have come as a relief to President Macron as well as Paris 2024 organizers. Macron was

18 Paris 2024 Cultural Olympiad website <<https://olympics.com/en/paris-2024/the-games/celebrating/cultural-olympiad>>.

at the time still dealing with the consequences of the risk he took earlier this summer when dissolving France's *Assemblée nationale* to hold earlier than expected legislative elections. Given that much political uncertainty remains and France currently lacks a functioning government, Macron doubtlessly kept his fingers firmly crossed that the Olympics and Paralympics would pass off smoothly as well.

However, the fact that the Olympics and Paralympics were widely seen as a success did not appear to create a national mood of optimism from which Macron has been able to profit. This was evidenced when the French president was loudly booed by a section of the crowd at the Paralympic closing ceremony. This followed Macron's attempt to put an end to a period of political uncertainty by naming Michael Barnier as prime minister despite him being a member of the party which came fourth in the second round of the July 2024 legislative elections. Athletes who finish fourth in an Olympic event do not win a medal and the crowd in the Stade de France appeared to express their displeasure at Barnier being given a privileged place on the political podium by Macron.

A CALL FOR A 'DISABILITY REVOLUTION'

Corinne Doria

On the evening of 28 August, the Place de la Concorde in Paris hosted the Summer Paralympic Games opening ceremony. Music, dance, fireworks and inspirational speeches by the President of the International Paralympic Committee and the President of Paris 2024 comprised the four-hour ceremony.

The ceremony was marked by evident symbolism and explicit references to the French Revolution of 1789, starting with the choice of the location. In Place de la Concorde some of the more emblematic events of the Revolution took place, such as the execution of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette. Reference to the French Revolution unfolded throughout the evening: the ceremony involved disabled athletes from the 168 participant delegations taking possession of the city centre in the Parade of Nations, a peaceful counterpart to French citizens roaming the capital at the end of the eighteenth century. The word 'revolution' was pronounced multiple times during the official speeches, and 'Revolution du handicap' ('Disability Revolution') was the unofficial title of the ceremony. Able and disabled artists danced to Ravel's *Boléro* holding torches instead of attacking the symbols of the absolute monarchy.

The choice of the French Revolution as the central theme of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paralympic Games can be interpreted in various ways. The French Revolution marked the end of the absolute monarchy in France and the first sanction of civil rights with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. This period was also a landmark in the history of the rights of disabled people: in 1790, the principle of the nation's duty to assist the 'infirmes pauvres' (poor individuals with disabilities) was asserted for the first time before the Constituent Assembly, the Republic replacing the charitable philanthropy of the Old Regime with a civic duty towards the more vulnerable. It was during the Revolution that the *Institution des enfants aveugles* (Institute for Blind Youth) and the *École des sourds-muets* (School for Deaf-Mutes)—the first schools for blind and for deaf-mute children, founded in 1786 and 1776 respectively—were placed under the protection of the Republic. The revolutionaries pushed forward the Enlightenment idea that people with sensorial impairment are not intellectually diminished, hence galvanizing the movement towards acceptance of deaf and blind education. Evoking the Revolution of 1789 also suggested an analogy between the demand for a social and political role by a part of society previously kept at the margins, the Third Estate in 1789, and similar demands by disabled people worldwide in 2024.

By underlining how the social and political participation of disabled people is a matter of justice and human rights, the ceremony also sent a powerful reminder that much remains to be done, even by countries representative of the modern Global North such as France. During the ceremony, we were repeatedly reminded of the work to make the city venues accessible to disabled athletes and that the French capital still has significant accessibility issues for disabled inhabitants and visitors. The Paralympic Games ensured that the topics of disability and disability rights were present in international media. But to what extent will this event advance the cause of social integration of disabled citizens?

Along with 'revolution', the word 'harmony' was also mentioned multiple times during the ceremony: the goal of creating a society suitable for both able-bodied and disabled individuals, a society in which physical and cultural obstacles, barriers and prejudices towards disabled people would be an embarrassment of the past. However, the suitability of an event like the Paralympic Games to achieve this goal is not guaranteed. Throughout the ceremony, the exceptionality of the athletes participating in the Games—men and women overcoming their physical limitations and achieving the impossible—was reiterated by the authorities, the commentators and through interviews with Paralympians. It is important to remember that the performance of the para-athletes and their life histories do not reflect the daily life of millions of individuals with disabilities and, more importantly, that pairing the message of the creation of a harmonious society with the idea that disability is a limitation that has to be overcome by individual will-power means to embrace the values of an ableist society where one has the right to live only if one can perform according to what is 'normal'.

WHAT HAPPENED TO 1924?

Geoffrey Levett

Elite sport in 1924 was both vital and political. Now, it is merely commercial. This was epitomized by the fact that during the 2024 opening ceremony the person who did most to foster the re-establishment of the Olympic Games after the catastrophe of World War I, and who oversaw Paris's hosting of the Games in 1924, was completely overlooked. That person was Frantz Reichel.

Frantz Reichel (1871–1932) was the leading figure in French sport, having an impact on its development as athlete, journalist and administrator. He was the chief evangelist for the vision of Pierre de Coubertin, carving out a role for himself as the pre-eminent sporting intellectual in France. And he had an impact on society far beyond that of a mere journalist-promoter of 'the virtues of physical fitness ... instrumental in sprinkling small stadiums' throughout Paris, as June Hargrove characterizes him.¹⁹ The journalist Géo Lefèvre, who inspired Henri Desgrange to create the Tour de France, referred to him as 'the man who created French sport.'²⁰ Reichel's greatest and most enduring achievement was to campaign for Paris to host the 1924 Olympic Games. The focal point for the event was the Stade de Colombes, which was built in the grounds of the elite Racing Club de Paris of which Reichel himself was a member.

Reichel died prematurely of a heart attack at the age of sixty-one at his desk at *Le Figaro*, after a lifetime of struggle in the cause of raising the public standing of sport. A crowd of 10,000 attended his funeral service, including a range of leading personalities from public life. Not only did his premature death provoke an outpouring of grief across the sporting community, it also prompted an immediate appeal for private subscriptions to erect a memorial to the memory

19 June Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris: An Open Air Pantheon* (New York, 1989), 285.

20 Archives nationales du monde de travail, Association des journalistes sportifs, Monument Frantz Reichel, 2011 010 040, letter from Géo Lefèvre to Armand Maspoli, 27 May 1942.

of a man that section of that sporting community saw as incarnating French sport during his lifetime. The condition of the public monument to Frantz Reichel—it sits largely forgotten in a little-frequented corner by the Périphérique in western Paris—belies the fact that at the moment of its unveiling it acted as a dramatic public statement of the amateur ideology in sport. Reichel was the intransigent defender of sporting amateurism whose unyielding opposition to professionalism, especially in rugby and football, made him the most divisive figure in the French sporting world in the early 1930s.²¹

Hence it is no surprise that the organizers of the 2024 opening ceremony overlooked him for commemoration. For the first time in Olympic history, prize money was awarded to gold medal winners at Paris 2024. World Athletics created a prize pot of US\$2.4 million to fund payments of US\$50,000 each for gold medal winners in track and field events. This will be extended to silver and bronze medallists at the 2028 Games in Los Angeles, and who can be in any doubt that where athletics has led, others will follow? Of course, this would be anathema to Reichel, but few people nowadays would argue against athletes' right to make their living through their trade. One might raise an eyebrow, however, at the gold medals being presented in a Louis Vuitton-created box tacitly sponsored by France's richest man, the luxury goods entrepreneur Bernard Arnault.

But payment to play wasn't the only thing that concerned Reichel about the potential breakdown of the amateur ideal. Looking at photographs of the 1924 opening ceremony on 5 July the pictures make a compelling contrast with those of the ceremony on 26 July 2024. A moderately full crowd of around 25,000 at the Stade de Colombes bathes in sunshine while the athletes parade past. [Figure 5] Following the parade, the President of the Republic gave a short



Figure 5. Agence Rol, '5 July 1924, Inauguration of the Olympic Games at the Stade de Colombes, opening ceremony'. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rol, 93442.

21 For more detail about Reichel's life and work see Geoffrey Levett, 'A certain idea of "le Sport français": the monument Frantz Reichel and the contest for the soul of French sport', *French History*, 36 (2022), 438–65.

speech proclaiming the opening of the Games, whose termination saw the release of thousands of doves of peace while Saint-Saëns' *Marche Héroïque* played. A final speech by the French athlete Géo André, promising on behalf of all the athletes to respect the rules of competition for the honour of their countries and the glory of sport, preceded a final parade as the assembled athletes of forty-five nations exited the stadium.

Compare this with the four-hour long bombast of the 2024 ceremony in which a bewildering variety of entertainment was viewed in the pouring rain by a crowd of 350,000 along the Seine and a global television and online audience in the millions. Participating athletes on their wet barges on the river seemed a sideshow compared to the Hollywood Babylon quayside and superannuated athletes whizzing up and down in speedboats. For Reichel the opening ceremony should be a simple exercise in which the athletes are the focus of the crowd's attention. He was chiefly concerned with participation and warned that sport as spectacle was the logical outcome of the rejection of amateur values. This is why a little of Reichel's thinking would be a welcome corrective to the trajectory of the modern Games. Why not rehabilitate his statue and place it beside that of that other great French Olympian of the 1920s, Alice Milliat, who was rightly honoured in the opening ceremony? He's been stuck in the long grass for too long.

MISSING IN ACTION: COUBERTIN AND THE 1924 GAMES AT THE OPENING CEREMONY

Robert W. Lewis

The opening ceremony of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris was joyfully creative, bizarre and entertaining. At a personal level, I enjoyed it from start to finish. My two elementary-school-aged children were captivated by the spectacle. This opening ceremony seemed to have something for just about everyone, from the parkour exploits of the mysterious masked torchbearer to the boat after boat of athletes grinning and waving in the rain to the stunning final lighting of the balloon-cauldron by French Olympic heroes Marie-José Pérec and Teddy Riner.

What the opening ceremony really didn't include, however, was much attention to the Parisian founder of the modern Olympic movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, or to the 100th anniversary of the 1924 Paris Summer Olympic Games. The broadcast commentary (at least on American television) briefly referenced Coubertin and the inaugural Olympic Congress held at the Sorbonne in 1894. The ceremony itself also mentioned Coubertin's creation of the Olympic rings in 1913, and featured a rapid-fire video montage that included some footage from the 1924 Games. [Figure 6] But that was all. The closest the ceremony came to Coubertin or 1924 otherwise was the inclusion of 100-year-old former Olympian Charles Coste, the oldest living French gold medallist, in the torch relay.

In truth, I wasn't really surprised by either development, particularly the near-total omission of Coubertin. The French daily sports newspaper *L'Équipe* had reported in February that Coubertin was going to be the 'grand absent' of the 2024 Olympic Games. While the article focused on the failure of a recent campaign to have Coubertin reinterred at the Panthéon, author Vincent Hubé suggested that no formal recognition of Coubertin would be forthcoming at the Games.²² As *L'Équipe* acknowledged, the Baron was a complex and problematic historical figure. Coubertin's writings were laced with racist and anti-Semitic sentiments; he lauded, on more than one occasion, the superiority of the 'white race'. He also did not vocally

22 Vincent Hubé, 'Pierre de Coubertin, personnage controversé et grand absent des JO de Paris 2024', *L'Équipe*, 17 February 2024, <<https://www.lequipe.fr/Jo-2024-paris/Tous-sports/Article/Pierre-de-coubertin-personnage-controverse-et-grand-absent-des-jo-de-paris-2024/1449345>>.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 6. Agence Rol, '5 July 1924, Inauguration of the Olympic Games at the Stade de Colombes, opening ceremony'. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rol, 93444.

denounce the 1936 Olympic Games, held in Nazi Germany, and strongly opposed the participation of women in most Olympic events. (Indeed, women were excluded from track and field events until the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, after Coubertin's departure as the head of the International Olympic Committee). And even if Coubertin's racism and hostility to female sport were not exceptionally outside of the norm in the context of his own era, he was also seen by many contemporaries, as historian Patrick Clastres observes, as an 'elitist aristocrat with uncertain republicanism'.²³

The decision to leave Coubertin largely off-screen was thus an understandable choice on the part of the organizers of the opening ceremony and the Games themselves. One might have thought, however, that the centennial of the 1924 Paris Games might have been something to foreground (at least a little bit!) at this opening ceremony. But I can also see why the 1924 Games didn't make the cut. Those Games certainly featured some outstanding athletic performances, such as those of British and American sprinters (depicted in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*), Finnish distance runners Paavo Nurmi and Ville Ritola and American swimmers such as Johnny Weissmuller, who later went on to star as Tarzan in twelve movies. At the same time, the 1924 Games were also an incoherent, poorly organized affair that stretched over two months; they failed to make a profit and were not terribly well attended. As the daily sports newspaper *L'Auto* complained at the time: 'The Games descend by degrees into almost general indifference, and finish up in almost mediocre fashion.'²⁴ Perhaps most importantly, the 1924 Olympics—while ostensibly hosted by Paris—largely took place in the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *L'Auto*, 26 July 1924.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 7. Agence Rol, '5 July 1924, Inauguration of the Olympic Games at the Stade de Colombes, opening ceremony'. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rol, 93445.

somewhat dingy suburb of Colombes, 8km to the north-west, where the Olympic stadium had been constructed due in large part to the reluctance of the Paris municipal council to fund an Olympic stadium closer to the heart of the capital. [Figure 7] But even if the 1924 Olympic Games had been held in Paris proper, they were staged in a different era than our present one; at the time, sporting events like the Games were not yet envisioned as tools of civic and national promotion, as they clearly are today.

Ultimately, the opening ceremony for these 2024 Paris Games didn't need to dwell on Coubertin or the distant French Olympic past to work its magic. Still, as a historian of French sport and those 1924 Olympics, I was selfishly a little disappointed by those omissions. That is why I was so elated two days later, when I found myself randomly watching field hockey, of all things. (This is not intended as a slight against field hockey, but it's not a sport that I typically watch or follow, even during the Olympics). As the camera panned around the venue for the event, I realized that it was none other than the old Stade Yves-du-Manoir—the stadium built for the Olympic Games in Colombes in 1924. I had forgotten that the old stadium, which also played host to the 1938 World Cup and many international soccer/football and rugby matches throughout the early 1970s, was even being included in the 2024 Olympic programme. But here it was on my television—a refurbished, slimmed-down version of the old installation, replete with garish blue artificial turf, but still sporting its unmistakable central grandstand, so lauded by contemporaries upon its completion in the 1920s. And it was in that moment, when a tangible connection to the history of the Olympics and French sport emerged onto my screen, that the 2024 Olympics really began for me.

BREAKING AT THE OLYMPICS: *FORMIDABLE* OR A MISFIRE?

Rachel Anne Gillett

As an historian, attending the women's Breaking qualifiers at Concorde Urban Park in Paris, Friday 9 August 2024, took on an added dimension. I was witnessing history. Breakdancing had never been included in the Olympics before. It may never be again. The medals awarded here would be global 'firsts'. Having secured tickets on the day of the event, I entered the arena. Snoop Dog, much-memed American rapper hammered out the 'trois coups' to start the show. And after a pre-qualifier in which b-girl Talash, an Afghani refugee athlete, unfurled a cape reading 'free Afghani women' (and was instantly disqualified) the b-girl battles commenced.

The athleticism was breathtaking. Competitors showcased advances in the genre in the last five decades. In contemporary breaking, floor moves now combine with aerial and upright (toprock) moves that would be at home on the pommel or the floor show in the Gymnastics. In the Olympic format breakers 'battled' against each other, dancing in short bursts to live DJ music, and judges evaluated them on technique, musicality, execution, vocabulary (range of different moves, heritage moves and unique combinations) and originality. To be there in person was to be left in no doubt of the Olympian demands of the sport and in awe at its artistry.

The inclusion of Breakdancing in the Paris Olympics also illustrates the politics and privilege that characterize this global sporting juggernaut. The World Dancesport Federation had originally pitched Ballroom dancing for inclusion but the Olympic committee suggested Breaking (or Breakdancing) better fit the youthful urban vibe they wanted to project.²⁵ Breaking paid tribute to the francophone world's long-time global dominance in rap, hip-hop, graffiti and breakdance.²⁶ It showcased France's *patrimoine* and diversity (while glossing over the politics of the *banlieue* that Mame-Fatou Niang and Karim Hammou, amongst others have analysed).²⁷ It was, however, a top-down inclusion policy. Long-time scholars and grassroots practitioners argued the process was similar to that of a 'cool uncle' who takes the kids out to the fair, feeds them candy all day and puts them on all the scary rides then brings them home to their parents exhausted, sticky, overhyped and likely to wake up with nightmares.

This was the context within which Dr Rachel Gunn ('Raygun'), the Australian competitor, qualified. The qualifiers in Europe utilized long-standing competitions. French competitors, for example, were trained, supported and provided with infrastructure leading up to the Games. The lead male competitor for France, Dany Dan, was funded by the state to prepare for the Olympics.²⁸ The Oceania qualifiers, in contrast, were announced close to the event. Competitors needed a passport to register and many had to purchase air tickets on short notice, or fulfil citizenship requirements they did not yet meet. This emptied the playing field in a region where the dancesport is undersupported and male dominated, as Rachel Gunn's own research documents.²⁹

The Paris location for the Breaking was dynamic and historic. The 'urban park' that hosted Breaking, Skating and 3-on-3 Basketball was erected in the Place de la Concorde. Its iconic golden spike anchored brightly coloured stands and crowds of eager fans who cheered rapturously when French competitors appeared. This setting reflected French *patrimoine* showcasing the forty-plus years of hip-hop's presence in a venue midway along the sweeping avenue from the Louvre up to the Arc de Triomphe. [Figure 8]

25 Nadira Goffe, 'What is breaking?, and other questions about the Olympics' newest sport, answered', *Slate*, 9 August 2024 <<https://slate.com/culture/2024/08/olympics-2024-breaking-breakdancing-paris-summer-sport.html>>.

26 Karim Hammou, 'Quarante ans de rap français. Hip-Hop en Français. An exploration of hip-hop culture in the Francophone World', (2020) <<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02897051>>.

27 'Penser l'intersectionnalité avec Mame-Fatou Niang', *La Poudre* [podcast], episode 83 (December 2020) <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/691NILDFTy4pcwx9vryymA>>.

28 Sebastian Mikkelsen, 'B-Boy Dany Dann: from French Guiana and working as a nurse to chasing an Olympic dream in Paris', *Olympics.com*, 25 June 2023 <<https://olympics.com/en/news/bboy-dany-dann-french-guiana-nurse-breaking-olympic-dream>>.

29 Rachel Gunn, 'Where the #bgirls at? Politics of (in)visibility in breaking culture', *Feminist Media Studies*, 22 (2021), 1447–62.



Figure 8. The ‘urban park’ setting for the Breaking competition, Place de la Concorde, Paris. Author’s own photo.

Hip-hop’s five pillars (graffiti, MC-ing, DJ-ing, breaking, and knowledge-/fashion- making) are now truly part of France’s artistic canon. Afrika Bambaata’s tour of 1982 brought with it breakdancers and fostered a booming French rap scene that has shone brightly ever since.³⁰ Mitterrand, and his culture minister, Jack Lang, championed (at least in abstract) the genre and released significant funds for breakdancing to be taught in state-sponsored community and institutional dance settings.³¹ Sarkozy decried French rap and identified it and the *banlieues* in which it took hold, as problems. Yet Sarkozy’s son is a hip-hop producer. The French right is now mobilizing rap for political aims, while activists proclaim the virtues of ‘conscious’ rap that engages issues of racism, even as others refuse that moral burden.

Dany Dan and Syssy, the two favoured French competitors, illustrate this rich postcolonial history. Dany Dan (Danis Civil), narrates his own hip-hop success story as that of a gifted francophone boy from French Guiana who encountered breakdancing and was transported, literally, to Paris to pursue the art. He works as a nurse, is married and settled in France, and at thirty-four, is one of the more experienced competitors. He is in France because of empire and he tells a proud French inclusion story.³² Syssy (Sya Dembélé), the favoured French female competitor heading into the Games, is the daughter of a Burkinabé *griot* and a choreographer, and was raised in St Etienne outside of Lyon.³³

30 Hammou, ‘Quarante ans de rap français’.

31 Ryan Augustyniak, ‘Le hip-hop in France: an interview with Felicia McCarren’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 23 (2019), 103–06.

32 Mikkelsen, ‘B-Boy Dany Dann’.

33 ‘Sya Dembélé’, *Sport-Etude*, <<https://sport-etude.com/Sya-Dembele>>.

In the qualifier Syssy performed with grace, elegance and power. Her performance was utterly eclipsed in the media that followed—although not on the day itself—by that of ‘Raygun’, the b-girl lecturer from MacQuarie University who practises auto-ethnography. Dr Rachel Gunn writes about representation, misogyny and access to breaking in her scholarly work. She also writes about how she, as a scholar, sees her work in relation to hip-hop feminisms and is careful about how she claims what she sees as a Black feminist tradition. A final point from her work that may help explain how her stage performance came to be, is that she argues that the Australian style favours the persona of the ‘larrikin’. Her auto-ethnographic work documented how she noticed and sometimes adopts this persona, that subverts and undermines institutions and works from a position of dry wit, comedy and self-deprecation, as well as feminist or gender-defying stances. One of her scholarly arguments is that b-girls have to represent, have to perform in high-stakes-mixed environments to provide narratives for a dancesport in which women have been marginalized. Her own ethnographic interviews show that every story matters, and she analyses how b-girls ‘manage the haunting pressures of minority representation: that every b-girl represents all b-girls.’³⁴ And yet she put herself in that mix on perhaps the largest global stage breaking has ever had. Given her scholarly engagement, the fact that Raygun ended up dominating the narrative at the Paris Olympics is rich in irony.

So this historic new day for ‘the culture’ (as hip-hop is often called) showed continuities. It was a product of French (post)colonial migration and cultural change, challenge and adaptation; of hip-hop’s entanglement with racial politics. Commentators have pointed to the harm done as Raygun sucked the bandwidth from the brilliant performers around her, although in the lived moment this wasn’t the vibe. At the panel when the Olympics were compared to the irresponsible uncle, the dialogue ended with many audience members expressing the hope that if Breaking once more appears on our Olympic screens, it can be done with more care. The Paris Olympics offered spectacle and ample scope for speculation about what the future of Breaking at the Olympics will hold. It remains to be seen who, now, will determine access to the stages on which these Olympian stories play out.

FRANCE BARS VEILED MUSLIM ATHLETES DESPITE INCLUSIVITY PLEDGE

Rim-Sarah Alouane

The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games dazzled with its grand display of glitter, parades, punctuated by typically French provocative performances that celebrate France’s unique *grain de folie*, inclusivity and the rich tapestry of French society and culture. France is adept at promoting itself globally, constantly seeking to expand its international influence and prestige, a phenomenon referred to as *le rayonnement de la France à l’étranger*. Yet, behind this seemingly perfect display lies a more troubling reality. Visible French female Muslim athletes were prohibited from wearing their headscarves, casting a shadow over France’s attempt to portray itself as a diverse and inclusive nation.

It feels like *déjà vu*. This controversy traces back to the enduring tensions between France’s commitment to *laïcité*—France’s form of secularism—and its Muslim population, often perceived as a threat to the nation’s republican values and way of life. Time and again, across the political spectrum, French authorities have claimed that the hijab or Islamic headscarf symbolizes gender inequality, women’s oppression and a threat to republican ideals and therefore needs to be regulated. This stance has been institutionalized over the years through various legislative and administrative measures.

34 Gunn, ‘Where the #bgirls at?’, 1448.

The principle of *laïcité* has been weaponized.³⁵ The modern understanding of this multilayered concept was born out of the 1905 Law on Separation of Church and State, originally intended to state neutrality and to protect individual freedom of religion and conscience.³⁶ However, its implementation has increased in the past decades to target the visibility of French Muslims in public spaces, reflecting an institutionalized obsession with regulating Muslim women's attire.³⁷ Since 1989, the hijab has been a contentious issue, initially focused on its presence in state schools. Over time, this focus extended to other public spaces, leading to a series of legislative measures aimed at regulating and often banning visible symbols of Islamic faith. Notably, the National Assembly adopted the controversial 2004 law banning conspicuous religious signs in state schools.³⁸ Although targeting all religious signs, the law was primarily aimed at the hijab. Similarly, in 2010, France adopted the law banning the concealment of one's face in public, specifically targeting the niqab, a full-face veil worn by a fringe minority of Muslim women.³⁹ Additionally, various municipal bans on the burkini at public beaches and municipal swimming pools further illustrate this trend.⁴⁰

Laïcité has been stripped of its liberal essence and now curtails individual freedoms, particularly for Muslims. This trend is evident in the 2019 public backlash over the sale of sports hijabs by French sportswear retailer Décathlon,⁴¹ the Baby-Loup case where a nursery employee was dismissed for wearing a hijab,⁴² and the political controversy surrounding a veiled candidate in the 2010 regional elections.⁴³ More recently, in its 2023 decision, the Council of State—France's highest administrative supreme court—upheld the French Football Federation's rule preventing players from wearing a hijab.⁴⁴ These examples underscore the increasingly restrictive interpretation of *laïcité* and its effect on French popular opinion toward Muslims.

In banning the hijab, the French government has argued athletes selected to represent France at the Olympics are considered to be engaged in a public service mission, necessitating adherence to strict *laïcité*. This approach can be problematic as it overly broadens the concept of public service to include athletes, thereby imposing undue restrictions on their religious freedoms. The consequences of this ban for female Muslim athletes are significant. Many faced the possibility of being forced to choose between their religious beliefs and their participation in the Olympic Games, effectively excluding them from the competition.⁴⁵ This not only undermines the principle of equal access to sports but also perpetuates the marginalization of visible Muslim women in French society. This ban could further entrench the lack of diversity in high-level

35 Rim-Sarah Alouane, 'The weaponization of *Laïcité*', *Berkley Forum*, 7 October 2020 <<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-weaponization-of-laicite>>.

36 Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État, <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000508749>>.

37 Rim-Sarah Alouane, 'Publicly French, privately Muslim: the aim of modern *laïcité*', *Berkley Forum*, 13 May 2021 <<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/publicly-french-privately-muslim-the-aim-of-modern-laicite>>.

38 Loi no. 2004–228 du 15 mars 2004 encadrant, en application du principe de *laïcité*, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics, *JORF*, no. 65, 17 March 2004 <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000417977>>.

39 Loi no. 2,010–1,192 du 11 octobre 2010 interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public (1), *JORF*, no. 0237, 12 October 2010 <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000022911670>>.

40 Rim-Sarah Alouane, 'The French obsession with Muslim swimwear', *Hyphen*, 23 September 2023, <<https://hyphenonline.com/2023/09/06/burkini-abaya-ban-france-muslim-swimwear/>>.

41 Louise Couvelaire, 'Décathlon renounce à vendre son "hidjab de running", sous la pression des réactions politiques et anonymes', *Le Monde*, 26 February 2019, <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/02/26/decathlon-propose-un-hijab-de-course-puis-renonce-face-a-l-ire-de-politiques_5428624_3224.html>.

42 Thomas Hubert, 'French veil ban upheld in controversial court case', *France 24*, 27 November 2013 <<https://www.france24.com/en/20131127-islamic-veil-baby-loup-european-court-human-rights-france-secular-muslim-burqa-niqab>>.

43 'Veiled female candidate runs in French regional elections', *VOA*, 8 February 2010 <<https://www.voanews.com/a/veiled-female-candidate-runs-in-french-regional-elections-83968567/169787.html>>.

44 'Interdiction par la FFF du port pendant les matchs de "tout signe ou tenue manifestant ostensiblement une appartenance politique, philosophique, religieuse ou syndicale": le Conseil d'Etat rejette les requêtes', *Décision de justice, Conseil d'État*, 29 June 2023 <<https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/interdiction-par-la-fff-du-port-pendant-les-matchs-de-tout-signe-ou-tenue-manifestant-ostensiblement-une-appartenance-politique-philosophique-r>>.

45 "Sport should be inclusive": activists slam France hijab ban', *France 24*, 11 June 2024 <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240611-sports-should-be-inclusive-activists-slam-france-hijab-ban>>.

sports competitions, undermining the Olympic principles of universality, solidarity and unity in diversity. Yet, the position of the French government, articulated by Minister of Sports, Amélie Oudéa-Castéra,⁴⁶ has remained firm despite critics from international bodies.⁴⁷

This institutionalized exclusion is also justified by an interpretation of feminism that positions the French state as the saviour of Muslim women, framing the headscarf as a sign of extremism or subjugation. This perspective denies Muslim women's freedom, portraying them either as victims needing rescue or as threats to social cohesion. The paradoxical nature of this stance becomes evident when considering the broader societal implications: while advocating for women's emancipation, the state simultaneously restricts their freedom to choose their attire and express their identities. The 2024 report by Amnesty International, underscores the discriminatory nature of the hijab ban.⁴⁸ The report details numerous instances where Muslim women and girls have been systematically excluded from participating in sports due to their choice to wear the hijab. Amnesty International also underlines the discriminatory nature of this ban and its devastating consequences on Muslim women.

The continued marginalization of the Muslim community and the erosion of individual freedoms in the name of *laïcité* have far-reaching implications for France's future. By implementing this ban, the government risks further alienating a significant portion of the population. Further highlighting the double standards in France's policies is the frequent accusation that Muslims do not integrate into French society. Yet, when Muslims, especially women, represent their country and participate in sports, they are often deemed a threat and rendered invisible. This paradox undermines the narrative of nonintegration by illustrating that when Muslims do contribute to national pride through sports, their visibility is challenged by even more restrictive policies. The world is watching closely to see whether France can uphold its commitment to the values of inclusivity and diversity that are at the heart of the Olympic spirit. The outcome of this debate will shape the legacy of the 2024 Paris Olympics and set the tone for the future of global sports.

THE OLYMPIC BALLOON: A SUBLIME CELEBRATION OF THE 'CITY OF FLIGHT'

Patrick Luiz Sullivan De Oliveira

The Paris 2024 Olympics opening ceremony was remarkable in its scale. Rather than constricting the events to a stadium, as had been the case since Athens hosted the first iteration of the modern Games in 1896, Thomas Jolly and his team sought to transform Paris itself into a stage. From Lady Gaga's cabaret act on the banks of the Seine to Céline Dion's closing number on the Eiffel Tower, each performance paid homage to Paris's long-standing reputation as a city of spectacles—whether they be political (decapitating royalty), social (barricades taking the streets), or cultural (models strutting down runways). But one spectacle overshadowed them all: the lighting of the Olympic Cauldron. Under a pestering rain, French Olympic legends Marie-José Pérec and Teddy Riner lowered their torches onto a metal ring that lit up. As the camera panned out, it revealed a silver balloon that raised the Cauldron above the Jardin des Tuileries—a spectacle intensified by the Eiffel Tower's shining presence in the background. [Figure 9]

Commentary about the Olympic Balloon following the opening ceremony was quick to reference the technology's French origins. On 4 June 1873, two brothers—Joseph-Michel and

46 Lucie Hennequin, 'Aux JO 2024, les athlètes françaises ne pourront pas porter le voile même si le CIO dit oui', *HuffPost*, 25 September 2023 <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/life/article/aux-jo-2024-les-athletes-francaises-ne-pourront-pas-porter-le-voile-meme-si-le-cio-dit-oui_223530.html>.

47 Ashifa Kassam, 'UN criticises France's ban on its Olympic athletes wearing headscarves', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/27/un-criticises-frances-ban-on-olympic-athletes-wearing-headscarves>>.

48 'France: "We can't breathe anymore. Even sports, we can't do them anymore": violations of Muslim women's and girls' human rights through hijab bans in sports in France', Amnesty International, Index Number: EUR 21/8195/2024, 16 July 2024 <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur21/8195/2024/en/>>.



Figure 9. The Olympic Balloon. Author's own photo.

Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier—made the first demonstration of a hot-air balloon in Annonay, a town in south-east France. However, that episode was just the beginning of France's rich aeronautical history, and it does not explain why balloons and Paris seem to go together like brie and baguette. Rather than a new element in the Parisian skyline, the Olympic Balloon is more akin to the rediscovery of an old icon, which is probably why it resonated so much with the public.

The first thing to clarify is that the Olympic Balloon is not a hot-air balloon, but a gas balloon. Rather than rising by heating the air inside the open envelope, it ascends thanks to helium inside the sealed envelope. While today the Montgolfier name is etched in history (a hot-air balloon is also known as a *montgolfière*), we would be remiss not to recall the inventor of the gas balloon. At around the same time, Jacques-Alexandre Charles was experimenting with what was then called 'flammable air' (another Frenchman, Antoine Lavoisier, would go on to coin the term 'hydrogen'). Charles organized his own gas balloon experiment and, on 27 August 1783, hundreds of thousands of Parisians witnessed the *charlière* depart from the Champ-de-Mars. [Figure 10]

Amongst those witnesses was Benjamin Franklin, who, after hearing someone mock the apparatus, supposedly quipped: 'Eh! What is the use of a newborn baby?' Franklin's point was that while the floating globe seemed silly, it would develop into something practical. In the ensuing decades, finding some kind of use for balloons became a French obsession. The Académie des sciences researched ways to steer them against the wind, while the army used them for aerial observations during the warfare that followed the 1789 French Revolution.⁴⁹ However, by the mid-1800s, there was a sense of disillusionment with the technology. The entry for 'Ballooning' in the 1860 edition of the *Dictionnaire des inventions et découvertes anciennes et modernes* disappointingly stated that 'the

49 Recent works on this early moment of ballooning history include Marie Thébaud-Sorger, *L'Aérostation au temps des Lumières* (Rennes, 2009); Michael R. Lynn, *The Sublime Invention: Ballooning in Europe, 1783–1820* (London, 2010); and Mi Gyung Kim, *The Imagined Empire: Balloon Enlightenments in Revolutionary Europe* (Pittsburgh, 2016).



Figure 10. Late nineteenth-century print commemorating the first *charlière* ascent. Chromolithograph, [between 1890 and 1900]. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-02474.

art of aerial navigation had not progressed at all' since the balloon's invention. Instead, the practice had fallen into the hands of entertainers and speculators who toured Europe and the Americas trying to make a quick buck through frivolous ascents.

So, why is it that we now associate balloons with the City of Light? The answer lies with the ballooning revival France experienced in the late nineteenth century. The turning point was the 1870/71 Franco–Prussian War. A series of defeats in the early days of the war produced the fall of the Second Empire, which had been headed by Napoléon Bonaparte's nephew since 1851. The authoritarian regime was replaced by the Third Republic, which modelled itself after the ideals of the French Revolution. Rather than surrender, the new leadership chose to frame its battle against Prussia as an existential defence of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*.

But France was woefully unprepared and experienced a traumatic defeat. Contemporaries identified few saving graces from the war, the main one being the resistance Paris mounted to a four-month long Prussian siege. In a turn of events that seemed more appropriate to a Jules Verne novel, Parisians adopted an ingenious method to communicate with the world beyond their city's walls. Throughout the siege, more than sixty balloons—about one every other day—departed Paris carrying mail, special cargo and even politicians. Parisians developed a fondness for this whimsical system that transported more than 1.5 million letters. 'It seems to me that this aerial messenger carries away a part of myself', a journalist wrote.

Because the adoption of balloons coincided with the establishment of the regime, the technology acquired a new kind of political legitimacy. Léon Gambetta, a prominent republican leader, escaped the city by balloon to organize the war effort in the provinces—an episode that French schoolchildren would go on to learn by heart. [Figure 11] In the years that followed, a



Figure 11. Léon Gambetta departs for Tours in the balloon 'l'Armand-Barbès', 7 October 1870, Montmartre. Jules Didier. Oil painting, c. 1871. Musée Carnavalet, P1225.

thriving scientific community that adopted balloons for atmospheric investigations coalesced in Paris. Its members deliberately associated their aeronautical practices as a service to the Third Republic, arguing that mastering the air was necessary if the fledgling regime was to hold its own against the German army and British navy. In 1875, when two aeronauts died of oxygen deprivation during an 8,500m-high ascent, the French compared them to soldiers who had given their

PANORAMA DE PARIS
VU DE LA NACELLE DU
GRAND BALLON CAPTIF À VAPEUR
DE LA COUR DES TUILERIES

VOLUME DE L'AÉROSTAT
25000
MÈTRES CUBES
DIAMÈTRE DE LA SPHÈRE
36 MÈTRES
FORCE
DES
MACHINES À VAPEUR
300
CHEVAUX

TOUS
LES JOURS
ASCENSIONS CAPTIVES
DE
500
À
600
MÈTRES
D'ALTITUDE

IL EST OFFERT A CHAQUE VOYAGEUR UNE MÉDAILLE COMMÉMORATIVE
PRIX D'ENTRÉE
DANS
L'ENCEINTE
1 FRANC

DE SON
ASCENSION

SOUVENIR
DE MON ASCENSION
DANS
LE GRAND BALLON CAPTIF
À VAPEUR
DE M^{re} HENRY GIFFARD

SPÉCIMEN
DE LA
MÉDAILLE

EST AFFICHÉ AUX ENTRÉES
DE LA COUR DES
TUILERIES

LITH. L. MICHEL, 17, RUE DROUOT, PARIS

Figure 12. Poster advertising the Giffard Balloon Lithograph [1878]. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-34806.

lives to France during the Franco–Prussian War and memorialized them as the Third Republic's first scientific martyrs.⁵⁰

All the while, the balloon had become a staple in the Expositions universelles—nineteenth-century mega-events that prefigured the modern Olympics. The French organized no fewer than five between 1855 and 1900. In 1867 and 1878, the millions of visitors who came to Paris amused themselves by going up in giant tethered balloons designed by Henri Giffard and looking down the new boulevards by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann that were beginning to pierce the city. Just like the Olympic Balloon, Giffard's 1878 balloon operated from the Jardin des Tuileries, although it was much larger (36m wide x 55m high versus 22 m wide x 30m high) and rose quite a lot higher (500m versus 60m). [Figure 12]

The Giffard balloons were so successful that one could even say they contributed to the creation of the ultimate Parisian monument. In his proposal for a large iron tower, which faced some vociferous opposition, Gustave Eiffel appealed both to its entertainment and scientific potential. Like the 1878 balloon, he explained, the tower could be both a success with crowds and used for meteorological observations. Tellingly, while the Montgolfier brothers were not amongst the seventy-two men of science and engineers honoured with their names inscribed on the Eiffel Tower, one can find Giffard's on the south-west side. (It is also worth noting that, like the Olympic Balloon, the Eiffel Tower was only supposed to be a temporary addition to the city).

By the turn of the twentieth century, the balloon was no longer an object of mockery, which meant that it could also be appropriated by the higher echelons of French society. In 1898, aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois men came together to form the Aéro-Club de France, an institution that infused ballooning with a distinct fashionable aura. The Aéro-Club would host exclusive parties in Saint-Cloud, a wealthy area in western Paris, where fancy drinks and glamorous performances were accompanied by spectacular balloon ascents.⁵¹ [Figure 13]

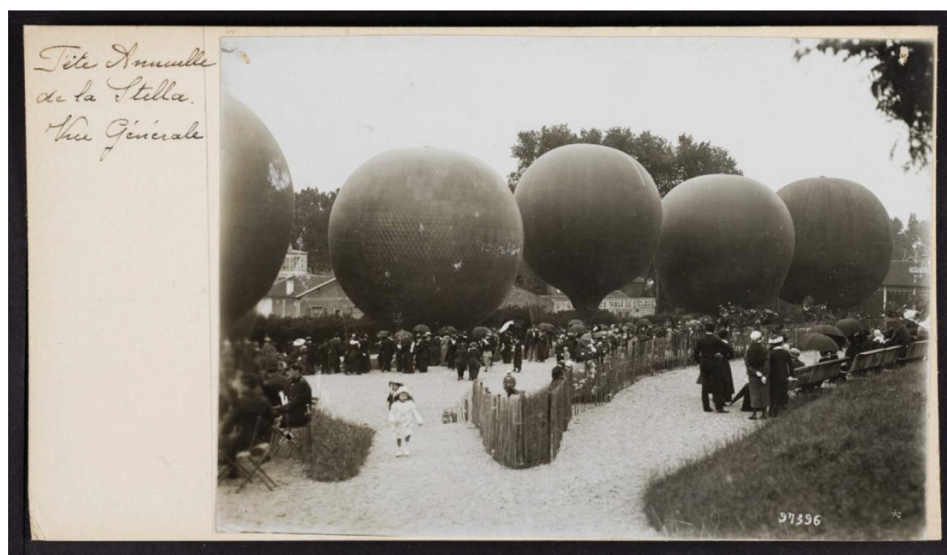


Figure 13. Early twentieth-century photograph of an event in the Aéro-Club's grounds in Saint-Cloud. Unknown author, Université de Caen Collections, Fonds Lafond série 36.

50 Patrick Luiz Sullivan De Oliveira, 'Martyrs made in the sky: the Zénith balloon tragedy and the construction of the French Third Republic's first scientific heroes', *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*, 74 (2020), 365–86.

51 Patrick Luiz Sullivan De Oliveira, '“Ce gentlemen [sic] rider du turf atmosphérique”: l'aérostation, la masculinité aristocratique et l'imaginaire colonial au tournant du XX^e siècle', *Romantisme*, 197 (2022), 94–106.

During the Belle Époque, a period that has come to define our image of Paris, the city was the indisputable aeronautical capital of the world. Between 1899 and 1910, members of the Aéro-Club alone conducted more than 3,000 ascents. The city also hosted the ateliers of skilful manufacturers, like that commanded by Henri Lachambre, that received balloon orders from France and beyond. In addition, with the expansion of the mass press and the advent of photography,

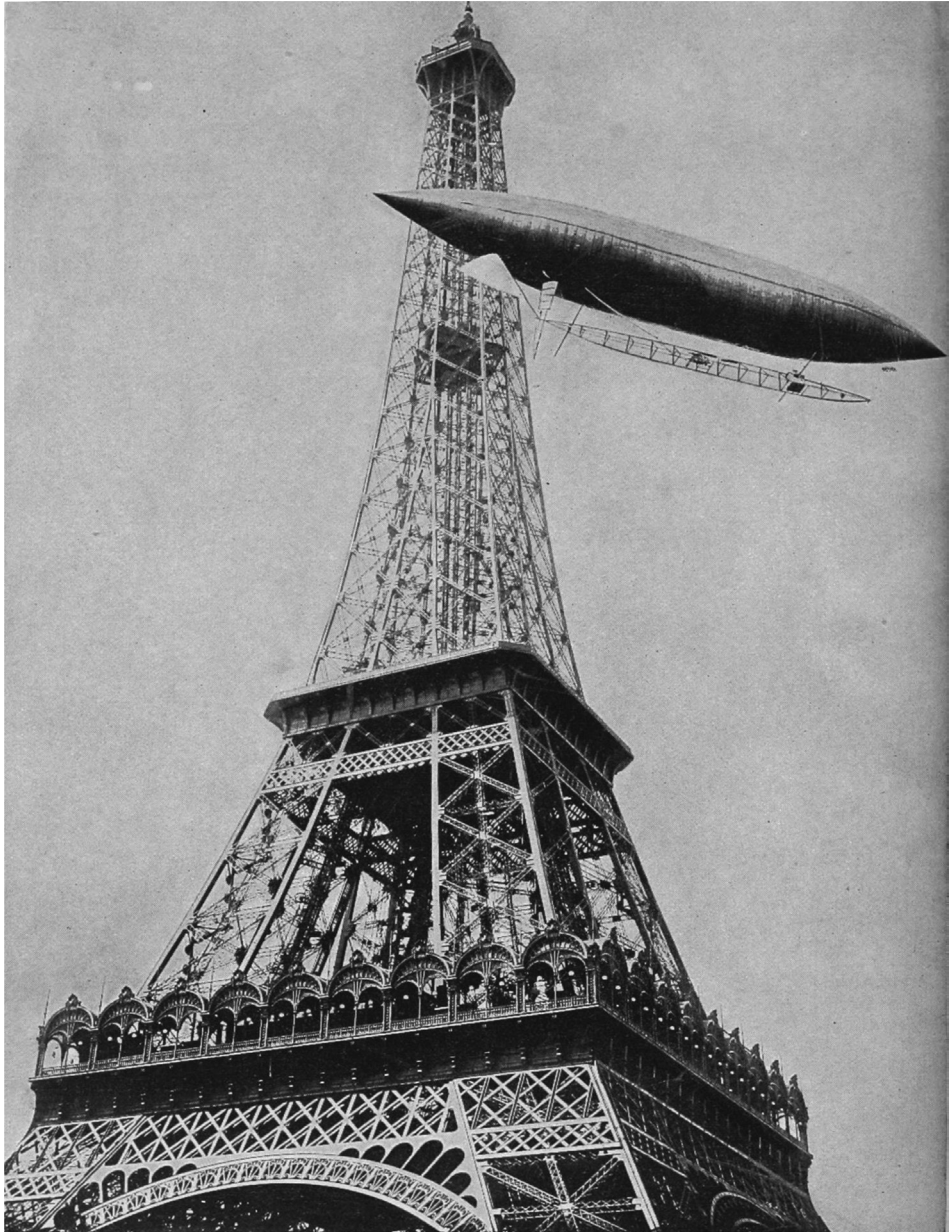


Figure 14. The air ship 'Santos-Dumont V' circling the Eiffel Tower. Smithsonian Report, 1901. Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Public domain.

people everywhere were able to see images of balloons ascending in Paris. Meanwhile, technological advances in the burgeoning automobile industry enabled the production of more efficient engines that helped transform balloons into airships. The Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont, the first aeronaut to become a global celebrity, regularly flew his airship around the Eiffel Tower, an image that revived people's hopes that one day humans would be able to steer machines above the clouds. [Figure 14] Watching Santos-Dumont's flights became such a popular attraction that *Le Figaro* reported that tram employees would announce the closest station to the Champ-de-Mars by shouting: 'Santos-Dumont! Santos-Dumont!'⁵²

The Olympic Balloon also drew large crowds. The 200,000 free tickets to see it up close were fully booked almost as soon as they were made available. Even more people flocked to areas surrounding the Louvre and viewpoints in Montmartre to watch it ascend each evening for the duration of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Arguably, the Balloon produced a kind of technological sublime, which, as David Nye explains, is when a spectacular technology manages to momentarily sublimate social divisions by producing a shared experience of awe.⁵³ In fact, a movement quickly coalesced calling for the floating globe to become a permanent fixture in the city (supporters included the mayor, Anne Hidalgo). As of this writing, the Balloon has been dismantled, but partisans still hope for its reinstallation.

Given the many logistical challenges (for instance, the Jardin des Tuileries is a high-circulation area), making the Olympic Balloon a permanent attraction seems unlikely. But if that were to happen, it would not only be a whimsical addition to the Parisian skyline; it would also honour the city's aeronautical past. In fact, the movement's request is relatively humble given what spectators at Paris's first Olympic Games were able to see. Hosted in conjunction with the 1900 Exposition universelle, the competitions that year also featured a series of balloon races, and spectators were able to see about 150 balloons depart from what one might also call the City of Flight.

52 Patrick Luiz Sullivan De Oliveira, 'Transforming a Brazilian aeronaut into a French hero: celebrity, spectacle, and technological cosmopolitanism in the turn-of-the-century Atlantic', *Past & Present*, 254 (2022), 235–75.

53 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).