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Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from WWI to the Cold War*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.xii + 320 pp. Notes on terminology and language, bibliography, and index. $99.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9781108486972.

Review by Celeste Day Moore, Hamilton College.

Sarah Dunstan begins her book in the commune of Ailly, Normandy, where the African American writer Richard Wright had purchased a farmhouse in 1955. For those familiar with Wright's account of his own "exile"--and the varied forms of racism that attended his earlier attempts to purchase a home in New Hampshire--this particular scene might appear at first glance to affirm the longstanding mythologies of French color blindness and exceptionalism, which have long defined (and constrained) the histories of African Americans in France.[1] For Dunstan, however, the farmhouse offers something more intriguing: an opportunity to consider the transnational contours and infrastructure of Black intellectual life in the twentieth century. Among Wright's many visitors was the Trinidadian scholar C.L.R. James, who later recalled Wright's particular interest in giving a tour of his personal library. As James noted, Wright drew upon the work of European philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, and Friedrich Nietzsche to comprehend the experience of oppression and to locate what Nietzche described as the "frog's perspective"--the "angle of vision held by oppressed people"--within Western thought (p. 2).

This scene, and the claims of Black writers within it to be both inheritors and critics of Western civilization, is critical to the framing of Dunstan's book, which examines the shared--if asymmetrical--relationship of African American and Black Francophone activists and intellectuals to Western modernity and the ways in which it defined their struggles for rights and citizenship in the twentieth century. While recent scholarship has placed the history of Black internationalism within diasporic, transnational, trans-Atlantic, Pacific, and even local frameworks, Dunstan's study privileges the transnational linkages between two (imperial) nation states: the United States and France.[2] Though careful to distinguish this account from the exceptionalist narratives of French color blindness that have long accompanied the history of African Americans in France, Dunstan nevertheless contends that this transnational relationship was unique.[3] She argues that Black activists and writers in France and the United States both drew from a "shared sense of the potential of republican democratic systems," (p. 4) which in turn shaped how they understood themselves, their pasts, and their futures and their resistance to those who would place race "outside the promises of republican democracy" (p. 10). In this regard, she contends, republicanism served as a kind of *lingua franca* among Black writers and

intellectuals, generating critiques, debates, political maneuvers, collaborations, and forms of anti-imperialist activism that were specific to the temporal and spatial constraints of her study.

Dunstan's account begins with World War I and the advent of Wilsonianism as a guiding framework for understanding rights, citizenship, and the promise of self-determination. The first chapter focuses specifically on the new world order wrought by the war, and the Pan-African Congresses organized in this period in 1919 in Paris and in 1921 (in London, Paris, and Brussels). While some political figures in this account, like Du Bois and Blaise Diagne, are well known to historians of this era, others, such as African American nurse and activist Addie Hunton and Guadeloupian politician Gratien Candace, may be less so. Taken together, their work reveals the varied ways in which Black political and intellectual leaders lay claim to the possibilities of this moment, but also their own investment in limiting self-determination as the "province of civilized men" (p. 46). Dunstan then considers how African American and Black Francophone intellectuals navigated the global structures of Marxist thinking and institutional Communism, which provided a new framework in which activists like Lamine Senghor, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, and George Padmore could critique racism in the United States and in the French colonies. Drawn together in international events--like the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in 1924, the fourth Pan-African Congress in New York in 1927, the 1927 Brussels Conference (organized by the League against Imperialism)--as well as within transnational publications, Black activists in the United States and France found different forms of institutional support, but shared a sense of disillusionment with the possibility of interracial activism.

Moving from what is typically defined as political, Dunstan then considers the interwar vogue for Black culture and its relevance to broader debates about race, nation, and citizenship. Building on the extant scholarship that has identified the textual links between *négritude* and the literary work of writers and artists in the United States (popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance), Dunstan contextualizes the work of publications like *L'Étudiant noir*, *Légitime Défense*, and *La Revue du monde noir* within concurrent academic and intellectual debates, in which the "cultural achievements of black men and women across both nations was useful for demonstrating black humanity and fitness for self-determination" (p. 113). In so doing, she brings into focus a range of figures whose contributions are frequently sidelined, including Clara Shephard and Louis Achille. Dunstan's focus on culture is further sharpened in chapter four, which argues that poetry was a critical medium through which Black writers identified the inherent flaws of civilizational discourses in the years leading up to World War II. One of the most intriguing parts of this chapter is Dunstan's discussion of Catholicism, which offered an important institutional and intellectual space to define race, imperialism, and modernity in this period.

While the threat of fascism pervades earlier chapters--and in particular, the imminent threat to Ethiopia--it comes into clearer focus in chapters five and six, which examine how Black activists themselves linked World War II to the "economic, cultural, and political mechanisms of oppression underpinning the Republican democracies of France and the United States" (p. 149). Moving from Paris to the periphery, chapter five considers the impact of World War II on the balance of power in the United States and France, and mines publications like the Martinique-based journal *Tropiques*, and the proceedings of the newly formed United Nations, to contextualize Black activists participation in postwar institution building. This in turn frames the discussion in chapter six, which examines the shared commitment among Black intellectuals in France and the United States to uncovering fascism and imperialism as twinned features of Western civilization, and informing their relevance to international debates about race and

human rights, including those hosted by UNESCO. The book ends by considering the intellectual work surrounding two well-known, if not yet thoroughly examined, events: the 1956 and 1959 Congresses of Black Writers and Artists. As Dunstan reveals, these gatherings demonstrate the limits in the "staking of civil rights claims in the Western framework" (p. 238). It looks closely at the journal and publishing house *Présence Africaine* in the late 1950s, as well as the continued Cold War maneuvering of the Société Africaine de Culture (SAC) and its American branch, the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC).

By examining the history of Black activism within and across the national-imperial frameworks established by the United States and France, Dunstan's book not only reveals new resonances among these movements but also the work of those figures whose influence and impact on organizing efforts are less visible within well-trodden narratives of nation and race. This is particularly striking with regards to the role of Black women, like Clara Shephard, Lucie Thésée, and Christiane Yandé Diop, whose work within these networks is understudied, making this an important addition to recent work on Black women's internationalism in France and elsewhere.[4] This transnational framework is likewise important for global French studies, as it offers a critical primer for understanding cosmopolitanism not simply as a feature of white privilege but also within the lives and works of nonwhite citizens and imperial subjects. Finally, this book will be of particular interest to scholars invested in thinking through a "larger pattern of inequality" that spans time and space, revealing the connections across world wars, the Cold War, and among the institutions of empire and Jim Crow (p. 9).

In reading, I was repeatedly struck by the sheer magnitude of Black intellectual work in this period, made all the more visible by the temporal and spatial scope of the inquiry. Yet the transnational framing can also be paradoxically limiting when the intellectual and political ambitions of Black thinkers are studied within the limits imposed by Western modernity. This is, as Dunstan shows, often reflective of the real constraints imposed on Black intellectuals in France and the United States. But recent work by scholars such Adom Getachew and Adam Ewing offers a useful counterpoint, as they demonstrate how Black knowledge systems and global politics not only exceeded the nation-state but were in fact grounded in longstanding, Pan-African critiques of slavery, nationalism, and capitalism (including fifteenth-century European conquest, native dispossession and genocide, and enslavement) that predated the advent of republicanism. Indeed, some of the same figures who populate Dunstan's book were likewise engaged in other forms of Black "worldmaking," to borrow from the title of Getachew's book, that looked beyond national or even transnational frameworks.[5]

At several points, Dunstan's book riffs on Nikhil Singh's now classic account, *Black is a Country*, which locates a genealogy of Black radicalism that has long exceeded "the terms of normative U.S. social, economic, and political discourses," and whose "global dreams" rejected the nation-state as the "ultimate horizon of black hopes for justice," even as this movement "foundered on the shoals of America's racial dilemma."[6] While Singh's book sketches the limits of the nation-state as a space in which to understand Black justice claims and freedom dreams, Dunstan's book works within these constraints, revealing the productive limits of self-determination and republicanism, which nevertheless offered new paths of connection and solidarity among Black political leaders. In this regard, it helps us think through the "peculiar political tenses" (to borrow Gary Wilder's phrasing) of mid-century Black intellectuals, who mobilized these specifically drawn notions of republican democracy to seek forms of "political citizenship that allowed for racial and cultural differences" (p. 281).[7] In short, by centering Black intellectuals, politicians,

and writers as they wrestled with the legacies of war, empire, and Jim Crow, Dunstan's work reveals the contingency and constraints of postwar nation-building and citizenship, and as such, is a valuable contribution to a number of fields.

NOTES

[1] Wright recounted this experience in his unpublished essay, "I Choose Exile," which was written in 1951.

[2] Some key texts in this rich historiographical tradition include Michael O. West and William G. Martin, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Quito J. Swan, *Pauulu's Diaspora: Black Internationalism and Environmental Justice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020).

[3] For critiques of the mythology of French color blindness, see especially Sue Peabody and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Tyler Stovall, eds., *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

[4] On Black women's internationalism, see especially Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany Gill, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

[5] See Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[6] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 14.

[7] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 1.

Celeste Day Moore
Hamilton College
cdmoore@hamilton.edu

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