

## Introduction

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas. . . I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Nobody is better qualified than the West to understand the nature of our impatience and of our awakening into revolt. It has itself taught us to diagnose this evil.

Jacques Rabemananjara

African American novelist Richard Wright bought a farmhouse in Ailly, France, in 1955. The “peace and quiet” of the small farming village offered Wright and his family a refuge from the urgency of city life and the demands of the writer’s career.<sup>1</sup> While few African Americans had the financial wherewithal to buy property in France, the country was the destination of choice for many black men and women seeking respite from America’s race relations. In the 1950s, some of the most famous writers of the century made their way to see Wright and his family at their Ailly farmhouse. One summer, C. L. R. James, a Trinidadian historian and journalist, came for the weekend. James’s clearest memory of his time in Ailly was the tour Wright gave him of his office. Pointing to his collection of books by the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, Wright had declared to James, “Everything he writes in those books I knew before I had them.”<sup>2</sup> Of

<sup>1</sup> See Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (New York: Amistad, 1988), 272.

<sup>2</sup> C. L. R. James, “Black Studies and the Contemporary Student” in *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 196.

course, Wright's personal library contained more than just Kierkegaard. He had read the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Friedrich Nietzsche feverishly and used Nietzsche's thinking to elaborate the idea that "the black man's ... is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people. ... It is what Nietzsche once called a 'frog's perspective.'" <sup>3</sup> As far as Wright was concerned, as a black man raised in the Jim Crow South of the United States, he was both heir to these Western philosophical traditions and best poised to perceive how the dynamics of oppression affected the human experience.

As the lines quoted above from eminent African American scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois and the Madagascan politician and activist Jacques Rabemananjara tell us, this sense of kinship to European intellectual traditions was not unique to Wright. Although they were speaking over fifty years apart – Du Bois in 1903 and Rabemananjara in 1959 – the two men shared the feeling that as educated men of African descent they were at once a part of the West and separate from it. When Rabemananjara declared that the West had "taught us to diagnose this evil," he was pointing to the way that the principles of citizenship rights and democracy running through post-Enlightenment thought were antithetical to black experiences of exploitation and exclusion. In the same speech, Rabemananjara affirmed the desire and the right of black peoples "to share with others the responsibilities of universal culture." <sup>4</sup> Du Bois also laid claim to membership of Western civilization. He, like Wright, believed that Western modernity had been indelibly shaped by race and by those who had been excluded on the basis of race. <sup>5</sup> Although he did not call it a "frog's perspective," Du Bois argued throughout his career that "we who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not." <sup>6</sup> C. L. R. James agreed. It seemed natural to him that Wright would find his own experience in Kierkegaard because Wright's very identity as a black man in the United States had given "him an insight into what today is the universal opinion and attitude of the modern personality." <sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wright, "Foreword" in George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (London: Dobson, 1956), 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rabemananjara, "The Foundations of Our Unity Arising from the Colonial Epoch," *Présence Africaine*, 1:24–25 (February–May, 1959): 85.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gilroy makes this point about Wright too, also drawing from C. L. R. James's essay: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 159.

<sup>6</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis*, 32 (October 1926): 296.

<sup>7</sup> C. L. R. James, "Black Studies," 196.

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All four men explicitly asserted their belonging to these European philosophic and intellectual traditions because they were writing in contexts where notions of Western civilization and modernity were a priori assumed to be distinct from black thought. They sought to emphasize that African and African-descended peoples have always been part of what historian Robin Kelley has called “a shared if asymmetrical modernity.”<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this book is to chart the ways that black thinkers from within the French Empire and the United States grappled with the reality of this “asymmetrical modernity” from the so-called Wilsonian moment associated with the Paris of 1919 until the end of the Algerian War in 1962 and the March on Washington in 1963. Collaboration across these two republican states occurred at conferences like the Pan African Congress of 1919 and the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists as well as through journals such as *Les Continents*, *Opportunity*, *La Revue du monde noir* and *Présence Africaine*. The connections created in these formal spaces lingered on in powerful personal and institutional exchanges between the black Americans and their counterparts in the French Republics. These exchanges were hugely influential in shaping black activism and thinking around race and rights on a national, imperial and diasporic level, and they are demonstrative of the centrality of the black experience to Western modernity as it was lived in France and the United States.

That is not to say that there is such a thing as a universal black experience. To the contrary, this book is a history of a multiplicity of ways in which activists of African descent understood their racial identity and its relationship with Western civilization, as well as their access to citizenship rights. Consensus was rare, and belonging to the African diaspora did not equate to a shared sense of political or cultural identity. As Nikhil Pal Singh put it in the title of his 2004 book, “Black is not a country.”<sup>9</sup> Race, as experienced and understood by each of the figures who populate this book, was (and remains) a situational identity contingent upon the specific historical and personal context of each individual. W. E. B. Du Bois’s experiences, for example, as a highly educated African American scholar and radical activist were very different from Claude

<sup>8</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, “How the West Was One” in Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 124.

<sup>9</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is Not a Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

McKay's, a working-class Jamaican immigrant who became a communist, poet and novelist. Along the same lines, although Leopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire became close friends and collaborators from the 1930s onward, their experiences of French citizenship varied along lines of class and regional identity. Senghor came from a wealthy family in Senegal's *Quatre Communes* while Césaire had grown up as the child of laborers in the Antilles and witnessed the deprivations of that life firsthand. The deep socioeconomic differences and inconsistencies in access to citizenship rights that existed across French territories also operated to foster division across African diasporic groups. This was certainly the case in the fraught relationship between francophone African and Antillean communities in the early to mid-twentieth century. Not only did male Antilleans have greater access to political rights than most of their African counterparts; they were also often integrated into the colonial administration in French-African territories, a power dynamic that divided the communities. Conversely, within the French Empire, the political and social realities of being a colonized subject also often brought activists together across racial and geographical groupings. The formation of the *Union Intercoloniale* and its associated publications, such as *Le Paria*, are a case in point (see Chapter 2).

While influential thinkers and activists familiar to histories of the twentieth-century British Empire do appear in this study as they engage movements and individuals from the United States and the French Empire – C. L. R. James and George Padmore, for example – this book focuses primarily on connections across the French and American Republican Empires. I contend that there was a particular relationship between groups across these two political entities, grounded in a shared sense of the potential of republican democratic systems, that needs to be distilled as distinct from the British imperial case. Republicanism, and specifically an idealized French republicanism inflected with memories of the French revolution of 1789, became the *lingua franca* of much anti-racist and anti-imperialist thinking emanating from and across these states.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars of French Empire have hitherto pointed to the tensions between the promises of French republicanism and the realities of colonialism, noting that anti-colonial activists in both the interwar and postwar periods frequently leveraged these contradictions when laying claim to

<sup>10</sup> Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 215–217.

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citizenship rights.<sup>11</sup> In much the same way, black activists within the United States mobilized the rhetoric of the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and the 1788 Constitution to lay claim to full citizenship rights within their own republican state. Across the time period my study traverses, comparisons between the political machinery of the two republican nations were frequent. Most often, France became an effective symbol of a “color-blind” Republicanism which African American thinkers used to frame criticisms of the United States. So too did franco-phone black thinkers lobby for reform within France on the basis of the dangerous consequences of the racism of the American Republic.

In the chapters that follow, I document many of the ways in which these men and women sought to mobilize the notions of popular sovereignty and citizenship they connected with 1789. They grappled with the way that the very idea of a political system grounded in popular sovereignty requires the construction of a singular people, a notion all too frequently conflated with racial and/or cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> Often they elaborated citizenship claims in terms of shared political affiliation rather than a racial identity. Their evocations of these principles were not calls for the erasure of cultural or racial difference but the construction of a democratic system in which the degree of difference would not map onto the access to political rights. A large number of the thinkers studied in this book also equated understandings of Western modernity with the Republican state. From this perspective, they saw France and the United States as the best manifestations of Western modernity thus far achieved. When Wright, Du Bois and Rabemananjara, for example, laid claim to the legacies of the Western civilization, they also understood themselves to be articulating a belonging to their respective republican nations. Often, they did so by asserting an identity of “civilized masculinity” that operated – implicitly and explicitly – to exclude women of color. Throughout this study, I show how gender operated in tandem with the dynamics of race and class to shape the visions of citizenship and modernity individual

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Cooper, “Provincializing France” in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan and Peter C. Perdue (eds.), *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 341–378; Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial Metropolis*; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> On the construction of the idea of “a people” and its relationship to race and culture, see Bernard Yack, “Popular Sovereignty and Nationalism,” *Political Theory* 29: 4 (2001): 517–536; Prasenjit Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900–1945,” *American Historical Review*, 104:2 (1997): 1030–1051.

thinkers put forward. So too have I brought the contributions of women thinkers – often overshadowed in histories by male figures such as Du Bois – to the fore. These include the Martinican intellectuals Paulette and Jane Nardal and Suzanne Césaire, as well as the Congolese politician Jane Vialle and African American writers such as Jessie Fauset and Clara Shepherd, among others.<sup>13</sup>

The encounters and exchanges that occurred between black intellectuals in the United States and the francophone world provided each group with new ways of understanding and acting on their own historical predicaments in ways that have hitherto remained ignored in the scholarship. Historians of the African American experience have tended to confine their studies to America's political borders. Those who have expanded these parameters often place African Americans at the forefront of diasporan politics.<sup>14</sup> The observation of historians Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, that “the history of African Americans is nothing less than the dramatic saga of a people attempting to remake the world” is not uncommon.<sup>15</sup> This makes sense. African Americans engaged with the most pressing questions of their time throughout their struggles for freedom. However, they were not the only group within the African diaspora who sought to engage in transnational activism in order to reconfigure the

<sup>13</sup> In so doing, I build upon the excellent work of scholars who have sought to rectify the elision of women of color from intellectual histories. See Mia E. Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones and Barbara Savage, *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> For studies that have attended to the African American experience in France, see Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Michel Fabre, “René Maran: The New Negro and Negritude,” *Phylon* 36:3 (September 1975): 340–351; Eileen Julien, “Terrains de Rencontre: Césaire, Fanon, and Wright on Culture and Decolonization,” *Yale French Studies*, 98 (2000): 149–166; and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). For histories of African American activism beyond the United States more generally, see Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: the United Nations and the African American Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Bortelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, “Preface” in Robin D. G. Kelley, Earl Lewis (eds.), *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ix.

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relationships between race and rights. Black thinkers from throughout the French Empire played a significant yet underacknowledged role in shaping African American thought and activism. Similarly, a plethora of recent books have explored the relationship between citizenship, rights and colonialism and mapped out francophone black thinking on the subject.<sup>16</sup> These works utilize the framework of the French Empire to make their case. As a result, they refer to the African American relationship only in passing.

The literature that does bring the two experiences together focuses attention upon the interwar period and the city of Paris. Historian J. S. Spiegel was among the first to privilege interwar Paris as a site that “afforded young colonials possibilities for association with militant French intellectuals” and the “chance for contacts with natives of other colonies.”<sup>17</sup> Since Spiegel, a number of literary scholars and historians have studied the significance of Paris in the interwar years as a site of vibrant intellectual exchange among writers and activists of African descent.<sup>18</sup> Most recently, Michel Goebel has explored the social landscape of Paris to establish patterns of interaction between Algerian, Senegalese, Vietnamese and Latin American thinkers in the interwar period.<sup>19</sup> Such attention to the exchanges of the interwar period provides a stark contrast to the postwar years, which rarely are studied in such a way. Instead, histories of the African American experience beyond the United States in the postwar are written in the shadow of the Cold War. The influence of the contemporary clash between the United States and the Soviet Union should not be underestimated. Nor should studies of decolonization be uncoupled from the French imperial frame. However, to insist upon the temporal division of the interwar and the postwar is to underestimate

<sup>16</sup> Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire’s Children: Race, Filiation and Citizenship in the French Colonies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> J. S. Spiegel, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought among French-Speaking West Africans, 1921–1939” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir*; Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*; Michel Fabre, “René Maran: The New Negro and Négritude,” 340–351; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature*.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

both the continuity of conversations across the two periods and to neglect the perspectives of black thinkers themselves. My book redresses these omissions.

Scholars such as Aimé Césaire, W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright certainly saw the experiences of World War II and afterward as a continuation of the same struggles against fascism, totalitarianism and colonialism that blacks had been fighting against for a much longer time. Relationships begun in interwar Paris carried on far past World War II and far beyond Paris. Recognizing this continuity also has a particular resonance for contemporary debates over the history of human rights. The idea that the struggle against colonial domination after World War II was a departure from the interwar period pervades the literature. Historians such as Jan Eckel argue that human rights only became “available as a possible justification for the colonies’ struggle for freedom” in this moment.<sup>20</sup> Pointing to the new international rights regimes of both the United Nations and the European Council, Eckel argues that decolonization put these new regimes to the test. Eckel, alongside Samuel Moyn and others, takes pains to distinguish between the right to self-determination – so important to anti-colonial actors – and the human rights regimes of the 1940s and beyond.<sup>21</sup> They emphasize that the right to self-determination only became associated with human rights much later and thus occlude the interwar history of this idea from their narratives. Indeed, as Frantz Fanon noted in his 1963 work *Wretched of the Earth*, “nationalist political parties during the colonial period” took “action of the electoral type: a string of philosophico-political dissertations on the themes of the rights of peoples to self-determination, the rights of man to freedom from hunger and human dignity, and the unceasing affirmation of the principle ‘One man, one vote.’”<sup>22</sup> For scholars such as Eckel, these trends provide evidence of the way that anti-colonial activists only sporadically employed human rights as a strategy for freedom. More often they focused on the integrity of sovereign rights for the nascent states that emerged in this

<sup>20</sup> Jan Eckel, “Human Rights and Decolonization: New Perspectives and Open Questions,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 1:1 (Fall 2010): 111.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 84–119; Samuel Moyn, “Imperialism, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Human Rights” in Akire Iriye, Petra Goedde and William I. Hitchcock (eds.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159–178.

<sup>22</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 59.



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period.<sup>23</sup> Similar observations have been made about the efforts of African Americans to achieve rights in the United States. As historians such as Mary Dudziak and Carol Anderson have documented, African American activists embraced the rhetoric of human rights in the aftermath of World War II but quickly narrowed the frame of their activism to civil rights.<sup>24</sup>

My study adds a new dimension to this scholarship by showing how these postwar trends were the continuation of an earlier, interwar, anti-colonial and anti-racist discourse focused on civic citizenship. Popular sovereignty and the right to self-determination were, for many of these thinkers, fully achievable within republican democratic nation-states despite racial or cultural differences and did not, therefore, necessarily require recourse to international law in the way that our contemporary evocations of human rights do.<sup>25</sup> By encompassing the period from the end of the Wilsonian moment through to postwar decolonization and the dawn of the French Fifth Republic in this monograph, I demonstrate the persistence of this perspective in black thought. Moreover, I illustrate the way that the relationship between black francophone and American thinkers extended beyond Paris, throughout French imperial circuits and into the United States.

One of the primary aims of this book, then, is to bring into conversation the two disparate historiographies of rights and race in the United States and the French Empire and to break down the division between the “interwar” and “postwar” periods. The result is a history of race and citizenship rights in both republics from “the frog’s perspective.” The rationale for doing so is twofold. As historians Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori contend in their anthology *Global Intellectual History*, “historically specific forms of connectedness provide an epistemological foundation for specific kinds of comparison.”<sup>26</sup> Bringing together the experience of black intellectuals within the United States and France and reconstructing their collaborations is not just an exercise in revealing the specific diasporic relationship between the two groups. It also draws attention to the underacknowledged but deep engagement of these particular groups of thinkers with not only nonblack intellectual legacies but

<sup>23</sup> Jan Eckel, “Human Rights and Decolonization,” 119.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*; Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, “Approaches to Global Intellectual History” in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

with the internationalist institution building that was occurring during the four decades in question. Connecting the independent archives of black activist organizations within America and France with those of international institutions such as the League of Nations, the United Nations and the Comintern, my book situates key black American and franco-phone intellectuals in a transnational framework that acknowledges the role of diasporic entanglements and other political discourses. It reveals how questions of race and nation intersected across national and imperial borders and illuminates the ways in which black intellectuals from both republics simultaneously constituted and reconfigured Western civilization. Imagining a form of statehood that would allow for plurality while universally guaranteeing rights is the thread that runs through the forty-year period covered by this monograph. Black notions of sovereignty and citizenship emerged from conditions of oppression and discrimination that forced them to ask structural questions of the societies and polities in which they lived. From a position of exteriority, they sought to formulate methods through which to assert the principle of the indivisibility of humanity and thereby achieve universal rights.

Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, elaborated an understanding of cultural hegemony that is useful here. Essentially, he argued that the state does not and cannot rule by physical force alone. Instead, it generates an ideology of normality – a dominant culture that justifies inequalities along lines of race, class and gender.<sup>27</sup> The men and women who form the focus of this study generated transnational counterhegemonic cultures aimed – explicitly and implicitly – at challenging the dominant culture of Western civilization that positioned their race outside the promises of republican democracy. As such, they manifested a kind of black internationalism largely characterized in terms of what Edward Said has called “adversarial internationalizations” – cultures and dialogues fostered from a shared sense of exclusion from the humanist discourses of the West.<sup>28</sup> In order to account for the different experiences that stem from similar structural impetus towards racialization and forced migration, I also attend to Earl Lewis’s framing of this concept in terms of a multitude of “overlapping diasporas.”<sup>29</sup> Across

<sup>27</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>28</sup> Edward Said, “Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture,” *Raritan*, 9 (Winter 1990): 31.

<sup>29</sup> Earl Lewis, “To Turn as On a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” *American Historical Review*, 100 (June 1995): 765–787.