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# Race across the Atlantic: Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris

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**Race across the Atlantic:**  
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“Listen, for God’s sake, don’t let these foreigners make you into a brick to  
hurl at our windows!”

Richard Wright, “I Choose Exile”

While there had been a longstanding tradition of African-American artists settling in Paris, the post-World War II era presented a unique scene offering new perspectives on a transatlantic conversation about race. If the 1920s Jazz Age is famous for the vivid and creative presence, in particular in Montmartre, of African-American writers and musicians, the late 1940s saw the emergence of a new African-American community, this time in Saint Germain des Prés on the Left Bank of the Seine, with its cafés and jazz clubs.<sup>1</sup> The postwar community was composed of expatriates, not mere visitors, and characterized by a more political and tragic mood because of the asserted flight from Jim Crow.<sup>2</sup> The leading African-American figure was Richard Wright who, after a first sojourn in Paris in late 1946 and early 1947, returned to take up permanent residence in the city in late 1947. Interestingly enough, the Left Bank was also, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the dwelling place of the circle of existentialists around philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. With feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, a writer committed to social and political action, came to represent the epitome of French high culture and of the French left intellectuals; they were also the leading figures of Saint Germain des Prés, the new French intellectual and artistic center. Thus, the encounter and interaction of the existentialist circle around Sartre and Beauvoir with the African-American expatriate artists on the Left Bank in the mid- and late 1940s constituted a new, transatlantic feature of the postwar intellectual scene in Paris, with the conjunction of jazz and philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 25-81 and 130-81.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 160-74.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

becoming the new symbol of Saint Germain.

As this essay aims to demonstrate, the dialogue between African-American and French intellectuals in postwar Paris constitutes an interesting case study of the workings of transatlantic intellectual networks. At the time Paris was the stage of encounters and conversations that are best appraised and discussed in the context of scholars' call for an internationalization of American Studies<sup>3</sup> and a recontextualization of the nation's history.<sup>4</sup> The 1946-1947 Paris scene and its African-American protagonists<sup>5</sup> illuminate the deprovincializing of American history called for by Thomas Bender. Viewed in retrospect, the vibrant "Harlem sur Seine" illustrates Bender's recommended "variable of space"<sup>6</sup> in that it shows American history unfolding abroad: segregation, a specifically "American dilemma,"<sup>7</sup> was now brought to a transnational space and embedded in a transnational discussion. Abroad, the victims of segregation were able to grapple with the American conundrum in the context of an interaction with the French environment and of conversations with French counterparts. As will be suggested below, the postwar Paris scene was pivotal in that it paved the way for the African-American Civil Rights movement to come and prefigured the post-colonial era, while molding both short-term (Cold War) and long-term French-American relations, thus articulating what Bender called the "variable of time" as well.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars in cultural history have embraced this new transnational approach and argued that the definition of the American nation and American identity, as well as the historical developments stemming from these (re)definitions, are shaped by the confrontation with foreign visions – through travels and encounters, and through a variety of circulating texts,

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Giles, "Reconstructing American Studies: Transnational Paradoxes, Comparative Perspectives," *Journal of American Studies* 28, 3 (1994), 335-58 and "Virtual Americas: The Internationalization of American Studies and the Ideology of Exchange," *American Quarterly* 50, 3 (1998), 533-47. See also "The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession," The Organization of American Historians, New York University Project on Internationalizing History (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>5</sup> These included press correspondents Edward Toles, Rudolph Dunbar, Roi Ottley, Ollie Stewart and Ollie Harrington, artists like Herbert Gentry (and his wife Honey Johnson), Paul Keene, and, by the end of the decade, Bill Rivers, Romare Bearden, Robert Colescott, Harold Cousins (some of them on GI Bill benefits) along with writers Richard Wright, James Baldwin and later Chester Himes (Stovall, *Paris Noir*, Chapters 4 & 5).

<sup>6</sup> Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944). The 1944 study of race relations, authored by a Swedish economist and Nobel Prize winner, offers an early illuminating example of a "transnational" approach to a specifically American problem. Wright and Myrdal also met in Europe.

<sup>8</sup> Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 9.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

from testimonies to translations.<sup>9</sup> In the 1940s, African Americans in Paris entered into a dialogue on race with others outside the perimeter of segregationist America. Paris thus may have freed the individuals and unleashed a new opportunity for expression, reflection and agency. Following recent studies in cultural and intellectual history written from a transatlantic perspective, this essay aims to understand the complex interactions between French intellectuals and African-American artists in Paris, not as a “one way” process but as a multi-directional process of mutual negotiation, influence and interaction.<sup>10</sup>

The encounter between Jean-Paul Sartre and soon-to-be exiled African-American Richard Wright is transatlantic in its nature. It took place in New York in 1945, to be relocated to Paris in 1947. The intellectual kinship and personal friendship between the French high-culture bourgeois philosopher and the Mississippi “Black Boy” and Chicago/Harlem radical writer effectively illustrates the reciprocal dialogue and interaction emphasized by new historical and cultural studies in the transatlantic field.<sup>11</sup> Sartre, in his travelogues in the French press, and in his journal *Les Temps Modernes*, in which he published Richard Wright among others, became the mediator of the African-American experience as told by African-American artists themselves. Conversely, he found his own standpoint as a writer *engagé* both nurtured and altered by the narrated experience, so alien to a person of his background. In Paris Richard Wright found an opportunity to reconsider the racial question from a distance and to engage with French and African visions of commitment and action through literature and art. He agreed to many interviews in the French press, wrote pieces for and collaborated with French journals such as Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* or African and Négritude artists' *Présence Africaine*. Perusing the pages of journals and newspapers of 1946 and 1947 offers a view of the complexity of the personal transatlantic network forged by Sartre and Wright as well as the corpus of texts it fostered. More than coexisting testimonies and individual assessments, these texts can be read both for their

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<sup>9</sup> On the need to “attend to the full variety of cultural negotiations, negotiations that do not recognize national borders but flow across them to solicit the identifications of attentive and like-minded individuals” and to dismiss the “notion of a bounded national territory and concomitant national identity,” see Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association,” November 20, 1998, *American Quarterly* 51 (1999), 16-17, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Pells, *Not Like US: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books / Harper Collins, 1997) and *Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies, and the Global Impact of American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). See also Roberta Haar & Neil Wynn, eds., *Transatlantic Conflict and Consensus: Culture, History and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Academic, 2009), Introduction.

<sup>11</sup> In *Modernist America*, in particular, Richard Pells has argued that critics too often focus on how America's global culture has had an impact on other countries' cultures, whereas America's cultural trends and tastes too have very much been shaped through foreign intellectual and artistic influences.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

mutual interaction and for the way they contributed to shaping the image of the U.S. in France and heralded future developments in African-American history, in African history, in French history and in the French-American relationship.

This essay opens with a concrete mapping of a unique transatlantic network. Moving beyond the personal links between Richard Wright and Jean-Paul Sartre, it will first explore the back issues of the French contemporary press in order to uncover a multifaceted nexus between African-American intellectuals and their Parisian counterparts. This material should then allow for a new reading of these encounters, and serve to correct the misguided criticism that Richard Wright's exiled works were unduly influenced by the existentialist milieu.<sup>12</sup> As will be established, more complex interactions and transfers occurred and helped cultivate the longstanding French fascination as well as repulsion with American culture and the American democratic experience. More specifically, in the early stages of the Cold War, the reception of African-American texts by an array of contemporary French intellectuals and critics reflects both the continuity and the pivotal transformation of the French-American relationship. It also exposes the "selective cultural filters" that may prompt keen understandings and irredeemable misunderstandings.<sup>13</sup> From the examination of this transatlantic network, new opportunities for scholarship emerge, as will ultimately be suggested, when it comes to a renewed focus on race in the context of transatlantic studies.<sup>14</sup>

## **I The Sartre-Wright Encounter: a Network of Texts and Ideas**

There is no escaping the personal aspect of the Sartre-Wright connection and the network of persons and published texts it formed. Jean-Paul Sartre met Richard Wright while he first visited New York in March 1945 and, in turn, when Wright visited Paris later from May to December 1946, he relied on this acquaintance of his.<sup>15</sup> Richard Wright sailed back to America, only to return a few months later – this time permanently. He died in Paris in 1960. Richard Wright's wife, Ellen Wright, became Simone de Beauvoir's literary agent, when she started her agency in 1951. Wright was instrumental in the formation of yet another

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<sup>12</sup> For an early but rare nuance, see Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," *MELUS* 5, 2 (Summer 1978), 39-51.

<sup>13</sup> R. Laurence Moore & Maurizio Vaudagna, eds., *The American Century in Europe* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 302-04.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

transatlantic relationship that is beyond the scope of this essay: he urged Beauvoir to visit his Chicagoan friend Nelson Algren when she toured America for conferences in 1947, an encounter that initiated a long-lasting affair between the two.<sup>16</sup>

More interestingly, a community of ideas and minds emerges from the observation of texts written prior to their actual encounter: both intellectuals formally expressed a similar impulse and strategy to use literature as a tool of social conscience and radical activism. Sartre is known for his *littérature engagée* – committed or engaged literature – while Wright famously coined the phrase that “words could be weapons.”<sup>17</sup> Both writers’ oeuvres include a manifesto on the power of literature and the responsibility of writers to use it to a purpose. In 1937, Richard Wright contributed a “Blueprint for Negro Writing” to the first issue of *New Challenge*, a short-lived magazine he helped launch in June 1937. *New Challenge* followed in the footsteps of Dorothy West and Marian Minus’ *Challenge*, which heralded the Harlem Renaissance movement.<sup>18</sup> Wright signaled a new generation of writers dedicated to expressing the “Negro experience,” its suffering and aspirations for change.<sup>19</sup> Sartre echoed similar concerns for a purpose-driven literature and launched *Les Temps Modernes* to that purpose.<sup>20</sup> The affiliation in thought thus preceded the personal affinity, as evidenced by Ralph Ellison’s comment in a July 1945 letter to Wright: “Sartre, one of the young writers, would have no difficulty understanding your position in regard to the Left.”<sup>21</sup> This cemented an intellectual network between a new generation of African Americans and a Parisian intellectual circle bound by more than just circumstances and travels, rich in reciprocal nurturing, and concretely manifest in the publication and circulation of texts responding to each other in 1946-1947 Paris.

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<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Lettres à Nelson Algren* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Translated in English as *Beloved Chicago man: letters to Nelson Algren 1947-1964* (Trafalgar Square, 1998). See also the essay by Babs Boter in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* in Richard Wright, *Later Works*, Vol II. (New York: Library of America, 1991), 237.

<sup>18</sup> Other contributors and editors included Renaissance of Chicago writers and New York writers such as Sterling Brown, Alan Locke, Franck Marshall Davis, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker and Ralph Ellison. Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, edited by D. L. Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 194-206.

<sup>20</sup> *Les Temps Modernes* was launched in October 1945 with fellow philosophers and writers on the editorial board (Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Leiris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Olivier and Jean Paulhan). All of them were frequent contributors as well.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Ellison, unpublished letter to Richard Wright, July 22, 1945 (Richard Wright Papers, The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Box 97, Folder 1314). Also quoted in Fabre, “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” 40.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

When Richard Wright first arrived in France in May 1946, he was the celebrated author of a collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and of two bestsellers, *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945); the books had not yet been translated into French upon Wright's arrival in 1946. Interestingly, however, one of Wright's short stories had been serialized in the first two issues of Sartre's new journal *Les Temps Modernes*, in October and November 1945. "Fire and Cloud," from the collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), is the tale of a black preacher, who – at first reluctant, then pushed by an epiphany – is brought to lead the protest march of his community through town, also bringing together Communists and African Americans in a common fight. Apart from a few appearances in newspapers and apart from a couple of underground publications,<sup>22</sup> all of them with a limited audience, the publication of "Fire and Cloud" in late 1945 can be said to mark the genuine entrance of Wright on the French scene with an actual piece of fiction, made possible through the mediation of Sartre's journal.

In 1946, *Les Temps Modernes* devoted a double issue to the United States, with significant sections given to the African-American experience and artistic productions. The issue featured "Early Days in Chicago," an extract from *American Hunger*, the second half of Wright's autobiography. *American Hunger*, narrating Wright's formative years in Chicago and his disillusionment with both the North and the Communist Party, was originally part of his autobiography. But the section was cut upon the request of Wright's editors and only the first half, about Wright's childhood in the segregated South, was published under the title *Black Boy* in 1945.<sup>23</sup> Several extracts – about Wright's working conditions as a restaurant bus boy, as a postal employee, or as a hospital orderly – were published in the French journal's August-September 1946 issue. This double issue also featured a number of Negro Spirituals, an essay on New Orleans Jazz, a section from James Weldon Johnson's *Book of Spirituals*, and three

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<sup>22</sup> "Le départ de Big Boy," *L'Arbalète*, 9 (Autumn 1944), no page number. The 266-page issue was devoted to American literature. The literary review, *L'Arbalète*, founded in 1940, was an underground publication in Vichy France. The short story "Big Boy Leaves Home" was translated by Marcel Duhamel, who later became the editor of *La Série Noire* at Gallimard. Prior to this, the Russian review *Internatsionalnaya Literatura 1938* had published "Fire and Cloud" and other short stories that the French version *Littérature Internationale* had translated into French that same year. Wright was at the time editor in chief of the *Daily Worker* – Harlem section – and thus close to Communist Party circles. His break with the Communist Party was definitive by 1946 when he came to Paris. This led Michel Fabre to conclude that "before his expatriation, his work was practically unknown" in France (Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright's critical reception in France – censors right and left, negritude intellectuals, the literary set, and the general public", *Mississippi Quarterly* 50, 2 (Spring 1997), 307-25).

<sup>23</sup> I have addressed Richard Wright's relationship with his editors and the making of his best-sellers in my "Richard Wright and his Editors: A Work under the Influence. From *Signifyin(g)* Rebel to Exiled Intellectual," in: *Richard Wright in a Post-racial Imaginary*, edited by Alice Craven, William Dow, and Yoko Nakamura (New York: Continuum Books, 2014), 83-98.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

extracts of the major sociological study on Chicago's South Side, *Black Metropolis* by Horace Cayton and St Clair Drake. Richard Wright had written the introduction to the study when it had been published in the U.S. in 1945.<sup>24</sup> This suggests yet another ramification of the intellectual network that made it possible for the African-American experience, here in its urban organization and manifestation, to be an object of information, representation and discussion from Chicago to Paris. All the pieces in the issue, activist in their content and form, actualize Sartre's and Wright's vision of the power of representation to raise consciousness and prompt action.

By the fall of 1946, Wright was a celebrity in Paris. From his first trip in 1946 (May-December) to his permanent return as an expatriate in 1947, about 200 articles were published, a mix of informational pieces on the star writer from America and testimonies about America's racial question. This reveals the widespread French interest in both the African-American visitor and the African-American question in general, as well as the importance of Sartre's mediation.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, until mid-1947 Wright's books were not available to French-speaking readers. *Native Son*, originally published in the United States in 1940, came out in France under the title *Un enfant du pays* in 1947 and *Black Boy – Une jeunesse noire* – appeared in 1948.<sup>26</sup> But from January to June 1947, Sartre, again, serialized *Black Boy* in *Les Temps Modernes*.

The surge of interest in America's racial question on the Parisian scene provided the opportunity for a two-way conversation, not just at cafés like "le Tournon" or "le Dôme," but in the pages of the French press. Indeed Sartre and Beauvoir published their impressions of America and incorporated the African-American question in their philosophical debates. Sartre toured America for a series of conferences in 1945 and accounts of his experience were published in *Combat* and *Le Figaro*, while Beauvoir's analysis of her 1947 trip that took her, from January to May 1947, from New York to California by way of Chicago, was serialized

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Wright, introduction to St Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis, A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1945), xvii-xxxiv.

<sup>25</sup> Several titles reflect the visibility of the racial question and the interest of the French press and public for it: "There's No Black Problem in the U.S.A. but a White Problem, the Black Writer Richard Wright Tells Us," an interview by Maurice Nadeau in *Combat* (May 11, 1946), 1; or "In Paris, Black GI's Have Come to Experience and Love Freedom," *Samedi Soir* (May 25, 1946), 2. Titles translated by author.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the publication by Parisian intellectual figures of other African-American texts, such as Chester Himes in the pulp fiction collection *Série Noire*, see Grégory Pierrot, "Chester Himes, Boris Vian, and the Transatlantic Politics of Racial Representation," *African American Review* 43, 2-3 (Summer/Fall 2009), 247-62.



in *Les Temps Modernes*.<sup>27</sup> In New York, Beauvoir was introduced by the Wrights to Harlem's life and reality and caught a glimpse of racial politics when she experienced the hostile stare of the passers-by, as Richard Wright with two white women on his arms, his wife Ellen and his guest Simone de Beauvoir, called for a cab in Greenwich Village en route to Harlem and the Savoy.<sup>28</sup>

In the course of 1946 and 1947, while various African-American testimonies in the form of interviews and publications circulated in France, French intellectuals also actively addressed the significance and universality of the racial question in America in more formal essays or artistic representations. Sartre acknowledged his affinity in intent and deed with Wright, whose example nourished his own commitment. In "What is Literature?" (1948), Sartre's seminal essay on *littérature engagée*, he used Wright's writings as an example of the universal purpose of literature to command action and trigger social change. In 1948, Sartre's activist play *The Respectful Prostitute*, a play based on the 1931 Scottsboro case in Alabama, which had premiered in Paris in 1946, was performed to much acclaim in New York's Cort Theater.

The Sartre-Wright network soon extended to French-speaking African artists whose seminal 1948 anthology – entitled *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (*An Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry in French*) – Sartre prefaced with his essay *Black Orpheus*.<sup>29</sup> The anthology was the manifesto for Négritude, the artistic movement at the root of colonial struggles for independence to come, thus embodying yet another branch of literature committed to action and yet another aspect of a multifaceted Paris network of which Wright, too, was part.

## **II The Network in Debate: The French Reception of the American Racial Question**

While the first section of this essay supports Richard Pells's claim that we need to recognize the two-sided, reciprocal nature of the cultural conversation between Europeans and Americans, the second section is indebted to Rob Kroes's insistence on considering the

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<sup>27</sup> The articles were subsequently published in Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954 [1948]). Translated as *America Day by Day*, by Patrick Dudley (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1952); and by Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> *Black Orpheus* was the introduction to Léopold Sédar Senghor's collection of French African, Caribbean and Malagasy poetry that launched the Négritude movement (1948). Senghor later became president of Senegal upon its independence from France.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

mediation that accompanies the process of cultural transfers and exchanges.<sup>30</sup> Though Kroes's study focuses on mass culture, his analysis of the dynamics of rejection and acceptance of America through representations and discourse are the theoretical foundation for the observations that follow.<sup>31</sup> If the Sartre-Wright network helped to give greater visibility and renewed meaning to the discussion of race in America by placing it in a wider, transnational context, it was also the root for controversy in France. In other words, the transatlantic network that made African Americans, and notably Richard Wright, part of the French-Parisian conversation, also altered, or reinforced, the French love/hate relationship with America, thus further revealing the complexity and ambiguities at the heart of the French intellectual and political milieu.

This is first illustrated by prominent literary critic André Rousseaux, a regular contributor to *Le Figaro*, the leading right-wing newspaper. Rousseaux advanced that the way American and African-American culture – and Wright's works in particular – were circulated in France left no other choice but that of a strictly political reading:

If Jean-Paul Sartre were to be believed, Richard Wright's books are the most important productions of our time. But this is no literary assessment. For Sartre's main concern is class warfare. As a result, insofar as Black people do represent oppressed people and in so far as Wright's books protest against the way Black people are being treated, Wright's books are necessarily and for that reason celebrated by Sartre.<sup>32</sup>

And Rousseaux, whose more conventional attitude to literature was now contested by Sartre's concept of *littérature engagée*, was unambiguous as to the consequences of such a connection between Sartre and Wright. He contended:

It is widely known that Sartre is prejudiced in favor of anything pertaining to the class warfare. In this respect literary criticism too often drifts towards political and partisan debates. As it is, the Communists, in their review *Poésie* 47, have already taken arms against Wright because he is supported by Sartre.<sup>33</sup>

Rousseaux thus identified (and implicitly contested) the “drifting” of literary criticism to an exclusively political interpretation, a situation that reflected the mounting tensions of the Cold War, a war that was to be waged through cultural channels as well. We need to bear in

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<sup>30</sup> Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall, Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> “If in this process there are obvious senders and receivers as well as modes and means of transmission, the black box is the semiotic dark room where messages undergo a process of translation, where they are decoded and re-encoded, decontextualized and re-contextualized, and made to fit the receivers' frames of references.” (Kroes, xi).

<sup>32</sup> André Rousseaux, *Le Figaro Littéraire* 91 (January 17, 1948), no page number. Translated by author.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

mind that in postwar Paris Wright's extensive writing was actually less known than his person and only available in fragments to the French. The literary figure then lost his status of writer to become a symbol, or worse – an object. Indeed, on the other end of the political spectrum, the French Communists refused to consider the American racial question as legitimately conveyed by Wright, because of his involvement in the particular network represented by Sartre. Thus, after Wright was published in *Les Temps Modernes*, Jean Kanapa, the Communist critic Rousseaux referred to, reacted as follows:

This is why *Les Temps Modernes* likes Wright so much. He is their brother in despair and mystification [...] If he served in a sincere and useful way the cause of the black worker, *Les Temps Modernes* would not welcome him so eagerly.<sup>34</sup>

What is at stake here is a specifically French question: the necessity of taking sides in the unfolding Cold War situation in which vying French Communists and non-Communists systematically called each other's analysis invalid. Being buffeted by both right and left, Wright acknowledged the intellectual and political tensions in France into which he was hurled, noting:

Indeed political lines and ideologies are drawn so hard and sharp in France today that even "facts" are dangerous. If one so much as mentions that the majority of the world's people are hungry, you can and will be branded as Communist by the Right, so say the Communists [...] If you look at reality and speak about it in terms of how it makes you feel, you are in for trouble.<sup>35</sup>

As Wright's comment reveals, what seems strictly a national context – the French intellectual and political scene – appears in a different and more complicated light when viewed from the perspective of transatlantic exchange. This becomes even more apparent, when it comes to the reactions to and disputes around Wright's testimony and texts circulated in Paris. Kanapa's raging against Wright and his dismissal of Wright's voice as inauthentic in effect replicated the U.S. Communist Party's rejection of Wright once the latter broke away from the party. For the most part, the French communists resumed the American communists' stance that the Black cause should not be seen as distinct from the cause of the workers in general, a position first embraced by Richard Wright – as "Fire and Cloud" seems to imply –

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<sup>34</sup> Jean Kanapa, "Petite anthologie des revues américaines," *Poésie* 47 41 (November 1947) (Paris: Pierre Seghers), 115-33, as quoted by Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," 44.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Wright, "A Personal Report from Paris," n.d. Richard Wright Papers, The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Box 6, Folder 130.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

then denounced upon his sorry experience with party rigidity.<sup>36</sup>

Go ask the American Black leaders of the fight if they consider Wright as the spokesman of the Black workers. They will tell they don't – as they have, over and over – but this is being kept from the French public. Wright undermines the hope for Black freedom, that is to say the union of Black and White workers.<sup>37</sup>

Wright was not the only one to be disillusioned with the Communist Party's cultural policy, especially after the dissolution of the John Reed Clubs in 1936, a political and intellectual environment that had fostered Wright's early career in Chicago. Other intellectual figures famously dissented and, much as happened in Paris in 1946-47, U.S. magazines and editorials also ventilated antagonistic views about radical literature and about the power of arts. Kanapa drew from the past decade of American strife in the radical community when he further argued about *Les Temps Modernes*' special U.S. issue:

Is there so much as one radical American writer in this issue? Not one. And who is the author of the piece on "American Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?" Clement Greenberg, a contributor to *Partisan Review*, a review known for its aggressively fascist stance.<sup>38</sup>

Calling *Partisan Review* a "fascist" publication, Kanapa interestingly mirrored the position of the American communists following the split of the two editors of *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, from the official Party line. In 1934, when it became clear that the party would no longer support the John Reed Clubs, they had launched *Partisan Review* as an alternative to the party's literary journal, *New Masses*.<sup>39</sup> Kanapa's view thus imports to France the dissensions and wars within the American community of artists on the Left.

This again serves to illustrate how a transatlantic perspective (such as the Sartre-Wright connection, and the publications and debates that ensued from their encounter and collaboration), can open up the narrow restraints of national intellectual, cultural and political history. The conversation unfolding in the French press around Wright's testimony of the racial question and Sartre's supportive decision to publish it, thereby humoring French readers' interest for American authors but also unleashing a virulent stream of criticism in

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<sup>36</sup> On Communism and African Americans, see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London: Zed Press, 1982) and William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left, African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Jean Kanapa, "Il y a deux littératures américaines," *Les Lettres françaises* 194 (February 5, 1948), 3. Translated by author.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Avon, 1964 [1961]).

France, revealed new and hitherto understudied complexities in the French-American relationship. The conversation about race in America, though foreign to the French situation, turned out to be a catalyst for French disagreements, in the context of a redefinition of the commitment of artists on the Left, both in the wake of the Second World War and on the eve of the Cold War.<sup>40</sup> A transnational approach thus opens up space for new studies to grasp the complications of French-American encounters and conversations over race across the Atlantic and across the political spectrum.

### **III French-American Race Conversations in the Black Atlantic: a Prognosis for Scholarship**

In his seminal book *The Black Atlantic* (1994) Paul Gilroy was one of the first to mine the field of the Atlantic space, strongly qualifying the relevance of national histories to the understanding of racial history, from slavery times to the twentieth century. Gilroy devoted one of his book's six chapters to Richard Wright and concluded that Wright scholars had neglected the interactions of Wright with Europeans. He went on to suggest that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* also deserved to be viewed through the lens of her exchanges with Wright, as she herself acknowledged. But scholarship which branches out from the Paris network into the feminist fights that were to come remains to be undertaken.<sup>41</sup> Though scholars have examined the ambivalences marking the French-American relationship and looked at French anti-Americanism or at French-American mutual (mis)understandings through the lens of cultural productions and transatlantic cultural and intellectual exchanges,<sup>42</sup> the ongoing transatlantic conversation on race still needs to be properly explored.<sup>43</sup>

Such a conversation in 1940s Paris included a number of distinctive participants who

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<sup>40</sup> This is confirmed by endeavors by scholars of cultural history to pay attention to the translations and publications of American novels in France. Ronald Jen has shown that the French translations of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter* unveiled comments on religion and politics and criticism of America by the translator, particularly two translations published by Communist publishing houses in Cold War France. Ronald Jen, "Transatlantic Conflict and Consensus in the Field of Cultural Production: The Cases of French Translations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*," in Roberta Haar and Neil Wynn eds., *Transatlantic Conflict and Consensus: Culture, History and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Academic, 2009), 31-46.

<sup>41</sup> Gilroy, 146-86, and on Beauvoir, 186.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11-12. Also see Louis Menand, "The Promise of Freedom, the Friend of Authority. American Culture in Postwar France," in: *Americanism, New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, edited by Michael Kazin & Joseph A. McCartin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 205-20.

<sup>43</sup> Focusing on Great Britain, Neil A. Wynn's article "Transatlantic Perspectives on the History of Race," in: *Transatlantic studies*, edited by Will Kaufman and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson (Lanham, Md.: University of America, 2000), 17-32, remains to be emulated for France.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

enriched their commitment to artistic endeavor and political action through their contacts and interactions with African Americans in Paris. The claim that “traditional identities find themselves traversed by the force of difference”<sup>44</sup> rings true for the greater Paris network of intellectuals ranging from existentialists to African or Caribbean intellectuals from the French colonies and territories. In that respect Sartre himself found his philosophy necessarily transformed through his proximity to Richard Wright and the questions raised by the racial issue in America, as well as with the Africans in Paris. Not only did he make Wright a significant example in *What is Literature?* and write the preface to *Black Orpheus* for the Négritude movement, but he devoted pages of his own works to the humanistic and philosophical aspect of racism in his times, thus furthering his philosophical doctrine notably through the lens of the racial question.<sup>45</sup> While Sartre was close to the Négritude artists, other members of his network also collaborated with them, such as Richard Wright. According to Wright's biographer, Michel Fabre, in 1947, another existentialist, Albert Camus, may have introduced Wright to the African and French Caribbean intellectuals, among them Alioune Diop, a Senegalese figure of the Négritude movement. That year, Diop edited and published an anti-colonialist paper devoted to the promotion of African culture, *Présence Africaine*.<sup>46</sup> In 1947, *Présence Africaine* published a short story by Wright, “Bright Morning Star.” Wright also attended the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne, which Diop organized and modeled after the NAACP's action. DuBois was prevented from attending because American authorities denied him a passport, but his written speech opened the event. The 1956 Congress was a powerful emanation of a network spreading across continents to address the oppression of racial minorities world-wide.<sup>47</sup> Its germs can be traced back to the transnational network of French-American, African-American and African writers, artists and intellectuals formed in Paris in 1946-1947.

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Giles, Foreword to *Transatlantic studies* edited by Will Kaufman and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson (Lanham, Md.: University of America, 2000), x.

<sup>45</sup> “Sartre wrote two thousand pages on questions of morals in the late 1940s, as a projected sequel to *Being and Nothingness*. Parts of these reflections were published posthumously as *Cahiers pour une morale*. His growing political concerns led him to give up the project of a sequel, which he later viewed as cast in purely idealistic terms. It is nevertheless remarkable that the only fragments of this project ever published in his lifetime – in *Combat* in 1949) were entitled “Le Noir et le Blanc aux États-Unis” [Black and White in the United States]: the philosopher used racial relations in the United States as a departure point for his analysis of the ideological aspects of racism.” Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America*, Chapter 3 “American Identity, American Difference, The Existentialists and Objective Spirit of the U.S.,” 121.

<sup>46</sup> Fabre, “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” 40.

<sup>47</sup> Though it cannot be directly connected to the Paris network, it is to be noted that Wright also attended the 1955 Bandung Conference, a sign he had definitely broadened his reflections beyond an American-only perspective.

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

The concrete unfolding of this transnational network in postwar Paris, with its wealth of publications that pointed towards historical movements that were to change the world order, formed another manifestation of what Gilroy termed the “Black Atlantic,” within the small perimeter of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements* of Paris, the location, all within walking distance of each other, of the Latin Quarter, the Sorbonne, and Saint-Germain and its cafés. What’s more, African Americans in Paris went on to contribute to an altered vision of America’s racial issue. Scholars in African-American Studies have suggested that *Black Paris* fostered empowerment and agency for individual blacks while cementing a community through “positive affinities and experience”<sup>48</sup> instead of a common past of slavery and a shared experience of segregation, thus paving the way for the upcoming decade of Civil Rights fights. This, in turn, influenced the African-American community’s self-perception and identity on U.S. soil, for, unlike Richard Wright, most returned home eventually. And while the presence of African Americans in Europe is a not a new topic of interest, only recently has the issue of race been considered in a larger dialogic and transcultural perspective: *Black France* (2012) is a collection of essays by scholars, activists, and novelists from France and the United States whose distance of nationality and/or close knowledge of France as residents or long-term visitors allowed them to address the paradoxes of the color-blindness they personally experienced in France, while witnessing racial prejudice directed at other, i.e. non-American, Blacks.<sup>49</sup> The postwar dialogue considered in this essay, located on the Left Bank of the Seine but transatlantic in nature, has helped France reconsider its vaunted colorblindness and influenced its (post)colonial history, while it has helped to mold the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has sought to shed light on a special moment and locus of transatlantic dialogue in 1940s Paris. The network thus sketched, made up of French intellectuals, African and Caribbean artists and activists, and African-American expatriates and visitors, could bring much to a diachronic understanding of the mutually enriching “special entente” between French culture and the African-American experience, and the way race has been thought over time and space. Starting from Lafayette and his correspondence with Jefferson, and later

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<sup>48</sup> Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir*; xv.

<sup>49</sup> Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall, eds., *Black France / France Noire, The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

**Race across the Atlantic**  
**Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Network in 1940s Paris**  
*Laurence Cossu-Beaumont*

Tocqueville and Beaumont, the racial question has been addressed by a stream of French visitors to America.<sup>50</sup> In 1940s Paris, France and the United States, two nations with the same proclaimed fundamental values at the core of their republican, democratic, social experience but with distinct stakes in diversity, found themselves represented by foreign eyes, challenged and – about to be – transformed.<sup>51</sup> Indeed the network also provides an opportunity to gauge – both in its entirety and synchronically – the pivotal postwar years of 1946 and 1947, when the aftermath of the Second World War had not quite morphed into the Cold War, when the French hesitated between fascination and repulsion before the arrival of American mass culture, when great movements of change, both in the Southern states of the U.S. and in the soon-to-be former colonies of the West, were starting up. The network here discussed reflects the early traces of these watersheds that were to internationalize issues previously deemed national and thus to alter historiography as well. A proper study of the Sartre-Wright network may contribute to redefining the contours and perimeters of “American history.” While this essay has aimed to illustrate the shifting image of American culture in the twentieth century through the networks that connected French and American intellectuals, it has also sought to establish that studying transnational conversations and mutual exchanges may not only lead us to reinforce or alter the image of a nation, including its self-image, but also its history, understood as historical events but also as ideas, ideals, and principles that inform these events. Transatlantic dialogues and confrontations over race have accompanied the long-term projects of the American and French nations, and have affected their capacity for change, as well as their resistance to transformation. The network and the rich intellectual transatlantic dialogue examined in this essay unfolded both through personal contacts and through published materials, and also through its reception by contemporaries and its legacy in scholarship. It may reveal just as much about France’s philosophical interrogations of race and the historical developments of its colonial history as it does about America’s political and cultural history, including issues of literary representation and artists’ agency. It may thus help to transcend boundaries of national histories but also of academic disciplines.

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<sup>50</sup> Gustave de Beaumont’s *Marie or Slavery in the United States* (1835) is the forgotten text Alexis de Tocqueville’s travel companion wrote upon their return from their 1831-1832 journey through Jacksonian America. It focuses on the racial issue more than Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Not only does the tragic narrative of Marie and Ludovic’s doomed inter-racial union demonstrate a French visitor’s original choice to address slavery and miscegenation, but the novel was serialized in *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, thus representing a rare (and early) case of a French contribution to the American abolitionist movement.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin remind us that France is “the one Western nation whose claim to the universality of its founding ideals rivals that of its most powerful ally across the Atlantic.” See: *Americanism, New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, 15.



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**Race across the Atlantic**  
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