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*Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers  
between the Nation and the World* by Eve Dunbar (review)

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# **Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World.** Eve Dunbar. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. 232 pages. \$74.50 cloth; \$28.95 paper; \$28.95 electronic.

Eve Dunbar's *Black Regions of the Imagination* renegotiates the relationship between regionalism in African American literature and ethnography as a practice and form of knowledge production around race in the United States. The tensions between the two entail questions of class, community, authorship, and authority; they speak not only to questions of perceived insiderness and outsiderhood but also to accusations of provincialism and romanticization, and to public and critical battles over racial formation in the national sphere. Dunbar scrutinizes this intellectual and cultural tension in the critically undertheorized period between major African American literary movements of the twentieth century: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

It is in this in-between period, after the artistic experiments and cultural vogue of African America in the Harlem Renaissance and before the black nationalism of the Black Aesthetic, that Dunbar locates the important drama of these two modes, literary regionalism and the ethnographic. Both popular forms emerged during the Harlem Renaissance as the sites of "knowledge" and the exoticizing of African American and African diasporic life. Thereafter, in Dunbar's analysis, the two openly vie for primacy in defining the concept of race in the United States. Dunbar explores the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes as navigating this contest between the regional and the ethnographic, through the lens of the international rather than the national.

Dunbar argues that the cosmopolitan and diasporic experiences of these authors solidify their regional concerns with African America rather than transcending the national into a seemingly more progressive diasporic identification: "U.S.-based African American narratives might be coextensive rather than antithetical to more international or global narratives" (8). She then redefines regionalism as an imaginative structure of racial belonging and politics that stands alongside and apart from both nationalist and diasporic frameworks, attempting to situate African American literature beyond the dichotomy that has so dominated the field for the past two decades. Dunbar challenges African American literary scholars to keep taking regionalism seriously.

Dunbar's necessary reevaluation of regionalism produces nuanced, against-the-grain readings of the canonical authors studied in each chapter. Zora Neale Hurston's domestic ethnography *Mules and Men* (1935) is lauded for its emphasis on the "timeliness" rather than "timelessness" of the folk and folk culture in the American South (42). Her Caribbean ethnography *Tell My Horse* (1938), however, does not fare so well in Dunbar's estimation, mostly due to what Dunbar deems the failures of the comparative impulse in Hurston's (and later Wright's) ethnographic work outside of the United States, work still preoccupied with African American racial formation and national politics. When Dunbar turns to Wright's later works, *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956), she asserts that cosmopolitan travel offers far more than the political progress narrative now ascribed to Wright's post-US period. Of considerable note here is Dunbar's fine reading of the presence of Africa as both conceptual and literal site for Wright, and the unsatisfying way that the continent becomes frozen in time and in a static regionalism, particularly with respect to gender and sexuality, in Wright's late work.

Dunbar's riskier analysis of Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and four of Chester Himes's Harlem detective novels reframes the oeuvre of these two pivotal figures in African American letters. Baldwin's international travels provide only a loose frame for Dunbar's third chapter; she argues that Baldwin's fiction writes back to ethnography as "a competing narrative meant to upstage, or at least contend with, mid-twentieth-century national discourse that often relied on sociological and anthropological tracks to create and then manage 'the crisis' of the black family and black culture, more generally" (98-99). While Baldwin's work is regularly read as upending the limits of racial representation, this specific generic twist is a compelling one, read with and against Baldwin's published conversation with anthropologist Margaret Mead. While some concepts could use further development in this chapter—such as the centrality of white male "debasement" as a vehicle to unknowing ethnographic authority (124) and a more directed argument about regionalism—Dunbar's serious exploration of sexuality in Baldwin's project of destabilizing hierarchies of racial knowledge and understanding is necessary and nuanced.

In Dunbar's reading of Himes, she argues that he creates an "absurd" hyper-real Harlem to mirror the failure of ethnographic definitions of African America: "through the use of ethnographic techniques such as topographical realism and characters meant to function as participant-observers and native informants, Himes highlights the tension between what black American culture might look like from afar and how it might be experienced from within" (151). Here Dunbar stretches her definitions of regionalism and ethnographic impulse in ways that could be made more explicit throughout the chapter. But she does subtly suggest in her reading of the pessimistic trajectory of Himes's novels that his take on the detective novel anticipates Black Arts politics and 1970s blaxploitation films, and hence serves as a deeply ambivalent forum for renegotiating racial definition.

Dunbar's conclusion recovers some of this potential by linking African American literary production to work in social science disciplines, such as Roderick A. Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black* (2004). In what Dunbar locates as a "growing refusal to relinquish the United States" as a territory for transformation in racial politics (171), *Black Regions of the Imagination* argues that this mid-century body of work constituted a foundational effort to renegotiate race at home and abroad, undergirding the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movements it preceded. Dunbar's book highlights, reconceptualizes, and recenters this period and the continuing significance that regionalism and ethnography have in defining race in the United States and for African

Americans in the world. Her challenge to diaspora studies is finally not an appeal to the significance of nationalism, but to black imaginings of home that exceed the frame of nation/diaspora or local/global. Dunbar's critical reevaluation of regionalism at mid-century convinces us of the form's "timeliness" in defining black modernity and the African American politics and literature that have followed its imaginative paths.

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