

Book Review: Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles by Imaobong D. Umoren

In Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles, Imaobong D. Umoren traces the lives of three black women activist-intellectuals—Una Marson, Paulette Nardal and Eslanda Robeson—whose work relating to race and gender reached across borders in the twentieth century. The book's account of the lives of these 'race women internationalists' succeeds in showing their centrality to historical narratives about anti-colonialism, feminism, socialism and Pan-Africanism, writes Bethan Johnson.

***Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles.* Imaobong D. Umoren. University of California Press. 2018.**

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'Wakanda forever!' If cultural commentators are correct, these words are prophetic: *Black Panther* heralds a seismic shift in the global cultural landscape. The film has brought new energy to long-sustained conversations about Pan-Africanism and left viewers wondering about the relationship of the African diaspora to the proverbial continental homeland. The phrase and hand gesture from the film have, in the intervening months, been used by black activists as a show of black pride and black power, thereby forging a connection between battles over domestic race-related issues and conceptions of black excellence and solidarity.

While Imaobong D. Umoren could not have predicted the popularity of *Black Panther* and its immediate incorporation into the zeitgeist, the release of her debut book, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles*, certainly feels fitting at a time when discussions about the boundary-less nature of African diasporic power appear to be back under the spotlight. In *Race Women Internationalists*, Umoren traces the lives of three largely forgotten black female activists/intellectuals—Una Marson (1905-65), Paulette Nardal (1896-1985) and Eslanda Robeson (1895-1965)—who, motivated by an abiding belief in racial justice and desire to connect the African diaspora with the land of their ancestors, attempted to influence international politics and improve the lives of those in the African diaspora in the mid-twentieth century. Their work on issues relating to race and gender, reaching across state borders, garners them the moniker found in the title: 'race women internationalists'. Through a comparative study of these three women, Umoren works not only to recover their stories, which have been largely lost to history, but also towards 'growing black women's internationalism, black women's intellectual history, and more broadly, African diaspora studies' (xvi).

Umoren opts for a chronological approach to recounting the lives and significance of Marson, Nardal and Robeson. Following a brief introduction, Umoren utilises significant moments in both international and personal affairs to make the women's decades-long careers in activism more digestible, with chapters on interwar feminism and black internationalism (1920-35), the Spanish Civil War and the invasion of Ethiopia (1935-39), World War II and its aftermath (1939-49) and decolonisation (1950-66).

Umoren further divides chapters so that each woman's activities are discussed within their own subsection. She admits that certain evidentiary limitations at times prevent a given subject's story within a chapter to be of equal size, but nevertheless succeeds in presenting a fairly-balanced analysis of each woman. Her willingness to avoid the urge to tell a single, generalised story about all three and her command of the format allow readers to easily compare the subjects' lives, and to understand the political realities and social trends of various moments in the twentieth century.

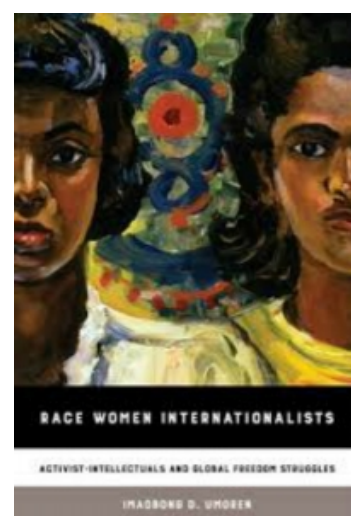




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The preponderance of the book focuses on recounting the lives of Marson, Nardal and Robeson. In this, Umoren shines. The book is overflowing with details; there seems to be no rock left unturned in Umoren's research. Due to her mastery of the facts and a clear approach to their display, moreover, comparisons of the women unfold naturally and her analysis of their activities remains fairly objective (she is willing to point out when a subject makes demonstrably false statements, but does not weigh in on the merits of an argument or ideology), without the overstated interjection of the authorial voice.

In the sections devoted to Marson, Umoren eloquently shows the difficulties associated with Marson's activist journey as a poet and playwright who discussed issues of race and gender. Born in Jamaica just after the turn of the century, Marson began a career in poetry that eventually brought her to London and to a wider audience (including a period with the BBC, where she was the first black female broadcaster). Umoren shows how the struggles Marson faced in England's capital, stemming from the racism and sexism she experienced and heard from her compatriots, strengthened Marson's poetic voice, pushing her to engage critically and honestly with the struggles of life for people from the Caribbean, particularly Caribbean women.

Umoren is, however, cautious about overstating Marson's internationalist project, frankly describing how Marson struggled over the course of her lifetime—in part as a result of her mental and physical illnesses—to articulate her support of racial unity. Using the chronological framework, Umoren guides readers through Marson's life in such a way that allows us to see the thread of anti-colonialism that connects Marson's support of Pan-Africanism in the 1930s through to her concerns about approaches to Jamaican independence all the way to her work on feminist internationalism in Israel.

When discussing Paulette Nardal, Umoren is particularly strong in her analysis of how interconnected Nardal viewed Christianity, liberalism and anti-colonialism. Over the course of her life, Nardal observed and reported on a range of issues for publications in both France and Martinique as an esteemed journalist. Umoren captures the breadth of topics that impassioned Nardal. The book displays how this Martiniquais who was to be the first black student at the Sorbonne devoted her life to numerous causes that earned her the title of race woman internationalist. Nardal wrote on themes of gender and race, while also supporting Harlem Renaissance writers. Moreover, she sought to influence politics by writing about anti-colonialism during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and working as a specialist for a short time with the United Nations. Nardal also contributed to international feminism by founding *l'Association le Rassemblement féminin* to discuss politics and social issues with the women of Martinique, as well as publishing a magazine for women entitled *La Femme dans la cité* based on the activism of her group.

The activism of American-born [Eslanda Robeson](#) has the potential to be overshadowed as the result of her marriage to a prominent actor and activist, [Paul Robeson](#), but Umoren instead showcases her consistent support of black, feminist and postcolonial causes, as well as her interest in other radical-left ideas. Umoren highlights Robeson's relationships with influential Asian and African leaders (such as Hastings Banda and Patrice Lumumba). Umoren also acknowledges her connections to major institutions such as the United Nations and [the Sojourners for Truth and Justice](#), to show that Robeson was not simply a casual observer of left-wing politics, but in the middle of it. Moreover, Robeson's numerous trips to various nations in Africa throughout her adult life are used most effectively by Umoren to highlight the particular nature in which her subject engaged with the real conditions in the continent, but also, in a more theoretical sense, of how travel impacts activism.

The lives of the first black female BBC broadcaster, a well-travelled journalist and an advocate for the United Nations make for entertaining subjects, to be sure. However, Umoren's work would have benefited from a clearer justification of her choice of subjects, as well as greater discussion of how these women fit within the larger tapestry of a class of women she refers to as 'race women internationalists'. In her introduction, Umoren explains that each of her subjects represents a different strand of popular intellectual internationalism, each defining their activism based on their own concerns about various forms of identity politics. However, for those without a strong grounding in this area of history, it is difficult to gauge whether they are representative or exceptional of the larger cohort. While it does not alter Umoren's primary object of chronicling the activities of these three women and contrasting their experiences of being race women internationalists, it is significant for the broader impact of her own work. Umoren is also less forthcoming about how impactful any of these women were, particularly with regards to the overall Western societies in which they lived. With only a few references to how many people might have consumed any of the works they released—magazines, radio broadcasts, etc—readers who wish to assess the impact of these women will need to do additional research.

Furthermore, while Umoren artfully lays out the various activities of her subjects, this richness comes at the expense of any detailed engagement with theoretical frameworks that might have strengthened her analysis. For example, she aptly notes the silencing of her subjects in historical memory and attributes this to gender bias, but her avoidance of theoretical analysis of the interplay of gender, race and activism that would have influenced the lives and activities of these three women will leave some readers feeling unfulfilled.

Given Umoren's attempts to highlight her subjects' centrality in the political and social milieu of the era, *Race Women Internationalists* features such a plethora of organisational and individual names that a non-specialist may feel unmoored or may not understand their significance without follow-up research. However, for those willing to use the book as a starting point to enrich their knowledge of race women internationalists, Umoren's diligent research and exposition of various meetings, organisations and influencers provide ample points from which to begin. For those who already boast a strong familiarity with the topics and movements with which Umoren's subjects were engaged, the work achieves its stated aim to redress the academic eclipsing of black female internationalists. In both cases, however, readers will leave *Race Women Internationalists* with a great deal more knowledge about Marson, Nardal and Robeson, as well as agreeing with Umoren's foundational claim that race women internationalists warrant greater inclusion in the narratives historians will tell about anti-colonialism, feminism, socialism and Pan-Africanism in the years to come.

Bethan Johnson is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge. Her doctoral research explores the rise of militant separatist groups in Western Europe and North America in the mid-Cold War-era. The work explores the life-cycle of violent ethno-nationalism, driving forces behind radicalisation along separatist lines and authoritative methods for ending and avoiding deadly conflicts. Her master's dissertation, also undertaken at the University of Cambridge, studied the manipulation of cultural nationalism for political unionist purposes by Lady Llanover in nineteenth-century Wales.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.