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Introduction

Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.

—PSALMS 68:31, KING JAMES BIBLE

THREE YEARS AFTER the bloody Chicago Race Riot of 1919, during which postwar racial tensions erupted into violence that resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations published *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. In a chapter section called “The ‘Abyssinian’ Affair,” the commission recounted the story of the Star Order of Ethiopia, “a small group of Negroes styling themselves ‘Abyssinians’” who, on 20 June 1920, publicly and ceremonially burned two American flags. According to the Chicago Commission, the flag burning “intended to symbolize the feeling of the ‘Abyssinian’ followers that it was time to forswear allegiance to the American government and consider themselves under allegiance to the Abyssinian government.”¹ The debacle resulted in the shooting and injuring of several people and the killing of two.

The quotation marks framing “Abyssinians” and the derisive tone used throughout the publication ironize and mock the sense of identification this group of Chicago African Americans felt with Ethiopia, then commonly known as Abyssinia, a remote country in East Africa that represented for them an alternative imperial force to which they could pledge citizenship and loyalty following a period when U.S. imperialism was in its ascent. As the Chicago Commission put it, the Abyssinian group was one of many that appealed to “the dark-skinned races” of the world and “sought to weld them all together into a great nation.”² Furthermore, the long imperial history of Abyssinia seemed to encourage African American identification

specifically with a regal line. Members of the group went by the honorifics “The Great Abyssinian” and “The Prince” and sold a package for one dollar to interested parties that included a picture of Ras Tafari, who would later become Emperor Haile Selassie.

The black press was generally critical of the group, not only for the violence that erupted during their parade (for which Grover Cleveland Redding and Oscar McGavick, the leaders of the “Abyssinian Affair,” were eventually executed) but for their emigrationist ideology. The *Chicago Defender*, for example, said of the United States, “This is our home, our country, our flag.”³ Others even went so far as to pathologize the desire to repatriate. Regarding Redding, one article reported that “the extravagance of his claims in promotion of a home-going expedition to Chicago colored folks to ‘their Abyssinian fatherland’ was cited as evidence that he might not have been mentally responsible for the disturbances that followed.”⁴ Another article—an Associated Negro Press piece published throughout the country—called Redding “a fanatic who has virtually lost his mind brooding over the question of the race going over the seas to redeem Africa from the ‘oppression of the white race.’”⁵ A St. Louis newspaper said of McGavick that he was “crazed with the ‘Back to Africa’ disease.”⁶ A black police officer, who had been wounded during the scene, said that the Abyssinians “had been parading through the sts. all the afternoon and acting like ‘nuts’ to my way of thinking.”⁷ But Ethiopianism, at this historical moment, was a strangely attractive product marketed by and to African Americans. Redding, according to the Chicago Commission, fabricated an ancestral claim to Abyssinia “as a means for exploiting credulous Negroes,” selling them Abyssinian pamphlets and other materials, such as the aforementioned Selassie portrait and the “propaganda” flyer reproduced here.⁸ Followers were encouraged to sign a pledge of allegiance, volunteering to “return” to Ethiopia and serve the nation in diverse fields such as electrical engineering and poultry raising.⁹

The most evocative among the components of the Star Order of Ethiopia’s propaganda packet was an Abyssinian flag. A nation’s flag, of course, is very symbolically freighted: from the time we are children, we pledge allegiance to it; Olympic athletes drape their bodies with it; we wave them, or fly them half-staff, in times of national tragedy. Rather than an anarchic rejection of nationality, then, the Star Order’s desecration of the American flag was in actuality only half of the act, the full act being the exchange of that flag for the Abyssinian one carried by Redding during the parade. In other words, the metaphorical flag burning/flag raising was understood by the group to be akin to the burning of a phoenix giving rise to the “true”



FIGURE 0.1. Flyer (originally captioned “Propaganda Literature Used by ‘Abyssinians’ in Recruiting Followers”), in *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), facing p. 60.

pan-African nationality under the Ethiopian flag. It is also worth noting that, in 1919, an Abyssinian delegation arrived in New York on the first ocean liner to ever fly the Abyssinian flag in the United States, and this was followed by another flag raising at the Capitol. The visual symbolism of this recognition—coincidentally at the same time that black people were being attacked and murdered not only in Chicago but throughout the country during the Red Summer, the sanguinary name James Weldon Johnson gave to the horrific racial violence that broke out across the United States—cannot be overstated. Despite the *Chicago Defender's* insistence that the American flag “is our flag,” here was an alternative to a national identity that could feel like a betrayal and a lie. To include the Abyssinian flag in the Star Order’s parade and “propaganda packet” facilitated the surrendering of one citizenship for another. What looked like a broad turn toward black internationalism looks now more like an attempt to recover a specific black nation.

But what does it mean to claim Abyssinianness, or Ethiopianness, as Redding and his followers did? The Star Order of Ethiopia’s pledge contained the following potentially incendiary language: “This is to certify that I have signed my name as an Ethiopian in America in sympathy with our motherland Ethiopia. I henceforth denounce the name of Negro which was given me by another race.”¹⁰ From this perspective, “Ethiopian,” a term debased through its use in blackface minstrelsy, could still be rescued, as it gestured toward a so-called noble history. “Negro,” on the other hand, could not be emptied of its negative implications so easily and the group encouraged the performative jettisoning of it. To quote Cedric J. Robinson, “Ethiopia” was “a term signifying historicity and racial dignity in ways the term ‘Negro’ could not match.”¹¹ A 1921 prospectus cited by the Chicago Commission also addresses the issue of the connotative value of terms of identification:

Ancient history knows no “Negro,” but ancient history does know Ethiopia and Ethiopians. Change a family’s name and in a generation you cannot tell whether its foreparents were rogues or saints. It is the same with a race. . . . Take away our birthright, our ancient honorable name, “Ethiopian” and you have stopped the very fountain of our inspiration. If we are “Negroes” we are by the same dictionary also, “Niggers.” The moment we realize, however, that we are “Ethiopians,” we can see the beams from the lamps of Ethiopian culture lighting a pathway down the shadowy ages, and the fires of ambition are rekindled in our

hearts, because we know that we came from the builders of temples and founders of civilization.¹²

Along with the biblical signification, the civilizationist argument upon which this prospectus rests—that identifying as an “Ethiopian” will allow us to “see the beams from the lamps of Ethiopian culture lighting a pathway down the shadowy ages,” and that “we came from the builders of temples and founders of civilization,” which is a requisite indicator of value—was the primary argument advanced for identification and sympathy with Ethiopia. A perspective promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois, described by Fikru Negash Gebrekidan as “an Ethiocentric view of history” supported by recent scholarship, traces its roots to Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus in order to argue that ancient Egypt’s civilization owed its development to ancient Ethiopia, with culture flowing along a “south-north axis.”¹³ Because most civilizationist arguments assumed the view that black cultures were uncivilized, the antiquity of Ethiopian culture provided African Americans with a well-documented example of originary blackness that exploded the logic of racist accounts of civilization.



The literal allegiance expressed by the Star Order of Ethiopia was perhaps the logical next step after the metaphorical—and uncontroversial—allegiance to a country that had long held a unique symbolic significance for African America. Ideologies of Ethiopianism were cultivated around Psalms 68:31, the epigraph cited at the beginning of the chapter, based upon the premise that a time would come when the black race would rise as prophesied and Africa, once Christianized and thus developed, was expected to take its rightful place in the world. “Ethiopia” has been associated historically with a number of civilizations whose ancient declines and anticipated restorations suit the parameters of the prophecy: the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia (present-day Sudan), the Aksumite empire (present-day northern Ethiopia), and the Land of Punt (probably present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia), among others. None of these corresponds exactly to the geographic boundaries of modern-day Ethiopia. But the vagueness around the name “Ethiopia” is in fact an essential aspect of its power and signification. Ethiopia was practically a place of myth. From the Greek for “burnt-faced ones,” the Ethiopians were said to live in a far-off place where, according to Homer, they dined with the gods.

Whether invoked as a temporally distant primal nation, as an abstract nation of the black race or synecdoche for Africa in general, or as an imaginary locus of biblical or antique nostalgia, the figure of Ethiopia resonates throughout the African American literary tradition. Phillis Wheatley, in “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,” refers to herself as an “Ethiop,” as does William J. Wilson, using the term as a *nom de plume* for contributions to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, and the *Anglo-African Magazine*; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote poems titled “Ethiopia” and “Ode to Ethiopia,” respectively. However, as these examples illustrate, references to Ethiopia as an abstraction, as a metaphoric nationalizing of racial union, were far more common than references to Ethiopia as a contemporary nation. Composed mainly of abstract racial invocations that emerged as variations on the familiar Bible verse cited above, this “Ethiopian” literary tradition, as Wilson Jeremiah Moses calls it, constituted an important strand of African American writing prior to the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁴

Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America explores the varied African American literary and cultural views of Ethiopia as they developed from inchoate ideologies of Ethiopianism that saw the empire as largely mythic and fantastic into ideologies increasingly grounded in knowledge both historical and contemporary, and more explicitly engaged with the politics of imperial Abyssinia in particular. Ethiopianism as a concept, even before a term existed for it, signified in a number of ways from at least the eighteenth century onward, and one of the goals of this book is to bring forward and consider its various forms as they gained visibility by the end of the nineteenth century: in particular, martial Ethiopianism, documentary Ethiopianism, and spectacular Ethiopianism. Although the malleability of Ethiopia’s signification for African America made it especially well-suited as a model of black nationhood and a source of spiritual citizenship, invariably the concept of its long-standing imperial identity was central to this signification. Put another way, this book follows the development within African America of imperial Ethiopianism, the larger rubric under which the above variations may be subsumed. Whether assuming a military attitude, or adopting an archaeological perspective, or expressing a fascination with pageantry, each of these variations on Ethiopianism begins and extends from a commitment to the imperial.

Although it was not until the 1931 constitution that the country of Abyssinia officially took the name “Ethiopia,” the correspondence between the two names goes back much further. “Ethiopia” was conflated with “Abyssinia” in the fourteenth-century *Kebra Nagast* (“Glory of Kings”), which

Mohammed Hassen Ali and Seyoum Hameso aptly term “an Abyssinian politico-religious epic.”¹⁵ The *Kebra Nagast* gave textual authority to a then newly articulated mythology of Abyssinia’s long imperial history, legitimizing a “Solomonic” dynasty that claimed to reach back three thousand years earlier to the union of King Solomon and the supposedly Ethiopian Queen of Sheba.¹⁶ An extremely important and enduring religious text, the *Kebra Nagast* nevertheless served immediate political ends—allowing a challenger to the throne to overthrow the non-Solomonic Zagwe dynasty—while articulating a coherent national myth for Abyssinia. This medieval-era mythology of the Solomonic Dynasty was resurrected by Abyssinia’s emperors in the late nineteenth century. Having emerged from a period known as the “Age of Princes” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during which political power was decentralized among a number of provinces, Abyssinia now had a strong imperial center and was recognized by the world as an ancient empire that had been strengthened and restored. By the turn of the twentieth century, its borders—established in concert with European colonial powers—extended to British East Africa and French, British, and Italian Somaliland in the east and south; and Eritrea and Sudan in the north and west, respectively.¹⁷ “Abyssinia,” stated *Harper’s* magazine in 1868, “if we are not critical as to boundary lines, is the ancient Ethiopia.”¹⁸

In the modern era, as the only African nation (with the unique exception of Liberia) to remain independent during the Scramble for Africa—the European dividing of the continent formalized by the 1884 Berlin Conference—Abyssinia symbolized black resistance to oppression and became the spiritual center of an imagined Black Empire. “The pan-African construction of Ethiopian identity,” as Teshale Tibebu writes, “made Ethiopia the concentrated expression of Africa.”¹⁹ What few, again, have examined is that the allure of Abyssinia lies precisely in its identification as the black *imperial* archetype, as it was the only strong territorial black empire in Africa at a time when pan-African movements were generally working to develop abstract international networks—consider, for example, the First Pan-African Conference, held in London in 1900. In other words, this emphasis on locus and hierarchical African primacy distinguishes this brand of Ethiopianism from earlier ones (on the one hand) and from most egalitarian diasporic pan-Africanisms (on the other). Through performative declarations of citizenship like the one by the Star Order of Ethiopia, the attempt to affiliate African Americans and Abyssinians depended upon the centralization of a transnational black empire *under one crown*. In their defense of Ethiopia against Fascist Italy’s attacks in the 1930s,

many black people around the world behaved, to quote George Padmore, “as though they were the subjects of the emperor.”²⁰ Working as a centripetal gravitational force, imperial Ethiopianism seeks to draw African Americans home.

With this in mind, I take up a question Etsuko Taketani asks in her book *The Black Pacific Narrative* mainly in relation to black America’s admiration for imperial Japan: “What were the grounds of the appeal that empire—as opposed to democracy—held for American blacks in the pre-war period?”²¹ But the scope of this question, when we consider the model of imperial Abyssinia, can be extended profitably beyond the years around World War II and reconsidered as one of particular intraracial consequence. It was in 1920 that the Star Order of Ethiopia’s Redding, who claimed the official title of “Prince of Abyssinia and royal envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the empress of Abyssinia to the United States,” led his parade in Chicago while wearing colorful robes and riding a white horse. Newspaper articles mockingly referred to him as an “Abyssinian King.” His self-representation reflects the Orientalist fascination with actual Abyssinian kings—especially Emperors Tewodros, Menelik, and Selassie—evidenced in numerous newspaper and magazine pieces from the period.

But this attraction to the splendor of “fantastic raiment,” as one article described Redding’s attire, cannot be reduced simply to Orientalism.²² When viewed contemporaneously, an association with imperial Ethiopia had immediate, practical, and quotidian racial ramifications within the United States. On 9 August 1920, President Woodrow Wilson officially proclaimed the renewal of the 1904 commerce treaty between Abyssinia and the United States described in the Star Order of Ethiopia’s “propaganda” flyer.²³ Article I of this treaty, which included an allowance for Abyssinians conducting business to “be able freely to travel” within the United States, had significant implications for Jim Crow. This point was not missed by the Abyssinian group in Chicago, notes the commission. Confusion surrounding the issue of whether foreign blacks were subject to the restrictions of Jim Crow and where they fit into U.S. racial schemata meant that the members of a 1919 Abyssinian delegation were welcomed at the Waldorf Astoria on the one hand while, on the other, a dinner organized at the National Democratic Club by the Persian consul general was suddenly canceled when the race of the guests was found out. In addition, one of the members of the same delegation, upon his return to the United States in 1922, was not permitted to stay at certain hotels and theaters.²⁴ The public presence of foreign blackness in the form of

Abyssinian dignitaries who may, in some cases, be permitted to transcend Jim Crow laws had the potential to disrupt the rigidity, clarity, and supposed absoluteness of the racial structure of the United States in a manner that sidesteps the issue of percentages of whiteness and blackness altogether. Unlike Homer Plessy,²⁵ the Abyssinian dignitaries did not have “white” skin. Furthermore, it is an ironic coincidence of history that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was reached during the same year (1896) that the Abyssinian military defeated Italy during the Battle of Adwa, a defeat by a comparatively underdeveloped and under-armed force that was so embarrassing for the Italians that it became an important factor in the decision to invade the country a generation later. Viewed as a challenge to theories of white supremacy, the Abyssinian victory at the Battle of Adwa could provide evidence for racial equality that was easily transferable to the American milieu.

Because of the challenge Ethiopian historicity and sovereignty presented to racist civilizationist approaches, and perhaps because of the widespread belief that Abyssinians did not in fact consider themselves black, many scientists, philosophers, and historians struggled contortively to find a distinction between the innate racial qualities of Abyssinians and other black people. As Immanuel Kant wrote a century earlier: “The Abyssinians are of Arabic descent, [they] are witty, [physically] well-shaped, but dun-coloured, with woolen hair, upright, not quarrelsome. There are some white moors among them; yet the Kaffirs who dwell in these places [of the Abyssinians] are not only ugly, but also as misshapen and malicious as the other Negroes.”²⁶ This was a typical Enlightenment view. According to Lorenz Auf der Maur, “The zenith of admiration for the ‘noble Abyssinian’ may be said to be reached with Edward Gibbon, who pits the noble, oriental ‘Abyssinian’ against the savage ‘Ethiopian’ (or sub-Saharan African), like many of his contemporaries.”²⁷ For Kant, Gibbon, and others, giving up the notion that Abyssinians were black was apparently more bearable than giving up the notions upon which white supremacy rested.

However, Kant’s racist remark does point toward the well-known multiplicity of black ethnicities in Ethiopia. What is typically understood as “Ethiopian,” both within and without the country, is more properly that which is associated with the term “Abyssinian”: a narrowly defined ethnic and religious identity emerging from the provinces of the geographically central highlands. As John Markakis points out in *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, historians have “focused narrowly on the Abyssinian core”—mainly the Christian Amhara (and sometimes Tigray) elite—at

the expense of the peripheral ethnic and religious groups.²⁸ Because the nineteenth-century Ethiopian empire saw itself “as the restoration of the *status quo ante*, the legitimate recovery of territories that Ethiopia had allegedly lost in times past,” it required the restored Ethiopian nationality to be unified and coherent. Faced with such a heterogeneous, multilingual population, however, the “true” Ethiopian identity perceived itself to be under threat and its boundaries became even more entrenched and pronounced and even less inclusive. It is this Ethiopian empire—not the ancient, storied one but one yoked together through conquest and built upon hierarchies—with which African American sympathies ended up aligning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Ethiopia, in the context of African American studies, is not usually included in conversations about imperialism except as a subject of it—in other words, not as an example of imperium itself. This neglect can be traced to, as Taketani puts it, “the view that imperialism in the twentieth century is a practice of, and has its roots in, Western civilization.”²⁹ Recent scholarship in the field of Ethiopian studies, on the other hand, especially in its attention to the Oromo people of Ethiopia, has presented a view of Ethiopian imperialism that revises the historical record.³⁰ For example, Markakis goes so far as to claim that Ethiopia was “not a victim but a participant in the ‘scramble,’” and the title of “empire” is “not a misnomer, since Ethiopia’s rulers governed their new possessions more or less the same way and for similar ends as other imperial powers were doing.”³¹ Even as long ago as 1935, Ethiopia was debated as a case study in an article by Robert Gale Woolbert that appeared in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. Despite its poverty, relative lack of industrialization and modernization, and general underdevelopment, Woolbert argues, if “one attribute of an empire is that it holds alien peoples in subjection,” then we must consider Ethiopia an empire, because “there can be no question that a single people rules over various subject peoples.”³² In other words, the example of Ethiopia is, ironically, a critical *failure* of black solidarity, where both the “alien peoples” and the oppressors are black. Moreover, Woolbert argues in another article that “though Ethiopia is an empire she is not a nation,” lacking any “such thing as an Ethiopian national sentiment,” and therefore Mussolini “frankly proposes to supplant Ethiopian imperialism . . . with Italian imperialism.” Woolbert doubts “whether even a successful war waged against a common foe would do much toward knitting the empire together spiritually.”³³

The problem is: if, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the example of Ethiopia as a model of black empire is valuable for multiple

reasons—as an illustration of the problematic civilizationist argument, as proof of the absurdity of Jim Crow and white supremacy, as a specific locus to which black solidarity movements can tether themselves—then one is faced with the dilemma that, simply put, black people oppress black people there. Like the ethnic conflicts still fracturing twenty-first-century Africa, the tensions of imperial Ethiopia fly in the face of Edward Wilmot Blyden's concept of a unified "African personality." In his argument for Liberian emigration, Blyden argued that because "the aborigines are not a race alien from the colonists," success was inevitable: "When alien and hostile races have come together, . . . one has had to succumb to the other; but when different peoples of the same family have been brought together, there has invariably been a fusion." This certainly was not the case in Liberia, and although Ethiopia, too, brings together "different peoples of the same family," it has always been plagued by interethnic and religious tensions.

This means that by the 1930s—when Ethiopia was threatened by Italy's efforts to colonize it—many African American writers viewed Ethiopia, an imperial state that had doubled in size during Emperor Menelik's reign, through an ill-fitting anti-imperialist lens. In fact, Menelik's "campaign of expansion" was exactly coincident with the Battle of Adwa, which was, from the Ethiopian perspective, an anti-imperialist conflict. Prompted in part by a desire for resources, as deforestation and soil erosion had destroyed much of Abyssinia, Menelik looked to the rich lands of the south.³⁴ During the expansion, he subsumed the "entire plateau . . . with the occupation of the Oromo state of Jimma in 1897," and the lowlands were seized immediately after that.³⁵ In subjugating the Oromo, the Ethiopian elites promoted the idea that they had "an historic mission 'to civilize the barbarians'"—which, as Mohammed Hassen points out, "has been the common cry of colonizers"—and, in doing so, depicted the Oromo "as a people without a history" and "as 'the enemies of the Amhara.'" ³⁶ Years later, Emperor Selassie, too, was known for his efforts to consolidate and strengthen the Ethiopian empire while strengthening his own absolute power. In fact, he allegedly said, using rhetoric that sounds unabashedly imperialist, "I am Emperor not only of Ethiopia but of all Africans, and chief of all Negroes, even those under foreign domination," effectively declaring African Americans (along with other black peoples around the world) subjects of a transnational Ethiopian empire.³⁷ His last phrase—"even those under foreign domination"—is the boldest part of this announcement, claiming a sovereignty that trumps any other existing sovereignty. His drive for imperialist expansion does not stop with East Africa. He is, in a sense, like Grover

Cleveland Redding and the Chicago Abyssinians, burning the American flag on behalf of all African Americans. But the first efforts to consolidate the Ethiopian empire in the modern period can be traced back to Emperor Tewodros, who reigned from 1855 to 1868. The British and American press's intense fixation upon Tewodros's imperial drive emerged with the start of the Anglo-Abyssinian War in 1867, a war sparked by Tewodros's imprisonment of a British legation in the country. After failed diplomatic efforts, the United Kingdom resorted to military action to rescue the British hostages. The war concluded with the 1868 Fall of Magdala, which resulted in the emperor's suicide.

The 1867–68 Anglo-Abyssinian War joins, in this book, the two most important moments in Italo-Ethiopian military history—the aforementioned 1896 defeat of the Italian armed forces at Adwa and the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in the 1930s—which were largely responsible for rendering a contemporary Ethiopia visible in the eyes of many African Americans. It literally put Ethiopia on the map. Cartographic representations in newspapers and magazines gave a newborn segment of American citizenry (as 1868 also marked the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment in the United States) a bound and delineated geographic space onto which to project an abstract black nationhood. In addition, the Anglo-Abyssinian War in a sense revolved around questions of boundaries—who belongs in the empire and who doesn't, who is free to travel and who is bound and fettered—which reinforced the reterritorialization of Ethiopianism in this moment. Moreover, the press promoted the “Christian island bound by a ring of Islam” characterization of the Ethiopian empire, regardless of its inaccuracy, underscoring the boundaries of the empire as ideological and giving Western readers a reason to sympathize with a nation perpetually under threat.

Even the center of this island, however, was uncertain. As late as 1900, an article in *Pearson's Magazine* titled “A Capital That Moves” notes that Addis Ababa is “an unique capital in that it arose almost in a single night, and is destined to disappear as speedily.”³⁸ The author refers here to the common practice of deforestation rendering Abyssinian capitals uninhabitable after a short while, but in describing the capital city essentially as a shifting target, he gestures toward a more generalized aspect of the image of Ethiopia in the West. An expansive Abyssinia was compelled to fix its borders. In 1891, Menelik, uneasy with colonial encroachment, “defined in a well-publicized circular to European rulers what he considered to be the legitimate boundaries of the country.”³⁹ When we consider the carving of Africa, Ethiopia becomes reconfigured as negative space: that which is not

colonial Africa. To quote Major R. E. Cheesman, whose article in the inaugural issue of *Geographical Magazine* was cited liberally in a 1935 article titled “No Longer the Dark Continent . . . Except in Spots,” published in the travel magazine “*So You’re Going*” *News*:

When the African littoral lands were occupied by the European powers the boundaries between them and Abyssinia were laid down by treaty and were delimited by such vague definitions as a certain parallel of latitude or a certain number of miles from the coast, with very few references to topographical features on the ground. The reason was that the country was totally unexplored and unmapped and such detail as was shown on the blank spaces that formed the map of the area was either very far from its true position or did not exist. It follows that the nomads whose grazing grounds had been cut through by a line made by foreigners had no means of knowing exactly where the line ran, nor any intention of keeping to it if they had. . . .

This unsatisfactory and explosive state of affairs has been going on spasmodically from the time the first treaties were made, in some cases about thirty years ago. It would, indeed, be extremely difficult for a Boundary Commission to operate on some sections of the frontier.⁴⁰

As the article’s title suggests, Ethiopia was in some sense believed to be the darkest spot of the “dark continent,” inscrutable to Europeans and, as the multiple rounds of delegates who went missing during the Anglo-Abyssinian War demonstrate, a place from whose bourn no traveler returns. Leaving aside the issue of border disputes between the Ethiopian government and the governments of various European powers, the nomads cited by Cheesman who transgressively ignore boundaries between colonial and noncolonial land imperil the colonial project itself. Ironically, as Ethiopia gained attention as a defined locus or target, it started to seem to the West more and more like a strange imperial Bermuda Triangle, pulling everything and everyone into its wake.

This centripetal force, however, can help us to understand the irony behind the celebration of Ethiopian imperialism and monarchism. As a model, the nation provides a way to imagine a network of black peoples, led by a black emperor. In describing the structure of the Ethiopian empire, Markakis writes that it “resembles a wheel with spokes but without a connecting rim,” because “there is no direct interaction among peripheral elites and regions, who interact only with and through the centre.”⁴¹ We can see how this model might appeal to a leader such as Marcus Garvey. As Yogita Goyal writes:

his pan-Africanism, if we can call it that, was not just a loosely defined vision of solidarity among all African-descended peoples. Instead, he envisioned an African empire that would both mimic and rival European imperialism. To do so, Garvey derived inspiration from a variety of sources, including the British empire, Zionism, the “supergovernment” of the Pope and the Catholic Church, and even the example of European colonization of Africa.⁴²

Goyal, however, overlooks one of the most obvious contemporaneous sources for Garvey’s vision: it mimics Abyssinian imperialism. Regardless of Garvey’s later disdain for Selassie—he argues that “the American Negro should, through his own agency, establish contact with the Abyssinian Negroes” and that “no one should allow himself to be deceived into believing that much more can be accomplished through Haile Selassie himself”⁴³—he did not lose faith in the imperial model, as long as the leader at its center was heroic and worthy of centralized power.

This version of Black Empire depends not upon an abstract and diffuse network of universal black collectivity but upon specific and bilateral axes of black solidarity. *Black Land* considers the model of the proposed relation between Ethiopians and African Americans that attempted to affiliate the two peoples by pointing to a center (the “Hot Spot of the World,” as the caption to a map printed in a 1935 issue of the *Baltimore Afro-American* read) and locating Addis Ababa as metropole, a predictable symbolic choice but an unlikely literal choice. Furthermore, because the assumption of Ethiopian citizenship by some African Americans was seen as nothing more than the recovery of a lost cultural identity and the rejection of a false one, a sense of *nostos* buttresses the centralization of a transnational black empire under one crown, as the centripetal diasporic force imagined to be drawing African Americans home operates most effectively with a strongly defined center. This is the paradox of this particular brand of black transnationalism and diasporic nostalgia: it built itself around the example of Ethiopia while also holding democratic ideals.



Coincident with an explosion in periodical development, Abyssinia was increasingly the focus of news coverage. The military conflicts in the country in the late nineteenth century were well known to newspaper and magazine readers in the United States and Great Britain. As Benedict

Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*, even when there are no stories in the newspaper about a nation (his example is Mali) for months, “the novelistic format of the newspaper assures [readers] that somewhere out there the ‘character’ Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance in the plot.”⁴⁴ *Black Land* follows the narrative of the “character” Ethiopia during moments when news of the nation dominated the “plot” and argues that African American Ethiopianism evolved in response to the emergence of the nation in the late nineteenth century as an adversarial presence in current world events. But African nations’ roles as newspaper characters, passing in and out of sight as world events dictate, are complicated by the continent’s seeming timelessness, a feature out of step with the seriality of the newspaper’s construction and format, as Kenneth W. Warren writes:

The series of rivers in [Langston Hughes’s] “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” however, is really one continuing flow of water. Though it, too, assures us of Africa’s continued existence, it does so only in terms of an endless extension of an “original bond.” One never imagines that Mali ceases to exist; Africa is always there. Upon reencountering Mali, however, the voyager in Hughes’s poetic vision also asserts that “time” has not meant anything to it or, for that matter, to any African geography. The Nile in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is the Nile of the pyramids. There is nothing new in Africa.⁴⁵

This misconception—that there was nothing new in Africa—was of course belied by the dramatic happenings regularly chronicled by the press, to which Du Bois gestures in the closing phrase of his 1915 *The Negro*, “Semper novi quid ex Africa!” (a quotation from Pliny: “Something new always comes out of Africa”). And yet Ethiopia, unlike Haiti and Liberia—the other frequently cited examples of black independent nations to which African Americans looked with pride—was associated with its age even in this up-to-the-moment reportage; it was not a black nation of the future but one of the inert and static past. To quote Edward Gibbon’s enduring assessment in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Ethiopians were supposed to have “slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.”⁴⁶ As a result, as Aric Putnam argues through a reading of J. A. Rogers’s pamphlet *The Real Facts about Ethiopia*, the country could be employed readily “as a metaphor for a new, international context in which black community can be performed,” as it was experienced as “a time and not a place.”⁴⁷ Ethiopia’s participation in modern world events seemed oxymoronic, but this

simultaneous modernity and antiquity allowed African Americans to find in it both a history and a currency.

The literary and journalistic texts discussed here demonstrate how views of Ethiopia's relationship with African America engendered new concepts of Black Empire. This book's first chapter attempts to uncover the beginnings of a more grounded Ethiopianism in its treatment of nineteenth-century lyric verse by Walt Whitman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others written on the topic of Ethiopia, when abstract Ethiopianism was a prominent ideology in African America. In this chapter, I argue that the old woman of Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," wearing a turban of red, yellow, and green, stands in for an Ethiopian military force. As Ed Folsom has pointed out, Abyssinia's emperor Tewodros gained international notoriety during the Anglo-Abyssinian War in 1867. Folsom shows how Tewodros and Lincoln were compared by the press but does not mention that Abyssinia under Tewodros was also, strangely, compared to the Confederacy. Here I address the politics of Whitman's poem, particularly in the poem's "recognition" of the flag, in light of the press's treatment of the Anglo-Abyssinian conflict.

Dunbar's interpretation of the Ethiopian flag's symbolic value, in "Ode to Ethiopia" and "Frederick Douglass," positions him uncomfortably alongside Whitman, a poet he found distasteful. His poems present an "Ethiopia" invigorated with nationalism and, unexpectedly, with militarism. Finally, this chapter also addresses two poems about Tewodros by women: "Magdala," which appeared in the 1875 book *Songs of the Year and Other Poems* by "Charlton" (nom de plume of an American woman by the name of Charlotte Pendleton), and "The Death of King Theodore," in E. Davidson's 1874 *The Death of King Theodore and Other Poems*. Charlton's and Davidson's poems are striking in their glorification of the Abyssinian king, in stark contrast to depictions of him in the British media, including racist caricatures in *Punch*.

My second chapter reads Pauline E. Hopkins's *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self* in the context of the African American periodical in which it was serialized, the *Colored American Magazine* (edited by Hopkins). Published only a few years after the surprising Italian defeat at Adwa, the novel contributed to the magazine's project of what I call "documentary Ethiopianism" as expressed in histories and biographies but also preserved the fantastic conception of Ethiopia that helped create Ethiopianism in the first place. Several critics have commented upon the generic fluidity in Hopkins's work, and I argue that the confusion produced in these hybrid genres—specifically in imaginative histories and historical

fictions—resulted in some conflicting messages about Ethiopia and its symbolic value. *Of One Blood* is exemplary in this respect, as a fictional text that introduces the mysticism that the historical and ethnographic texts of the *Colored American Magazine* avoid while still participating in documentary Ethiopianism by sending its characters to Ethiopia.

In my reading of this novel, I look to the character of Mira, a ghost whose writing serves as a plot device to reveal answers to Reuel, the novel's protagonist. Through Mira's interpretive (not creative) "writing," she points with a ghostly finger and takes the form of Ethiopic writing itself—a fantastic incarnation of documentary Ethiopianism. Finally, through identifying and explicating a neglected quotation in the novel as a poem by Sarah Piatt, I discuss how *Of One Blood* activates what I call the Regalization Fantasy, a fantasy intrinsic to imperial Ethiopianist ideology. As a result of the fantasy's paradoxical inclusivity and exclusivity, the imperial model of Ethiopianism seen in *Of One Blood* contains the irritant that leads to its own dismantling by midcentury.

The book's middle chapters follow the development of a strand of Ethiopianism that integrated spectacle into its presentation. Chapter 3 introduces three incidents of Ethiopianist aristocratic impersonation or imposture: that of Isaac Brown, a Jamaican man who successfully passed himself off as Menelik's nephew at the turn of the century; that of Joseph Emanuel Blayechettai, who in the 1920s claimed to be the kidnapped son of a king of Tigre, an Abyssinian province; and that of Virginia Woolf, whose participation in the Dreadnought hoax in 1910, during which she dressed as an Abyssinian prince, was notorious. These impersonations are dramatic illustrations of what I term "spectacular Ethiopianism," a variant especially prevalent in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, these performances of spectacular Ethiopianism were preceded in the nineteenth century by the reciprocal costuming of Prince Alemayehu, the son of Emperor Tewodros orphaned by the Anglo-Abyssinian War, and his guardian, the eccentric English explorer Captain Tristram Speedy; the mirror images and narratives of Alemayehu and Speedy appear to have informed these early twentieth-century impressions.

Rather than simulate nobility, two Americans sought to construct spectacular Ethiopian empires of their own. In chapter 4, I examine the case of Harry Foster Dean, whose *The Pedro Gorino: The Adventures of a Negro Sea-Captain in Africa and on the Seven Seas in His Attempts to Found an Ethiopian Empire* recounts the tale of his ambition to build a black empire in Africa, an effort that led one of the major British participants in the Scramble for Africa to call him "the most dangerous 'negro' in the

world.”⁴⁸ I also address the unofficial diplomatic role of William Henry Ellis, a flashy African American millionaire and the first American to visit with Emperor Menelik in 1903. (Ellis was not the only African American to visit Abyssinia prior to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War; in 1922, for instance, A’Lelia Walker, daughter of the famed Madame C. J. Walker and host of a Harlem Renaissance salon, visited Empress Zauditu.) Ellis did his best to curry favor with Menelik but was rumored to be planning to oust the emperor in order to take his seat on the throne.

The fifth chapter begins with a scene from George White’s 1936 *Scandals*, reprised in the 1937 film *You Can’t Have Everything*, that featured the dance team Sam, Ted, and Ray (also known as Tip, Tap, and Toe) as Haile Selassie and two of his army’s soldiers. Many reviews considered this scene the best one of White’s Broadway musical revue, and a photograph from this scene was even included in the cover story of the 6 January 1936 issue of *Time* magazine, a profile of Haile Selassie declaring him the magazine’s “Man of the Year.” With hints of so-called “Ethiopian minstrelsy,” the image of Selassie in the public eye was an odd amalgam of ancient solemnity and slick modernity—a turn toward the familiar in the articulation of spectacular Ethiopianism. As with Menelik and Tewodros before him, literary and journalistic accounts of Selassie depicted a leader who evinced an attraction to technology and modernization that was undermined by an Ethiopian culture and landscape deemed somehow averse to modern life. This chapter also addresses two theatrical representations of Ethiopia: Arthur Arent’s censored 1936 Federal Theater Project *Ethiopia*, which was generically categorized as a “living newspaper,” and an important turn-of-the-century libretto, *Abyssinia*, starring blackface performers Bert Williams and George Walker. In this context of theatricality and minstrelsy, I explore how caricature was used to depict various Ethiopian political figures—sometimes positively and sometimes negatively—as what I term “Savage Statesmen.”

The last three chapters of this book examine the challenges to imperial Ethiopianism that began to surface during the Italo-Ethiopian War, despite the pervasiveness of pro-Ethiopian writing that characterizes this period. In my sixth chapter, I address the explosion of verse dealing with the “Ethiopian Crisis,” or the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, such as J. Harvey L. Baxter’s *Sonnets for the Ethiopians* and Melvin Tolson’s “The Bard of Addis Ababa.” Returning to traditional tropes of nineteenth-century Ethiopianism even in the face of modern warfare, Baxter calls upon the nation’s resources of antiquity to produce a counteroffensive against the ancient Roman Empire that Mussolini looked upon with such nostalgia.

In addition, I look to occasional verse by lesser lights and unknown bards such as Rufus Gibson and Jay N. Hill and by important figures such as Marcus Garvey. The tenor of Garvey's elegies written in honor of fallen Ethiopian war heroes Ras Nasibu of Ogaden and Ras Desta presents a fascinating contrast to his expressed disdain for Selassie. I consider these poems alongside another poem dedicated to Ras Nasibu written by Baroness Maria Atzel and printed in the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, a newspaper published by Sylvia Pankhurst, an English suffragist, anti-Fascist, and prominent defender of Ethiopia. The agitprop role of the *New Times and Ethiopia News* has not yet been fully examined, and this chapter discusses its global importance. The newspaper reprinted Langston Hughes's "Letter from Spain," where it was placed in dialogue with newspaper accounts of Askari soldiers serving in the Italian armed forces in Ethiopia.

In my seventh chapter, I consider two of George S. Schuyler's novellas published serially in the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*—*The Ethiopian Murder Mystery: A Story of Love and International Intrigue* and *Revolt in Ethiopia: A Tale of Black Insurrection against Italian Imperialism*, both written in response to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. These novellas interact and engage with the newspaper's propagandistic reportage of the war in provocative ways: Schuyler's fiction mimicked the articles formally, encouraging in the newspaper's readers a fluid reading practice transcending the fictional/nonfictional divide. Whereas Hopkins's amalgamations of fictional and nonfictional Ethiopianist writing in the *Colored American Magazine*, only a few years after the Battle of Adwa, proved somewhat unmanageable, Schuyler in the 1930s was able to assume his readers' intimate familiarity with the contemporary nation and therefore actively manipulate the newspaper's generic features. In its articles—including those written by Schuyler—the *Courier* tended to build upon an already existing sympathetic support for Ethiopia through the royal family, particularly through the figure of Selassie. However, in his melodramatic Ethiopian stories, Schuyler exploits the public's fascination with monarchy only to expose, in the end, the ironies behind that misguided sympathy.

During the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, Harlem's solidarity with Ethiopia was at its height, with volunteers offering to fight in the Ethiopian military and organizing riots, parades, and boycotts for the cause. Just after the war, Claude McKay wrote *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, the subject of my eighth chapter, hidden in the Rare Books and Manuscripts archives at Columbia University until its discovery by

Jean-Christophe Cloutier and published for the first time in 2017. McKay's novel hinges upon the question of what it means to be an "authentic" Ethiopian imperial representative: for example, one of the novel's characters, Alamaya, admits cagily that a signed letter from the emperor establishing his bona fides "was authentic but not genuine"; later, as part of a scheme to raise funds for the Ethiopian cause, Alamaya and his secret communist colleague "invent" an Ethiopian princess by costuming a local Harlem woman.⁴⁹ In fact, it is Professor Koazhy, a costumed figure modeled after Marcus Garvey, and not the meek visiting Ethiopian prince Alamaya, who proves to be the "authentic" Ethiopian prince for the crowds watching the parade that opens the novel.

By the 1960s, as we see in Hughes's dedicatory poem to Selassie, with which this book concludes, the existence of a centralized Ethiopian empire would actually challenge the viability of an imagined extra-imperial network of black internationalism. Unlike the Chicago Abyssinians, who saw a "pathway" pulling directly from African America toward ancient Ethiopia, lit by cultural lamps that could ignite their own "fires of ambition," Hughes and others in the second half of the century would recognize the deficiency of this centripetal model. "Ethiopia the Shadowy," as W. E. B. Du Bois called it, would again fall into the shadows, no longer holding its once central position as and promise for a national metaphor of black solidarity.⁵⁰

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