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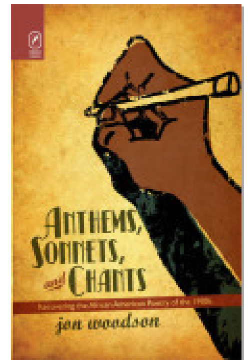
3. “Race War”: African American Poetry on the Italo-Ethiopian War



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"Race War"

AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY ON THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR

> War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.
>
> —F. T. Marinetti, "Poesia, musica e architetture africane," *Manifesto Stile Futurista*, March 1935

> Oh, hang your heads, a voice accusing cries,
> And points a finger shaking in your face.
>
> —J. Harvey L. Baxter, "Oh, Hang Your Heads, A Voice Accusing Cries"

> But the greatest danger has not yet been even named. What if, one day, class war and race war joined forces to make an end of the white world?
>
> —Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*

The Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–36) was a notoriously unequal armed conflict that resulted in Ethiopia's subjection to Italian rule. According to Enzo Traverso's capsule history of the major armed conflicts that took place in the 1930s, the build-up to the Second World War began with the Italian imperial adventure: "Anti-fascism was also identified with the struggle for peace, in a continent where the wounds from the First World War were still open, and where the political balances seemed increasingly more precarious. The Italian attack on Ethiopia, the re-militarization of the Rhineland, the war in Spain, the Sino-Japanese war, then Munich and finally a new war: this escalation aroused an increasing anxiety whose echo was felt in art and culture" ("Intellectuals and Anti-Fascism"). Global technological warfare began with Italian fascism's predation of Ethiopia. Walter Benjamin theorized that such conflicts

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reflect the opposition between two discourses of aestheticized politics: Fascists claim that "war is beautiful," while Marxists say that "art is a weapon" (Griffin "Notes"). Another aspect of the Italian-Ethiopian conflict was its role in further establishing the centrality of warfare in modernity. Walter Benjamin pointed out that the human body could simply not absorb the speed and lethality of modern war (Kellner "Virilio"). Given that Italy was a highly regarded fascist state ruled by the dictator Mussolini while Ethiopia was a technologically primitive and politically feudal (though independent) African state, the conflict quickly came to symbolize Benjamin's observation about the nature of the human body, though inflected through a eugenic lens.

The particularly unusual feature of the conflict was the ten-month period between Mussolini's declaration of war and the beginning of the fighting. This delay allowed many questions to accrue. It reflected the impossibility of waging a modern war in Ethiopia until the Italians were able to make preparations to fight in a country with a harsh climate, forbidding terrain, and little infrastructure or natural resources. The hiatus of nearly a year between the announcement of hostilities and the actual invasion was filled with speculations about the nature of the conflict that would result. Strikingly, this period of military build-up was subject to a tense international drama fueled by conspiracies, betrayals, racism, and megalomania—all of which was reported by newspapers and on-the-scene radio correspondents, who reported each new development the moment it occurred.

In contrast to the Italians, the Ethiopians were virtually unarmed. Once fighting commenced, they fought with their bodies, relying on "human wave" assaults to overwhelm the machine guns of the Italians. Paul Virilio has further theorized the role of warfare in these terms:

> Logistics, the preparation for war, is the beginning of the modern industrial economy, fuelling development of a system of specialized and mechanized mass production. War and logistics require increased speed and efficiency, and technology provides instruments that create more lethal and effective instruments of war. The acceleration of speed and technology, in turn, create more dynamic industry, and an industrial system that obliterates distances in time and space through the development of technologies of transportation, communication, and information. The fate of the industrial system is thus bound up with the military system which provides . . . its origins and impetus. (Kellner "Virilio")

Inarguably, the war demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations. League decisions were not supported by the great powers. Ethiopia

(Abyssinia), which Italy had unsuccessfully tried to conquer in the 1890s, was in 1934 one of the few independent states in a European-dominated Africa. A border incident between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland that December gave Benito Mussolini an excuse to intervene. Rejecting all arbitration offers, the Italians invaded Ethiopia on October 3, 1935. Under Generals Rodolfo Graziani and Pietro Badoglio, the invading forces steadily pushed back the ill-armed and poorly trained Ethiopian army. The Italians won a major victory near Lake Ascianghi (Ashangi) on April 9, 1936, and took the capital, Addis Ababa, on May 5. Ethiopia's leader, Emperor Haile Selassie, went into exile. In Rome, Mussolini proclaimed Italy's king, Victor Emmanuel III, emperor of Ethiopia and appointed Badoglio to rule as viceroy. In response to Ethiopian appeals, the League of Nations had condemned the Italian invasion in 1935 and voted to impose economic sanctions on the aggressor. The sanctions remained ineffective because of a general lack of support. Although Mussolini's aggression was viewed with disfavor by the British, who had a stake in East Africa, the other major powers had no real interest in opposing him. The war, by giving substance to Italian imperialist claims, contributed to international tensions between the fascist states and the Western democracies ("Second Italo-Abyssinian War").

For African Americans, the impending Italo-Ethiopian War gave new focus to a wide range of social concerns. Because of the preexisting discourse of Ethiopianism,[1] African Americans understood the implications of a war between a European power and an independent African state. The international crisis captured African Americans' imaginations. Their interest in intervening in the conflict rapidly came into conflict with the American national policy of isolationism. Also, a small but influential cadre of African American leftist artists expressed Marxist antifascist opinions. The prospect of an African nation being overrun by a modern European nation appalled African Americans: reversing the situation would depend on Ethiopia's ability to marshal whatever forces that could be brought to bear on the Italian aggressors.

The African American reaction to the Ethiopian crisis was fueled by other factors as well. William R. Scott comments that

> (1) "the concept of pan-Africanism, the belief in universal black solidarity and salvation, had forged in the postwar era important linkages among colonial Africans and American blacks, making scattered African peoples sensitive to the problems of blacks everywhere," (2) "[a] more militant Negro, deeply affected by the social changes produced by the black urban movement, the war experience, and disillusionment with both the traditional American system of justice and the established col-

ored leadership, had injected a fresh fighting spirit into the black American liberation struggle," (3) "during the Depression decade, the black American struggle for economic equity was expanded and transformed into a crusade for full equality fought 'on a scale, and with an intensity, unseen in any previous decade of the century,'" (4) "[t]he perception of an analogy between Italian imperialism and white racism in America also played an important part in provoking strong black reactions to the Abyssinian conflict. African American spokesmen consistently associated Fascist aggression in Ethiopia with racial injustice in the United States, pointing to the connections between the brutality of American anti-black violence and Italian militarism. The savage lynchings of blacks in the American South and the mass slaughter of Africans in Ethiopia seemed like parallel forms of oppression," and, finally, that "[a]n Ethiopianist tradition in African American thought was, however, identified by contemporaries as the central force generating the tremendous response of blacks in the United States to the East African conflict." (8–11)

Faced with an inevitable defeat at the hands of the Italian military, Haile Selassie seized the moral high ground in an attempt to persuade the European powers to take a stand against the Fascists, and he successfully maneuvered to convert Ethiopia's frail position from one of geopolitical irrelevance to some measure of consequence:

> At the beginning of 1935 there was very little in the way of coherent opposition to fascism as a dangerous international force. Nazi Germany, however people felt about it, had so far committed depredations only against Germans. It was widely supposed that Italy and Germany were almost irreconcilably hostile to one another. The notion of fascism as monolithic, inescapably predatory, directed toward ideological world dominion in the same way that Communism was, had not yet been invented. It first began to take shape when the outrageous behavior of Mussolini in East Africa was brought, dramatically, to the forum of the League of Nations. The seismic effects of the crisis were not entirely due, of course, to the propriety of the Ethiopian position or the sympathy it evoked. That sympathy corresponded to deep ideals, illusions, hopes, and frustrations everywhere. And it owed something, too, to some coincidental and extraneous circumstances. Three circumstances in particular helped to convert Ethiopia into a martyr, a symbol, and in some ways a world power.
>
> The first was climate. Walwal, coming at a time when Italy was still far from prepared for battle, took place six months before the beginning

> of the rainy season that would make battle unfeasible for another four. Ten months must intervene before Italy could get its war under way, ten months in which the Ethiopians could try to parry nemesis and the yeast of internationalism could work in western opinion. The second was the state of world press and radio news. Reporting had by now become big business. A need for news had developed, economic (for the proprietors of papers and broadcasting companies) and psychological (for readers and listeners). Lavish financing in the collection or even—in a certain sense—the creation of news was a very good investment. Newsmen began to assemble in Addis Ababa, and so provided the Ethiopians with a public. Third, the British were going to hold an election. It had, by law, to take place before September 1936, but the government could choose any date it pleased before that. Compelling political considerations made it desirable to hold one sooner. The date eventually chosen coincided, within weeks, with the ending of the rainy season and the beginning of the war. . . . Addis Ababa, by the summer of 1935, was becoming one of the world's major news capitals. (Dugan 118–19)

The effect on African Americans of the impending war between Italy and Ethiopia was complex and has to this day never been satisfactorily sorted out (W. R. Scott 165). A number of controversies arose at that time: debates over the Ethiopian's racial identity, antagonism between African Americans and Ethiopians, the treatment of black Americans who had come to Ethiopia, and the response of the Ethiopian elite to the African American defense and aid effort (W. R. Scott 165–66). As might be expected, the prolonged contemplation by the African American masses—whose sensibilities were overdetermined by racial oppression—of a European power methodically assembling a technological juggernaut for the sole purpose of overpowering and extinguishing an independent African nation produced a break with traditional habits of social protest, writing, stoicism, tolerance, passivity, and sublimation. The Italian threat to Ethiopia amplified nascent nationalistic stirrings in American blacks, but the general effect was to motivate African Americans to accept violence as the most appropriate response to the crisis. Whether it took the form of warfare, mob violence, riots, or the sport of boxing, the centrality of violence became a feature of the African American cultural formations in the 1930s.

William R. Scott states that "because of all the news, talk, and activity generated by the black media's coverage of the Abyssinian issue, the bulk of African Americans, even the young, probably knew of the Italian threat to remote Abyssinia and sympathized with its plight" (54). Given the centrality of this event, it is curious that the response by African American poets was

not *more productive* than it was, and this aspect of the episode requires attention to the *negative presence* of the Ethiopian conflict. As might be expected, given his internationalism, leftist politics, and racial nationalism, Langston Hughes registered a number of poems in the campaign to defend Ethiopia. At the same time, such major poetic voices of the period as Sterling Brown and Frank Marshall Davis chose not to write on the topic, and it was left to new poets (Owen Dodson, Marcus B. Christian, and J. Harvey L. Baxter) and to what Eugene Redmond refers to as the magazine poets. Only one African American poet produced a volume dedicated to the war, J. Harvey L. Baxter's *Sonnets to the Ethiopians and Other Poems* (1936). This volume has consistently been overlooked in studies of this period, more than likely because Baxter has been consigned to the category of "romantic escapists" by the literary critics of the 1930s, who privileged social realist poets. Though information is lacking about the readership of Baxter's volume in the 1930s, he did advertise it prominently in *The Crisis,* and there is every reason to believe that it contributed to the various discourses of the period.

Poetry assumed an important role in the discourses that framed the African American reaction to the Italo-Ethiopian War. Kertzer states that

> modern wars depend on a sense of national allegiance, but the nation itself has no palpable existence outside the symbolism through which it is envisioned. As Walzer puts it, "The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived." People subscribe to the "master fiction" that the world is divided into a fixed number of mutually exclusive nations; they see these units as part of the nature of things, and assume an antiquity that the nations in fact lack. This symbolic conception of the universe leads people to believe that everyone "has" a nationality, in the same sense that everyone has a gender. It is in this light that Benedict Anderson defined a nation as "an imagined political community." Far from being window dressing on the reality that is the nation, symbolism is the stuff of which nations are made. Symbols instigate social action and define the individual's sense of self. They also furnish the means by which people make sense of the political process, which largely presents itself to people in symbolic form. (6)

Poems, then, compose the textual component of efforts that contribute to the personification of the state and affirm that black Americans participate in the "imagined political community" that the Ethiopians inhabit. Serving as a symbolic form that contributed to the sense of nationalism that African Americans directed toward the Ethiopian crisis, poetry allowed African

Americans to redefine their abject racial identities and to assume a more self-determined sense of purpose, power, and agency. Equally important is the conversion of the selfhood of African Americans into a new Ethiopian self, an activity best objectified by the formation of the Sons of Menelik clubs in Harlem once the nature of the Ethiopian crisis began to register on the African American imagination. The particular utility of poetry in such activities is suggested by Kertzer's discussion of the relationship between rhetorical forms of symbolism and emotion:

> Ritual can be seen as a form of rhetoric, the propagation of a message through a complex symbolic performance. Rhetoric follows certain culturally prescribed forms whose built-in logic makes the course of the argument predictable at the same time that it lends credence to the thesis advanced. . . . Of special relevance to an understanding of the political uses of ritual is the emotionally compelling structure of we/they imagery. . . .
>
> Successful ritual . . . creates an emotional state that makes the message uncontestable because it is framed in such a way as to be seen as inherent in the way things are. It presents a picture of the world that is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate. (101)

Two of the first poems published during the Ethiopian crisis attempt to construct new political identities for African Americans: Hughes's "Call of Ethiopia (*Opportunity,* September 1935) and Arthur N. Wright's "Ethiopia's Blacks" (*Baltimore Afro-American* August 3, 1935) are explicit examples of poetry used to formulate the new type of social solidarity through a participation mystique: "It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become to feel themselves to be in unison" (Durkheim qtd. in Kertzer 62). Hughes's poem is now an anthology piece.

CALL OF ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia,
Lift your night-dark face,
    Abyssinian
    Son of Sheba's race!
    Your palm trees tall
    And your mountains high
    Are shade and shelter

To men who die
For freedom's sake—
But in the wake of your sacrifice
May all Africa arise
With blazing eyes and night-dark face
In answer to the call of Sheba's race:

Ethiopia's free!
Be like me,
All of Africa,
Arise and be free!
All you black peoples,
Be free! Be free!
(Langston Hughes, *Opportunity,* September 1935)

For its part, A. N. Wright's long-forgotten anthem may best be described as versification.

ETHIOPIA'S BLACKS

Into the streets, Black Brothers,
Into the dust and rain,
Speak the word for freedom;
Shatter the torturer's brain

Up from our knees of prayer,
Up with our voices sing,
Brothers, Black, Brown and Yellow
Selassie's Emperor and king

Forward march, Black Brothers,
Break through the barricades
Guns and men and money
Mussolini must not prevail

Oh God of our Fathers
Thy People cry to Thee
To Ethiopia's millions
God, Give them liberty
(Arthur N. Wright, *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 3, 1935)

Wright's emotional plea is a call to arms, though it is unclear whether it is a call directed at African Americans, Ethiopians, or for both. Though the first, second, and third stanzas treat the conflict militarily, a matter of violently confronting a "torturer" to preserve freedom, the poem concludes with a religious turn, though in the final stanza prayer has been set aside so that the united black people "cry" (line 14) to God. We should also note that a demonized Mussolini in stanza three is opposed by an iconic Selassie in the fourth line of the preceding stanza. In the third stanza, Wright depicts a conventionalized revolutionary battle, with the confrontation between Italy and Ethiopia described in terms of barricades (imagery that perhaps suggests the urban warfare of the French Revolution). Of course, such imagery was anachronistic. The Italian protoblitzkrieg turned machine guns, bombs, and poison gas against the virtually unarmed Ethiopians. The imagery constructs a fantasy that equalizes the combatants.

The most striking aspect of the poems by Wright and Hughes is that they are both calls. For African Americans, the call is an activity freighted with cultural implications. The word *call* has several meanings, many of which apply to these poems. A call is a loud utterance, a demand, the characteristic sound produced by a bird, or a request (WordNet). Among the traditions of African American music are the traditions of song and chant associated with the world of men's work. These forms are variously referred to as field hollers, arhoolies, and calls. Imaginative call-and-response utterances were associated with whatever type of work was being performed. Agricultural workers created the evocative protoblues of cornfield hollers, ax and hoe songs, and songs to accompany plowing and cane cutting. Southern railroad crews used track-lining songs to synchronize the intricate operation of track lining. The call has many names and forms. The field holler has roots in the slavery era, but that musical form has persisted to this day (Judge). Langston Hughes had also been exposed to the peddler's calls that were a feature of Harlem street life in the 1930s. These highly original calls were the descendants of work songs. Fred McCormick discusses prison songs in the following passage, but his analysis serves as a more general description of what is believed to have been the social function of the call in traditional African American society:

> In all these verses you will not find the slightest iota of fantasy or escapism. If there were any would-be lottery winners in Parchman Farm or Angola they do not show up here. Instead the songs are vested with stark reality and sweat. They are the channeling of rage and resentment against the iniquity and brutality and rank injustice of a penal system which was nothing more than the legitimised extension of plantation slavery. All

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> folksongs involve catharsis but . . . song was the only voice which allowed prisoners to kick against the system. Shared songs did more than alleviate the work, they alleviated the misery. (McCormick)

Wright's poem clearly calls out to "Black brothers" (line 1), though the shifts from the objectified "Ethiopia's Blacks" of the title to "black brothers" (line 1) and "our knees" (line 1) obscures the subject position of the speaker who so vehemently calls upon the defenders of Ethiopia. Wright emphasizes the Ethiopians' potential to speak; in the first stanza they are asked to speak, in the second stanza to sing, and they are always already crying out in the final stanza. The third stanza urges them to march and to break down barricades, but the text as a whole seems to privilege speech—the response is not action, only more words. Clearly, the issue is agency, and the poet looks to the verbal response that presages yet another phase of action. Hughes's poem is also double-voiced: the poet's call is itself the subject of the poem. The speaker first calls to Ethiopia: "Ethiopia, / Lift your night-dark face" ("Call of Ethiopia" lines 1–2). The speaker first calls to Ethiopia, as the source of the call by addressing a call to Ethiopia, then iterates "the call of Sheba's race" (line 13) as direct discourse: "All you black peoples, / Be free! / Be free! (lines 18–19).

African Americans' newly rebellious spirit developed in many forms. Rather than deriving solely from the Ethiopian crisis, this rebellious spirit was also produced by "widespread black discontent in Harlem [that] contributed to intense pro-Ethiopian agitation" (W. R. Scott 104). The cultural atmosphere of this period is usually generalized in terms of what transpired in Harlem:

> Frustrated by their inability to take up arms in defense of the Ethiopian "homeland," Abyssinian loyalists in Harlem charged collusion between Washington and Rome. New York's rabid race patriots concluded that U.S. government opposition to the volunteer movement was calculated to serve the interests of Italian imperialism rather than those of American neutrality. Many were suspicious that Italy was acting with the silent approval of their own government. Harlemites tended to agree with the reported observation of Robert L. Ephraim, president of the Negro World Alliance in Chicago, that Washington's stand against the volunteer effort and its refusal to act against Mussolini could only be taken as an indication that the white races of the world were lining up against the black. An international white conspiracy had been connived that would lead ultimately to *a war of the races.*
>
> Whether or not most Harlemites foresaw a coming race war, fears of interracial struggle locally became rampant in the New York area during the summer of 1935 with a series of confrontations between Negroes

> and Italian Americans. Preexisting antagonisms between the two groups, albeit mild, had been greatly accentuated by the Italo-Ethiopian crisis and began to assume the form of two conflicting nationalisms, one African and the other Italian. (W. R. Scott 138; emphasis added)

Curiously, the Harlem riot of March 19–20, 1935, which was the first race riot by a minority group in the North[2] (Puryear "Organized Crime"), has not been attributed to influence from the Ethiopian crisis but to stimulation by "deplorable social conditions" (W. R. Scott 104). Claude McKay's account attributes the riot to interethnic tension that developed out of African American protests against Harlem's Jewish merchants who refused to hire black store clerks. The merchants eventually hired a small number of black clerks, then let them go, claiming that business was suffering the effects of the Depression. McKay concluded that "on Tuesday the crowds went crazy like the remnants of a *defeated, abandoned, and hungry army.* Their rioting was *the gesture of despair of a bewildered, baffled, and disillusioned people*" ("Harlem Runs Wild" 384; emphases added). McKay's language merges the discourses of the military—the Harlemites constitute an *army*—and a Marxist treatment of social identity. He presents the prescient reflection of the defeated Ethiopian army superimposed on the massed instinctive aggression of an undirected, unscientific *class* that misidentifies itself as a *race.* While McKay does not explicitly mention the Ethiopian crisis, he nevertheless manifests it in the paranoid imagery of race war and genocide.[3] McKay's statement is dominated by the affective performance of the *gesture*. Though many individuals are involved, their collective response is dreamlike, regressive, and infantile in that they have lost the capacity for language. The riot is incoherence made powerful, the cry at the collective level. The Harlem riot may be thought of as a stage of the "identity work" (Snow 4) through which African Americans constructed a revised collective identity that might serve them in the traumatic conditions in which they found themselves. David Snow comments that

> although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of "one-ness" or "we-ness" anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of "others." (4)

A feature of the incoherence of the Harlem riot was not its displacement of warfare in the sense that it was directed at the property of the Jewish mer-

chants and did not direct violence against persons considered the "other." The Harlem riot was directed at the property, rather than the bodies, of Jewish merchants. However, the event that set off the riot was the circulation of a rumor that the police had gunned down a young thief; this rumor stimulated identity talk in the form of an "atrocity tale" (Snow 8). As I will show in my discussion of the poems on the Ethiopian crisis, the atrocity tale is an important element of the construction of the African American/Ethiopian collective identity.

It was the reaction to the Joe Louis–Primo Carnera boxing match on June 26, 1935, that brought about direct conflict between African Americans and Italian Americans. On Sunday, August 11, a fight broke out between the two factions in Jersey City, and tensions remained high. William R. Scott relates that

> violence soon flared anew in reaction to the long-anticipated Italian invasion of Ethiopia on October 3, 1935. This time the conflict occurred in New York, in the city's Brooklyn and Harlem sections. A local paper remarked that "the first shots of the Italo-Ethiopian War were echoed in New York City yesterday as Negroes and Italians battled in several patriotic skirmishes," creating serious alarm in the two boroughs and causing anxious moments for metropolitan authorities. From the time paperboys first began to shout news through the streets of Harlem that Italian war planes had bombed Ethiopian towns, anger had mounted among the city's resident blacks. Outside the entrances to Italian fruit and vegetable markets in Harlem, fuming blacks scrawled chalk inscriptions reading "Italians, Keep Out." On streetcorners, where Harlemites often gathered to hear about and to discuss the Ethiopian crisis, soapbox orators berated Mussolini and demanded retaliation for the Italian attack on Africa, the black person's home. (140)

In the final stage of the "meaning making process,"[4] the black collective identity came to frame its existence within the bounds of an imminent global race war. This polarization is a distinct feature of the second and third of Hughes's three Ethiopian poems.

Langston Hughes took a plotted and episodic approach to the Ethiopian crisis in these three poems. They address the commencement of the crisis ("Call of Ethiopia"), the Italian attack ("Air Raid over Harlem: Scenario for a Little Black Movie"), and the defeat of the Ethiopian government with the occupation of Addis Ababa by the Italians ("Broadcast on Ethiopia"). Though "Air Raid over Harlem" deals directly with the beginning of the Italian invasion, the theme of the poem is not immediately apparent until

the twenty-third line: "Sure I know / The Ethiopian War broke out last night." The poem uses the pretext of the outbreak of fighting in Ethiopia to intervene in the formation of the Harlemites' race-war collective identity: Snow states that "in the absence of correspondence between personal identities and collective identities, some variety of identity work is necessary in order to facilitate their alignment" (10). Additionally, Snow observes that radical groups rely on the technique of identity construction (11).[5] Thus the "raid" is an exercise in "identity transformation," when a dramatic change in identity takes place and individuals see themselves as remarkably different than before (Snow 10). Questions of identity take precedence over the war crisis as the poem establishes a dialogue between social and personal identities: the Harlem social identity is on one side of the dialogue, and on the other side is the generalized black individual, who is slow to recognize the Harlem collectivity. In order to construct the new radical collective identity, Hughes must first install the Harlem individual in the Harlem collectivity. "Air Raid over Harlem"—the title shocks but does not divulge any historical context. Instead, the opening of "Air Raid" presents a speaker who is characterized by his palpable distress about his identity.

AIR RAID OVER HARLEM
(SCENARIO FOR A LITTLE BLACK MOVIE)

> Who you gonna put in it?
> Me.
> Who the hell are you?
> *Harlem.*
> Alright, then. (lines 1–5)

The speaker's voice is situated in the first-person subject position and couched in denial—"You're not talking about Harlem, are you?" (line 7). Presumably, the words of the title are a cry from a news vendor. As if to reassure himself and to restore the previous order of his world, the speaker identifies himself as an authentic Harlemite, through a catalog that testifies to his allegiance to his social identity as a black person:

> That's where my home is,
> My bed is my woman is, my kids is!
> Harlem, that's where I live!
> Look at my streets
> Full of black and brown and
> Yellow and high-yellow

Jokers like me.
Lenox, Seventh, Edgecombe, 145th.
Listen,
Hear 'em talkin' and laughin'?
Bombs over Harlem'd kill
People like me—
Kill ME! (lines 8–23)

He styles himself a joker—"Jokers like me" (line 14), yet, on the surface, his words demote his social identity, demonstrating its insufficiency and lack of agency. The implication is that initially Hughes's speaker intends "jokers" to be understood neutrally as *individuals*—as in "folks like me." *Joker,* however, suggests a complex range of semiotic-ethnic connotations, and Hughes's poem capitalizes on this polysemic word: a joker is a person who plays jokes, a thoughtless person, a person that is being disparaged, and a playing card that either is not used or is of high value, depending on the game. Thus the polarity of *joker* extends from nullity to potency. Buddy Moss recorded "Joker Man Blues" in 1933, so *joker* is also situated within the insubordinate discourse of blues subjectivity. In the context of the blues, the joker tends to be associated with the power to produce reversals. In the blues, the trickster, fooler, hoaxer, jilter, and startler are jokers. In "Come On in My Kitchen," bluesman Robert Johnson sings, "Took my woman from my best friend / Some *joker* got lucky, took her back again" (emphasis added). "Air Raid over Harlem" turns on the counterfeit nature of the Harlemites as jokers. Hughes's joker discourse constructs a joker/folk dyad, a sociopolitical dialectic on which his poem conjoins two familiar social identities. While the people of Harlem disparage themselves as jokers (the folk), they are also jokers who have the capacity for surprise and deception; they represent the unknown and unmanifested forces of resistance and transformation. As the poem proceeds, we realize that the speaker may even be aware of this duality of impotence/potency.

Hughes's treatment of the crisis is in keeping with the facts of the historical account insofar as he has situated his poem in the street, with his subject directly experiencing the conjunction of the Harlemites and the far-off Ethiopians, with whom they so closely identify. The innovation in Hughes's poem is the hyperbolic, Mayakovskian treatment of the danger. Through the avant-garde techniques of superimposition and simultaneity, Hughes cinematically fuses the occupations of Harlem and Brooklyn by twelve hundred police officers (W. R. Scott 141) with the Italian air war against Ethiopia. Hughes's poem achieves his transformational effects through two monumentalist intertexts, *King Kong* (1933) and Vladimir Mayakovsky's odes to

the Soviet Union. In 1921, the cubo-futurist poet Mayakovsky produced the epic propaganda-art poem "150,000,000," an allegory of the decisive battle between 150,000,000 soviet workers and Woodrow Wilson's evil forces of capitalism. Ivan, the poem's hero, is a man with 150,000,000 heads and appears to be Mayakovsky's reification of mass man. In "Air Raid" Hughes presents the black masses as "a sleeping giant waking / To snatch bombs from the sky," a giant who "picks up the cop and lets him fly" (lines 112–14). Mayakovsky's transrational style also incorporates street slang, popular songs, satirical advertising jingles, grammatical deformations, bizarre grammatical inversions, neologisms, puns, and distorted rhymes (Blake 22–23). There are only dim reflections of Mayakovsky's avant-garde language arsenal in "Air Raid"; Hughes employs casual rhymes, black vernacular, anagrams (fits/fist, planes/planted, air/raid), and capital letters. Shulman notices Hughes's "modernist disruptions of the text, surreal dreams and political juxtapositions, and the techniques of the Living Newspaper" (286). In the background of "Air Raid" are news reports from the radio, and continuing in a modernist vein, Hughes employs the technology of the film to establish his "scenario," though in comparison to Mayakovsky's poem, the monumental imagery in "Air Raid" is more realistic than transrational.[6] Foregoing Mayakovsky's grotesque image of the collective, Hughes shifts his poems into the context of the popular horror film *King Kong,* where gigantism is simultaneously familiar and defamiliarizing. Hughes recapitulates the suspenseful scene in which the gigantic ape, Kong, who has been rendered unconscious by the gas bombs of the moviemakers who have invaded Skull Island, begins to awaken: "A sleeping giant waking / To snatch bombs from the sky" (lines 103–4). Brought to New York, where he is displayed for profit, Kong escapes and defends himself by hurling his attackers and knocking airplanes out of the sky. Similarly, Hughes's monster awakens, but it awakens to political consciousness, which leads to the workers' revolution.

King Kong was one of the first mass spectacles of cinema's sound era. The movie garnered an unprecedented audience of fifty thousand people on its first day in two New York movie houses, Radio City Music Hall and the Roxy. The film was unabashedly racist, sexist, and antidemocratic. In "Air Raid," Hughes rearticulated[7] the semiotics of the film so that it operated entirely within an alternative register of black collective identity. Moreover, in the poem Hughes announces his project to rearticulate the film:

> And someday
> A sleeping giant waking
> To snatch bombs from the sky
> And push the sun up with a loud cry (lines 102–5)

In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe,* Susan Buck-Morss points out that the movie *King Kong* did more than provide a mass spectacle—it presented the mass to itself through the figure of the giant ape (Buck-Morss 176):

> Because Kong, too, falls in love with Ann [Darrow, played by Fay Wray], he is identified with the public that "loves a pretty face," precisely the mass audiences whom the director in the film and the directors of the film hope to attract. Descriptions of the masses as a giant animal, an instinctual, primitive force, were common at the time, an association in the film that intensifies when the director and his movie crew reach the mysterious Skull Island. King Kong is held back behind a giant gate from natives who have forgotten the more advanced civilization that built it. The native "primitives" worship Kong, providing for him the obligatory sacrifice of virgin girls. There is much in the movie that is racist. The dark-skinned villagers are as far removed from civilization as Kong himself. . . . Yet the connection between beasts and dangerously powerful masses (the working class during the Depression) is sustained in the staging of a boxing match between Kong and a dinosaur that mirrors the cuts and jabs of this quintessentially working-class sport. (177–78)

Hughes's rearticulation of "the big black giant" (line 107) as the monstrous ape King Kong constructs a narrative subtext in which the "big black giant"/King Kong is not *the masses* but is distinctly the *black masses*—simultaneously, the Ethiopians and the Harlemites. (Through its "boxing match," *King Kong* may also be thought to reinscribe the race war counternarrative: Hughes must be on guard lest the trope of the boxing matches between African and Italian Americans asserts itself.) The radical-collective counternarrative that Hughes develops begins with the trickster narrative set up by the first speaker in the poem: Harlem's joker constructs a linguistic continuum (what DuPlessis calls "lateral metonymic associations" and "vertical semantic coring" [*Genders* 18]) that elides and elevates the joker into a worker-giant that ultimately embodies pan-African unity and agency. In the scheme of Hughes's rearticulated "Little Black Movie" (line 113), the "primitives" of Skull Island are merely victims of the monster as the sign of their Galtonian regression and of the imperialistic movie makers who destroy their culture in the act of capturing Kong. The "primitives" are rearticulated as the Ethiopians, and Kong is Haile Selassie—literally "a king and god in his own world" (Buck-Morss 174). Up to this point in Hughes's reinscribed cinema-poem, King Kong is the polysemic sign of the atrocity tale: Kong may be understood as a monumentally and mutely suffering collective victim-figure, embodying the totality of the outrages against black peoples, whether American or Ethiopian.

The last three stanzas of "Air Raid" are a departure from the tragic outcome of the original *King Kong* film. In those final stanzas, Hughes further rearticulates his "Little Black Movie" as a Marxist comedy. Hayden White observes that "while Marx emplotted the history of the bourgeoisie as a Tragedy, that of the proletariat is set within the larger framework of a Comedy, the resolution of which consists of the dissolution of all classes and the transformation of humanity into an organic whole" (313). Hughes's scheme for this comedic transformation resides in yet another narrative countertext, the archracist text *The Story of Little Black Sambo*,[8] which Hughes evasively alludes to in the subtitle, "Scenario for a Little Black Movie." Just as Little Black Sambo's trickery melts the inimical tigers into butter, in Hughes's "Little Black Movie" the big black giant/King Kong survives despite the technological weapons of the elites. This fairy-tale victory is accomplished by the unification of the jokers into the heroic and triumphant "Sambo"-joker-worker-Kong of a new and omnipotent collective identity. The jokers become workers who then eat the butter of their magically homogenized class enemies:

> Hey!
> Scenario for a Little Black Movie,
> You say?
> A RED MOVIE TO MR. HEARST
> Black and white workers united as one
> In a city where
> There'll never be
> Air raids over Harlem
> FOR THE WORKERS ARE FREE (lines 118–126)

"Air Raid" is driven by the tension between the impinging dangers of warfare and the childlike residents of Harlem. Hughes establishes the childish countertext not only by the "Little Black Sambo" subtext but also by the singsong, Mother Goose verse-form that surfaces in places along with its fearful content; one place where this usage is particularly effective occurs in the dreamlike metamorphoses that take place in the lines that parody the child's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep / I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Hughes renders this nighttime ritual as

> Where the black millions sleep
> Shepherds over Harlem
> Their armed watch keep
> Lest Harlem stirs in its sleep
> And maybe remembers

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And remembering forgets
To be peaceful and quiet
And has sudden fits
Of raising a black fist
Out of the dark
And that black fist
Becomes a red spark (lines 43–54)

The aggressive unification of the workers is specifically directed against a symbolic enemy: "A RED MOVIE TO MR. HEARST" (line 121). Snow's discussion of types of collective identity illuminates Hughes's incorporation of Hearst:

> Clearly a collective identity in which the boundaries between "us" and "them" are unambiguously drawn, in which there is strong feeling about those differences, and in which there is a sense of moral virtue associated with both the perceptions and feelings, should be a more potent collective identity than one in which either the emotional or moral dimensions are weakly developed. (11)

Hughes justifiably selected William Randolph Hearst as an American surrogate for Mussolini: "Hearst is known as one of the largest media moguls of all time. During the 1930s he worked with the Nazi party to help promote a positive image of the Nazi party in American media" ("American Supporters of the Fascists"). In the poem, Hearst localizes the fascist threat far more effectively than Hughes's depiction of the police as occupiers: even though the war has broken out on the other side of the world, there *can* be air raids over Harlem because there are Fascists like "MR. HEARST" in power in America.

In the final scene of "Air Raid," blackness has been effaced in the turn from ethnic conflict to class warfare. Anthony Dawahare states that Hughes often invoked a nationalist posture only to migrate to a final internationalist-utopian position, "a call to worker's multiracial unity" (96). In the last line, *"I'M HARLEM!"* (line 57), Hughes enunciates the joyous epiphany of the victorious giant, HARLEM. The HARLEM figure attains collective self-awareness through the individual/collective experience of remembering—"lest Harlem stirs in its sleep / and maybe remembers" (lines 42–43)—, a remembering so powerful that it instantly liberates the masses:

What workers are free?
THE BLACK AND WHITE WORKERS—

You and me!
Looky here, everybody!
Look at me!
I'M HARLEM! (lines 46–57)

While this transformation may sound magical, it is mediated by the technological discursive network of the film. Hughes invokes cinematic mediation through textually simulating the filmic vocabulary of montage in the structure of his poem (by using quick cuts, voiceovers, close-ups, flashbacks, and dream sequences), a method that appeals because of the presumed relationship of visibility to truth. Hughes's willingness to "show" the truth means that the author is willing to confront the public's gaze—to be seen and to see—a strategy that is an inescapable feature of cinema.[9] Thus, Hughes fuses seeing/being seen—the utopian-epiphanic gaze—and the comedic-revolutionary resolution in which the workers vanquish their oppressors by virtue of their ability to see their condition, to see who their enemies are, and to make the leap to effecting a revolutionary remedy.

The Italian attack against the Ethiopians, marked for the entire world the beginning of another long period of suspense, tension, and danger. The world had to wait ten months for the Italo-Ethiopian War to begin. The actual fighting went on from October of 1935 until May of 1936, when the Italians were able to occupy Addis Ababa—a period of eight months during which it was never clear how the war might end.

The most comprehensive response to the Italo-Ethiopian War by an African American poet was *Sonnets for the Ethiopians and Other Poems* (1936) by the prolific "magazine poet" J. Harvey L. Baxter. Baxter's forgotten volume stands out as the only collection of poetry dedicated to this seminal historical event. Baxter treated the Ethiopian crisis in a sequence of fifteen sonnets and another series of eleven poems titled "Lyrics (Ethiopian)." The preface to *Sonnets* is dated July 23, 1936, which was a mere two months after the fall of Ethiopia's government. It is possible to trace the events of the Ethiopian crisis through the sonnets. The poems titled "Lyrics (Ethiopian)" are more broadly thematic; in most cases, they do not speak directly to specific events.

The title of Baxter's volume betrays the reason why *Sonnets for the Ethiopians and Other Poems* is not considered a canonical[10] African American text from the thirties. For Sterling Brown (the pivotal black critic of the thirties), Baxter was beneath consideration. Brown considered Baxter yet another romantic escapist, an ideological and aesthetic failure. Given the valorization of experimental-modernist aesthetics centered on the documentary trend (calling above all for documentary sources and a detached delivery),

and social-realist and secular-nationalist discourses, Baxter's *romantic* handling of the Italo-Ethiopian War branded him an irrelevant poet. Baxter's use of the sonnet and the irregularly rhymed lyric, his employment of a neo-Shakespearean diction reminiscent of Claude McKay's, his embrace of standard rhetorical archaisms, and his use of the Christian-Ethiopianist metanarrative were all potential liabilities. As I have shown in chapter 2, such an absolutist dismissal of this poetry is itself based on unregistered forms of idealist literary theorizing. As Bornstein states, "The original sites of incarnation thus carry with them an aura placing the work in space and time, and constituting its authenticity as well as its contingency" (6). While "Air Raid over Harlem" is accorded a central position in contemporary discussions of 1930s poetry (in Smethurst, Nelson, Shulman, Dawahare, and Corbould), "Air Raid" was published in *New Theatre* in February 1936, a left-wing periodical with a small circulation and not available to a black readership. When Baxter's collection is restored to its material context and the sociology of the text is considered—factors that include the publisher, print run, price, and audience (Bornstein 7)—a profoundly altered sense of Baxter's Ethiopian poems is achieved. Baxter's volume had the distinction of being a discrete volume of poetry, in itself a rarity that accorded it notability at the time; moreover, *Sonnets* addressed a topic that, according to the *Chicago Defender,* had electrified the world. In "Books by Negro Authors in 1936," a two-page spread of "paragraph reviews for the guidance of *Crisis* readers," civil rights activist and bibliophile Arthur B. Spingarn endorsed Baxter's volume. Spingarn commented, "The author's second volume shows considerable advance over his first" (47). Three of the pamphlets on Spingarn's list concerned the Ethiopian crisis. Reviewed along with Baxter's volume were forthrightly political texts: George Padmore's *How Britain Rules Africa,* Lawrence Gellert's *Negro Songs of Protest,* Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder,* and Mae V. Cowdery's *We Lift Our Voices.* James McGann has stated that "meaning is transmitted through bibliographical as well as linguistic codes" (Bornstein 7). This suggests a different narrative of reception for Baxter's *Sonnets for the Ethiopians* than that descending from an ideological and aesthetic analysis whereby *Sonnets for the Ethiopians* can be dismissed as "romantic escapism." Rather, the historicized and material association of Baxter's *Sonnets* with its printed context shifts its aura, utterance, and reception to a politically engaged meaning.

Other poets besides Baxter responded to the Italo-Ethiopian War with sonnets: Owen Dodson published "Desert in Ethiopia" in *Opportunity* in December 1935. Also in this category are P. J. White's "Vestis Virumque Cano" (*Opportunity,* January 1936), and Marcus B. Christian's "Selassie at Geneva" (*Opportunity,* June 1938). Like Baxter's *Sonnets*, these poems considered

the Ethiopian crisis through the discourse of tragedy, a response advocated by Baxter in the opening sentence of his preface: "The world has currently observed the most wanton of the tragedies of the century, the gobbling up of Ethiopia by Italy." The treatment of the Ethiopian crisis through a tragic (and religious) narrative was the antithesis of Langston Hughes's comedic and transcendent Marxist-internationalist narrative, with its antecedent obligatory ridicule of Selassie. The sonnets that are situated in the tragic-romantic discourse lack realistic social details (such as urban atmospherics, vernacular language, and popular culture); however, they are more congruent with the historical record, as when Baxter compresses Haile Selassie's speech to the League of Nations into one of his sonnets. In comparison, Hughes's "Air Raid" may even be said to be antihistoric in that Hughes refused to record or to recognize the consequences of the factual present and instead grounded his poem in a fantastic futuristic vision of an unattainable industrial utopia.

Though Baxter speaks of the Ethiopian crisis as a tragedy, a distinction must be made between the tragic mood of his sonnets and the historic emplotment of his sonnet sequence as romance. Hayden White states that in tragedy there is a resignation to the inalterable and eternal conditions under which men must labor in the world (9). In Baxter's sequence there is no such reconciliation with "the limits on what may be aspired to" (White 9), so it is necessary to look to another form of historic emplotment, the romance:

> The romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it—the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the story of the resurrection of Christ in Christian mythology. It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall. (White 8–9)

"The World," which is the opening sonnet of Baxter's volume, addresses the amoral geopolitics that prevailed during the Ethiopian crisis, as France and England conspired with Italy to divide up Africa despite participation in the League of Nations. In an ironic departure from his reading of the events as tragedy, Baxter alludes in his first line to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* with his first line, for Baxter's "The world's a mummery of groggy lies / And we are victims of its undertow" (lines 1–2) is a labored variation on Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage / and all the men and women merely players" (*AYL* 2, 7). Not only is *As You Like It* a romantic comedy but also it presents the world as Christian romance, a struggle between good and evil in which good triumphs. (This development in Baxter's poetry is a noteworthy departure from the practice of Claude McKay, whose protest sonnets served as models

for Baxter and other African American poets. McKay drew on Shakespeare but used the histories and tragedies as rhetorical resources. James R. Keller shows that "Look Within" (448–49) is based on *Hamlet* (2.5.154–56) and that the famous sonnet "If We Must Die" (450) is derived from the "St. Crispin Day" speech of *Henry V* (4.2.18–67). In *As You Like It,* a debate about the negative and positive aspects of life is carried out between Jaques, a chronically melancholy pessimist, and Rosalind, the play's Christian heroine. Baxter's "The World" is spoken in Jaques's voice, and the poem is drawn from his tirades against humanity. Baxter centers on the deceptions of the conspiratorial politicians that determined the course of the Ethiopian crisis so that the sonnet is an intricate catalog of disguises, avoidances, and misdirection. The catalog includes "mummery," "lies," "turn our backs," "close our eyes," "fallen low," "bewildered leaders," "ape the maniac," "dodge and shirk," "eat his words," "fog," and "chaff." The speaker addresses himself to God for redress, and this is the most salient feature of the sonnet—the power to end the depredations of the Europeans does not belong to men. Thus, even in the most thematically "realistic" sonnet of the sequence, realism has given way to romance.

In the next sonnet, "Africa," Baxter has abandoned the rhetorical and positional semblance of realism altogether, and he can state that

> I come a singer, yet a champion
> Of the undone, benighted folk, forgot;
> Of fleshy foot-stool, bleeding stepping-stone,
> Whom men beguiled in their despotic lot. (lines 5–8)

Baxter concludes the sonnet with an assertion of God's existence—"God is not *dead,* nor guarded in a *tomb!*" (line 14; emphases added). The word *victim* (line 2) appears in "Africa" and again in "The World." This echo suggests that at the heart of Baxter's concern is the question of the victimization of Africa, Africa that is an idealized abstraction not subject to the type of military intervention that I have discussed in connection with the call to action voiced by Arthur N. Wright and Langston Hughes. Nevertheless, Baxter's Africa is framed within an anti-imperialist discourse so that a stance of suitable political resistance is maintained.

Baxter's brand of social realism turns into historical nostalgia in the third sonnet:

WELL MAY I SING OF THE PROUD ETHIOPE

> Well may I sing of the proud Ethiope
> Who ruled before the will of Rome was born;

> And did with Israel and Egypt cope
> Ere pyramid or temple scanned the morn.
> Well may I sing of his primeval speech,
> And of his arts and obfuscated past,
> Of priests who rose to prophesy and preach
> That God was Soul, Almighty, First and Last.
>
> Of how his blood seeped in the Arab-vein,
> And Negrofied the skin of India.
> Then leaped from Bosporus and colored Spain,
> And mongreled up old Greece and Italia.
> These men who wear the night upon their faces,
> FOUGHT OFT WITH JEW AND NOMAD BIBLE RACES.

Here Baxter suggests that in the distant past the Ethiopians inhabited the other side of the victim/victor dyad. The sonnet's concluding line, "FOUGHT OFT WITH JEW AND NOMAD BIBLE RACES," is the only line in the entire volume that is printed in capital letters. It is the final line of the poem that asserts and recovers the biblical context of the Ethiopians, and the line plays upon the trope of reading the indecipherable writing on the wall that is rendered in Daniel 5:25—"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN [PERES]." The book of Daniel relates the Persians' defeat of Belshazzar. The modern parallel with the Bible that the sonnet implies is the defeat of the Italians by the Ethiopians. Like the Babylonians, the Italians will be weighed and found wanting at the end of their days, and their kingdom will be divided and given to other rulers. In "Well May I Sing of the Proud Ethiope," Baxter has assumed the mantle of the prophet Daniel and invoked the destruction of the Fascists. Despite the semblance of unaffected directness afforded by the opening line of the poem, Baxter's appropriation of the prophetic books of the Bible is not direct but is instead mediated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's prophetic novel in verse, *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Browning's epic-prophetic intertext has supplied the trope of wearing the night; Baxter's thirteenth line ("These men who wear the night upon their faces") echoes Barrett's "And last / I learnt cross-stitch, because she did not like / To see me wear the night with empty hands. / A-doing nothing" (book 1, lines 446–49). Moreover, the prophetic tenor of Baxter's *Sonnets for the Ethiopians* is derived from Browning's influence; this source is suggested by the allusion to the book of Revelation—"First and Last" (line 8)—which Baxter places at the end of the sonnet's octave to enforce the idea that the end is also the beginning. Browning aligned *Aurora Leigh* with the prophetic conventions of the Hebrews, Romans, and Greeks, and her epic's nine books may have alluded

to the nine books of the Roman sibyls.[11] *Aurora Leigh* contains a plethora of biblical metaphors, and it concludes with allusions to the same Revelation 21:6, "[I am the] Alpha and [the] Omega," the beginning and the end that Baxter alludes to in line 8. Alison Booth (80) shows that Browning has converted Alpha and Omega into *first* and *last* in the final stanza of *Aurora Leigh*. Revelation 21:19 reads "the first was jasper" (*NRSV*) and Revelation 21:20 reads "the twelfth amethyst" (*NRSV*). In Browning's poetic version of this passage, she has substituted "last" for "twelfth."

> He stood a moment with erected brows,
> In silence, as a creature might who gazed,
> —Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
> Upon the thought of perfect noon: and when
> I saw his soul saw,—"Jasper *first*" I said;
> "And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
> The rest in order:—*last,* an amethyst." (lines 984–90; emphases added)

Baxter has followed Browning's alterations in his sonnet, and he has further compressed the combination of Alpha and Omega and the vision of the jeweled city of God into the simplicity of "first and last" ("Well May I Sing" line 8)

To reinforce this prophetic discourse, Baxter has insinuated the original indecipherable text of the writing on the wall into the poem as a divine intertext, and he refers to this missing divine text in lines 5 and 6 as "primeval speech" and "obfuscated past," respectively. The words "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN [also variously *parsin* and *peres*]," are written syllabically into Baxter's sonnet as "mongreled" (line 12), "men" (line 13), "temple" (line 4), "priests"/"prophesy"/"preach" (line 7), and "Bosporus" (line 11). Baxter has made significant alterations to the biblical narrative in order to cohere with the historical present. In the Bible, the prophet Daniel was confronted with a text ("MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN") that could be read ("measure, measure, count, divide") but could not be meaningfully interpreted. Daniel then produced an interpretation: *The king's deeds had been weighed and found deficient and his kingdom would therefore be divided.* "FOUGHT OFT WITH JEW AND NOMAD BIBLE RACES" is the writing on Baxter's contemporary wall. However, in Baxter's sonnet the writing on the wall is a trope that casts the Italians in the guise of the present-day Persians, while the Ethiopians are identified as JEW AND NOMAD BIBLE RACES. Thus, it is the Ethiopians themselves who are the unreadable text that the poet must interpret. This trope is inherent in the characteristics of the Ethiopians whom Baxter endows with "primeval speech" (line 5), an "obfuscated past" (line 6), and

darkness ("These men who wear the night upon their faces" [line 13]), for their seeming obscurity indicates their divine protection. The concluding line, "FOUGHT OFT WITH JEW AND NOMAD BIBLE RACES," is not the text but is the interpretation, even though its presentation in capital letters suggests that in this modern context it is the indecipherable writing on the wall. Baxter sees himself as the incarnation of Daniel, but he revises Daniel's prophetic act. Speaking prophetically, he predicts an Ethiopian victory, because their powerful identity is not visible to their pagan opponents.

The antimodernist and romantic character of Baxter's antifascist discourse allows for no separation from the past. The Ethiopians of the 1930s are not distinguished from their biblical ancestors (as they are in Hill's poem on the Ethiopian fighter, for example). Such a separation would ensure the Nietzschean death of God alluded to in line fourteen of "Africa," where Baxter declares that "God is not *dead*" (Baxter's emphasis). Because the concluding line of "Well May I Sing" appears in capitals, it ordains a synchronous historical structure in opposition to the obliterative diachrony of fascist-modernist time. Baxter further advocates synchrony and synthesis in the substance of the sestet of "Well May I Sing," which (couched in the language of eugenic pseudoscience) addresses the seepage of "blood" (not genes) and makes a claim that the Italians' ancestors were the Ethiopians. In the sestet, Baxter advocates the view that the Ethiopians were the ancestors of the Italian Fascists, betraying through the black vernacular lilt of "Negrofied," "leaped," and "mongreled up" a malign pleasure derived from the aggressive assertion of a shared ancestry that must have seemed disagreeable to the Italians:

At issue here are competing notions about warfare. Paul Virilio has argued that Mussolini's mobilization against Ethiopia marked the beginning of a new age of history, military capitalism. Virilio theorizes modernity in terms of the effect of military capitalism on modern culture:

> For Virilio, logistics, the preparation for war, is the beginning of the modern industrial economy, fuelling development of a system of specialized and mechanized mass production. War and logistics require increased speed and efficiency, and technology provides instruments that create more lethal and effective instruments of war. The acceleration of speed and technology, in turn, create more dynamic industry, and an industrial system that obliterates distances in time and space through the development of technologies of transportation, communication, and information. The fate of the industrial system is thus bound up with the military system which provides, in Virilio's vision, its origins and impetus. (Kellner "Virilio")

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It is exactly these unique conditions that Baxter confronts with his sonnet sequence. Baxter's *song* invoked in "I come a singer" ("Africa" line 5) and the title of "Well May I Sing of the Proud Ethiope" presents the Italian-Ethiopian conflict as a war between two competing modes of time—poetic time and linear time. Baxter's Italians are cut off from the past; they cannot recognize their genetic unity with the Ethiopians. Not only are they at war with their authentic selves but also they are violating their spiritual essence. The Fascists exist in the dromomatic, futuristic present in which time is always speeding up and running out.[12] Fascist time is linear, concrete, profane, and ahistorical; opposed to it is the sacred, mythical time of the prophetic and ritualistic mode of reality (Eliade 1965 20–21). Baxter's poetic time is paradoxical, circular, eternal, and transcendent. Mythical time places the poet in circular, prophetic time so that he joins the past to the future: what has been in the past will also exist in the future. Thus, the controlling figure of Baxter's entire sequence is, in a sense, the writing on the wall that tells of the intervention of a divine apportionment that measures, weighs, and divides.

For Baxter, the war is a matter of competing chronologies, a subject he confronts directly in "God Send Us Rains," the twelfth sonnet in the sequence. Baxter's sonnet constructs the opposition of fascist dromology by the natural order, in this case the seasonal Ethiopian rains that prevented the Italians from going on the offensive. While the sonnets are weak in addressing the concrete sequence of historical events, it is possible to temporally place this sonnet toward the end of the rainy season in the fall of 1935. "God Send Us Rains" is an appeal for a divine intervention by means of a natural cause: "For rains will snuff the breath of barking guns, / And form a Purgatory of the roads; / For rains will shield us from the greedy Huns" (lines 9–11). The Italians attacked when the rains no longer defended the Ethiopians:

> With the beginning of dry weather conducive to large-scale military operations, the long-awaited Italian invasion of Ethiopia began, just before dawn on the morning of October 3, 1935. From strategically located bases along the Eritrean border, one hundred thousand Italian troops advanced in three columns into Abyssinian territory. With banners flying and trumpets blaring, three columns of Il Duce's grand colonial army crossed the Mareb River, a muddy stream delineating the Ethiopian border, and advanced toward enemy military positions at Adigrat, Enticcio, and Adwa, scene of the great Italian disaster in Italy's first Ethiopian war. Although there was no official declaration of war, the fascist march for revenge and the glory of Rome was formally underway.
>
> News of the Italian assault on Ethiopia was flashed around the world. Cables from Addis Ababa broadcast to the international community that

> Ethiopia's brave but meagerly armed warriors were pitted in fierce battle against a powerful invasion force of Italian troops equipped with modern combat rifles, aircraft, vehicles, and chemicals. Reports of the hostilities indicated that it was impossible to provide detailed accounts of the early fighting but stated that Mussolini's blackshirted legions had successfully penetrated northern Ethiopia and established a base there for an extensive attack on the rest of the country. (W. R. Scott 99)

Because they were not at the scenes of the fighting, African American poets could not incorporate their own first-hand observations of military combat into their writings. By contrast, the Italian futurist poet F. T. Marinetti, a veteran soldier who served with the invading Italian forces, gloried in effusive, experimental descriptions of the horror that resulted when modern armaments (dive bombers, mustard gas, machine guns) were directed at the ragtag Ethiopian forces. This futurist-fascist countertext was not available to African American writers—it was written in Italian and had not reached North America—though as I have shown, Langston Hughes did incorporate experimental techniques for some of his politically radical poetry in the thirties. The avant-garde techniques that allowed Marinetti to carry out his literary appropriation of the conflict were not generally a part of the African American repertoire of poetics. The culture of the 1930s was dominated by the documentary approach of poets such as Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Reznikoff, and Kay Boyle. Extraliterary materials[13] included through collage and montage techniques "to serve as direct, if fragmentary, representatives of the real social and historical world from which they emerged" (Dayton 65) represented intrusions in the lyric surface of those experimental documentary poems, so it was obvious that the poems were experimental. In contrast, documentary expression often was not an obvious feature of African American poetry.

This must not be taken at face value, however. Rather than relegate to another discussion the question of how else African American poets might have responded to the Italo-Ethiopian War, it is my intention to contextualize the documentary tendency and to retheorize the poetry that black poets composed in response to this conflict. Tim Dayton has summarized the documentary tendency of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead,* the most important documentary poem of the thirties:[14]

> As William Stott argues in his seminal *Documentary Expression and Thirties America,* the 1930s were virtually dominated by the documentary mode of communication, in part because the seeming directness and factualness of the documentary suited it both to the traditional American

"cult of experience" (in the phrase of Philip Rahv) and to the more particular skepticism regarding the abstract and impalpable that was engendered in the public by the Great Depression. Documentary in the 1930s, Stott notes, was typically "social documentary," which "deals with facts that are alterable. It has an intellectual dimension to make clear what the facts are, why they came about, and how they can be changed for the better. Its more important dimension, however, is usually the emotional: feeling the fact may move the audience to wish to change it." (62–63)

What Stott broaches above as "emotion" is perhaps more usefully understood as code for *propaganda:* in the thirties, photography was theorized as being the closest approximation to the real, while in truth "the photographer's prejudices often entered into the creation of an image, making the photos part enduring cultural record and part propaganda" (DP). The assumption that documentary productions achieve ideological neutrality is entirely suspect; ultimately, documentary productions do not provide more objective works of art than do "romantic" aesthetics. But documentary theorists proceeded as though they were making a verifiable departure from subjective aesthetics. Tim Dayton has traced the formation of documentary poetry to Ezra Pound:

The documentary trend found its first great poetic exemplar in Ezra Pound, eventual adherent of Italian fascism. Pound's *Cantos*, Michael Andre Bernstein argues, may be understood as an attempt to undo one of the major effects of nineteenth-century French poetics (an effect paralleled less reputably and less brilliantly in the poetics of the American Genteel Tradition), particularly as seen in Mallarmé: the sundering of poetic language from the things and events of this world. Mallarme wanted poetic language to confront a realm to which ordinary language had no access, where it was rendered silent. Pound, conversely, sought to reattach poetic language to the worldly concerns of men (as he would have put it). In his attempt to achieve this, Pound incorporated extraliterary texts to serve as direct, if fragmentary, representatives of the real social and historical world from which they emerged. (64–65)

Dayton argues that Pound developed a documentary method for modern poetry out of a reaction against "the extreme subjectiveness characteristic of romanticism and powerfully expressed in the romantic lyric" (63). In the final understanding of the romantic and postromantic,

the subjective being that makes itself heard in lyric poetry is one which defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective and

> the realm of objectivity. While its expressive gesture is directed toward, it is not intimately at one with nature. It has, so to speak, lost nature and seeks to recreate it through personification and through descent into the subjective being itself. (Theodor Adorno quoted by Dayton 66)

Through documentary, poets such as Rukeyser sought to intervene in the real and made it an "exterior" feature of their poems; thus, according to Dayton,

> the objective social content that Adorno finds latent within all lyric poetry does not, in *The Book of the Dead,* remain latent. Rukeyser does not permit objective content to remain merely implicit in the lyric; she renders it explicit in the documentary sections of the poem, which, as we have seen, are often edited and slightly revised versions of testimony offered before the House subcommittee investigating the construction of the tunnel at Gauley Mountain. (66)

However, Adorno has one final proviso that shifts the meaning of the African American lyric: "Adorno argues that despite this apparently asocial character of lyric expression, objective social content remains within it, though transformed by and enfolded within individual consciousness" (Dayton 66).

Following Adorno's lead, then, the task is to see by what means objective social content is documented under the methods with which the black poets wrote their sonnets in the thirties. The black subject position differs from that of white poets writing the modernist sonnet (for example, Millay and Cummings), because the black poets did not derive their personal and social identities from their sense of alienation.[15] The primary impetus of their sonnets is to express "the ideas of the human agent who is able to 'remake' himself [*sic*] by methodological and disciplined action" (Lupton 75). Even though the black sonneteers restricted themselves to the lyric mode, the objective social content of their work did not remain latent. In their work, one tangible aspect of the self-in-process is the form of the sonnet itself; the sonnet is discipline, and objective reality is a component of the refashioning of the self: as the self is remade, the world is remade. This is clarified if the sonnet is thought of as a speech act that reclaims a portion of the lost being of the slave; in the sonnet, the body of the bourgeois subject becomes a participant in resting, playing, using the senses, and reclaiming the "closed" body in an orderly manner. To arrive at this articulate, orderly leisure, the disorderly world (of the "open" body) that has imposed a pathological disciplinary regime must also be remade. For leftist or left-liberal writers, facts themselves were important in and of themselves, so "reportage seemed to offer a solution to problems both

formal and political" (Dayton 64). The world of objective fact that Rukeyser introduces into her poem through documentary materials does not serve the needs of African Americans, since those "facts" (for example, the "facts" of blacks' imbecility, inarticulacy, hypersexuality, and subhumanity) are the source of the African American's social death. In order for the black bourgeois subject to exist at all, the "facts" that embody the African American's inferiority must be subordinated to the will for a refashioned self. The sonnet may be thought of as the sign of this will in operation; for a revolutionary Marxist poet like Hughes, who addresses the Italo-Ethiopian War in another register, parody in experimental form serves to some degree as a sign of his will, though in contrast to the precise self denoted by the sonnet, Hughes's will is directed toward revolutionary disorder

For formalist black poets who wrote about the Italo-Ethiopian War, the subjectivity of the poet was not opposed to the collective. This was African American poets' first departure from romantic and modernist procedures. Though the African American poet may in some cases be alienated from the authoritarian system that imposed racist, religious, social, and political regimes, the poet was part of the black collectivity, though the poet was also part of an idealized human collectivity. The second departure took place when the objective social content did not remain latent but instead became the directly perceived field of the poem—though this field was mediated by the consciousness of the poet and did not retain its own integrity as privileged *documents.* A third departure from modernist poetics by black poets was driven by the problem of poetic authority. In "Lyric Poetry and Society" Adorno observes the centrality and necessity of the lyric speaker who preserves both social and subjective experience—"all social experience being necessarily individual in character" (Dayton 2). Thus, there is an interplay between interiorized content and the outside world; specifically, the black bourgeois poet, rather than finding that he must exclude the world in order to achieve lyric expression, finds that he must encompass the Italo-Ethiopian War in order to voice his lyric, and the black lyricist strains to extend the capacity of the subjective mode into an intersubjective and transindividual mode. At the same time, while others situated more fortunately in society may take the possession of the "bourgeois" subjectivity as an inalienable right (and may reject subjectivity, or seek to alter or to destroy subjectivity), the black poet, as a self-in-process, may not make such a fortuitous claim. Instead, the black poet must struggle to forge his or her subjectivity from whatever materials may randomly come to hand. Analogues to the legendary example of Frederick Douglass's adventitious acquisition of the *Columbian Orator* include Owen Dodson's submission to a Keatsian disciplinary regime, Melvin B. Tolson's encounter with esotericism when his research on

the Harlem school of Negro writers confronted him with Jean Toomer's disciples, and Sterling Brown's hoodwinked encounter with the black South.[16]

Four of the major African American social realist poets of the thirties—Frank Marshall Davis, Welborn Victor Jenkins, Fenton Johnson, and Sterling Brown—did not write poems on the Italo-Ethiopian War. Langston Hughes's three poems on the war contain documentary elements, but the poems also employ parody. Parody is a significant nonrealist departure from the mode of poems based on reportage. Rukeyser, for example, combined lyric, epic, and dramatic modes in *The Book of the Dead* through collage and montage. According to Shulman, the poem "can be seen as a series of documentary photographs" (183). In comparison to this mode of documentary seriousness, it may be observed that Hughes's poems are not addressed to the specifics of the military campaigns or to geopolitical developments. The war simply did not exist as a directly observed and unmediated historical event for Hughes. It was not until N. Jay Hill wrote "An Ethiope in Spain" (*The Crisis,* July 1937: 202) that a poem describes an Ethiopian soldier in combat:

> Silent man of the hour is he,
>   Hurling back the ejector,
>   Loading, firing grimly;
> Exchanging few words with his company,
> For he spoke neither Italian
>   Nor Spanish.
> Though little English
>   And some French,
> For the most part he spoke Amharic.
> And that was not necessary.
>   For language could not match
>   The eloquence of his silence. (lines 17–28)

Hill's Ethiopian rifleman is Ghvet, who fought with the International Brigade in Spain. Presumably, he escaped to Europe from Ethiopia along with Selassie and his court. Ghvet, the son of Ras Imru, is depicted as a grimly destructive antifascist fighter, "A prince, with no bright jewel in his ear," and "a victim of civilized barbarity." Hill dwells on Ghvet's surrendered "black majesty" so that Ghvet comes to symbolize the transformation of the fractured world of the past into a future classless humanity. In Hill's world, the Italo-Ethiopian War had little or no meaning.

Owen Dodson's magisterial and resignedly elegiac sonnet "Desert in Ethiopia" (*Opportunity,* December 1935: 375) came the closest to describing the fighting in documentary detail:

Desert, be prepared to blow your sand:
Be prepared to bury all the dead
Within the ripples of your burning hand
Where coins of gold should sparkle white instead.
O desert, your smooth bosom must receive
The lost, the silent agonizing eyes
Of men whose banners drooped, whose sires believe
That you must efface their fiendish lies.
I know that hope alone is not release
From scintillating swords that catch the sun;
I know that peace must some day bleed for peace
If stars in nights to come will shine again
Upon this husk inhabited by men.

Dodson's sonnet was published two months after the Italians invaded Ethiopia, but it is clear that the poem was written during the tense period between Mussolini's declaration of his intention to annex Ethiopia and the 1935 invasion. Dodson has advanced beyond the enthusiasm of the call to arms and composed a solemn contemplation of the outcome of battle: in the face of the massive build-up of military equipment by the Italians, Dodson foresees the tragic outcome that awaits the Ethiopian fighters. Through its intertextual reliance on Shelley's "Ozymandias of Egypt" (1817), "Desert in Ethiopia" originates from a remote perspective that refuses every attribute of modernity. Here is Shelley's sonnet:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said:—Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Dodson's sonnet irrevocably recalls Baxter's similar handling of the war,

namely, the shifting of the modern crisis into the opposition of egotistic, oedipal (fascist) time and cosmic-natural time. By implication, Dodson interrogates Mussolini through the intertext; we cannot read his poem without thinking of the arrogant Italian dictator in terms of what remains of Shelley's pharaoh—"a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown / And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command" that is "half sunk" in the sand—who was destroyed by cosmic forces in the inevitable course of events on the planetary scale of history. And fortuitously, Shelley's sonnet has the word *stretch* in its final line, bringing to mind the prophecy that 'Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God." Dodson capitalizes on this Ethiopianist association by building up *stretch* into a metonymy and apostrophizing the desert. Thus, the desert is the reification of naturalistic reality: in the desert, human will is illusory. By invading Ethiopia, the Italians have abandoned the industrial-modern scale of dromomatic time for the reaches of infinity, where they are always already defeated, disintegrated, and nullified. Dodson's treatment of the theme of temporal conflict is rooted in a skepticism that he derived from Shelley. Jennifer Ann Wagner has described Shelley's revision of the conventional sonnet's relation to time: "In 'Ozymandias,' Shelley revises his view of the sonnet function, seeing it not so much as that which memorializes but more importantly as that which forces one to look forward, since the poem teaches us that history—the progression of time forward—will not allow one to monumentalize any single instance and indeed will itself mock the mouth or the hand that thinks so" (73). Skepticism insists on closure, whereas in Baxter's romantic Ethiopianism there is no means to admit a limiting component of realism. Dodson's contemplation of the modern situation allows him to see not the end of an era but the end of human time and the requisite extinction of humanity. Dodson's Spenglerian historiography demotes humanity to mites who cling to a "husk" (line 14).

Addressing Waring Cuney's "'Ozimandias'-like [*sic*] reflections" in Cuney's poem "Dust," DuPlessis observes that "the critique by African American writers of the notions, and location, of the 'civilized' is one response to the plethora of 'primitivisms' in Euro-American work. In the 'civilization' trope, African American writers try to criticize and reconsider the locus of the 'primitive' against dominant discourse. Gail Bederman has argued that the hegemonic 'discourse of civilization' was, at root, a white-supremacist, male-supremacist set of ideas" (*Genders* 130). Since Mussolini characterized Ethiopia as "an African country universally branded as a country without the slightest shadow of civilization" (Mussolini 1935), Dodson's "Desert in Ethiopia" may best be read as his response to the fascist dictator's aggressive and specific investment in the "civilization" trope. After the defeat of Ethiopia, the "civilization" trope was again invoked by fascist apologists: the

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Italians saw their victory as a conquest that "[opened] the doors to work and Italian civilization" (*Il Piccolo*). By reducing the Earth to a "husk," a worthless outer covering, Dodson mocks the Italian claim of possessing and disseminating civilization:

> I know that peace must some day bleed for peace
> If stars in nights to come will shine again
> Upon this husk inhabited by men. (lines 12–14)

"Desert in Ethiopia," however, is an irregular sonnet, having only thirteen lines. Dodson's model, Shelley's "Ozymandias," is also an irregular sonnet (*ababacdcedefef*), and Wagner speaks of its "Chinese box structure," its "complex narrative structure," its "resistance to closure," and its "resistance to the monumentality of the visionary moment in the Wordsworth sonnet" (70). Wagner links these effects to the questioning of lyric subjectivity (71). The failure of formal soundness in Dodson's sonnet underscores his downcast, resigned handling of the conflict between the Italian invaders and the Ethiopian defenders, a conflict that was almost certain to end in disaster for the Ethiopians. For Dodson, a racial component is at work: so long as the world is driven by "fiendish lies" (line 8) about race, the very existence of mankind will be threatened.

Italian and Ethiopian accounts of the cost of the war differ greatly:

> Italian approximative estimation of Ethiopian losses are 40 to 50 thousand men in the Northern front and 15 to 20 thousand in the Southern front. Conversely, the Ethiopian government claimed that 275,000 officers and soldiers had been killed in the war and 78,500 patriots during the five years of Italian occupation. In addition Ethiopia claimed another 477,800 civilians had died as a direct result of the Italian invasion and the ensuing years of guerilla warfare. (Sbacchi 91)

Despite the scale of the conflict, the specific battles of the Italo-Ethiopian War are nearly absent in African American poetry. Ada S. Woolfolk's two quatrains on the fighting in "Via Crucis" (*Opportunity,* January 1936: 23) broaches the subject but nevertheless confines her treatment to the passion-lynching trope. In her poem, each Ethiopian soldier is an analogue of Christ who must lift his own cross as he marches to Calvary:

VIA CRUCIS

> Caesar has come again. No other's eyes

Or bitter lips could be so proud. Unfurled,
The flags of war, with shadows stain the skies,
And trail a pall of death across the world.

In Ethiopia the war drums moan,
And bare feet march. Each soldier's panoply
Of war, a cross that he must lift—his own—
His marching road, the slope of Calvary.

The treatment of the fighting as a *passion* is more often developed around the iconic figure of Haile Selassie; the actual fighting has been replaced by the trope of the passion of Haile Selassie. As the Italians closed in during the final phase of the invasion, Selassie fled Ethiopia, ultimately relocating to Bath, England. Selassie's removal to Europe was controversial. Langston Hughes implied in his poem "Broadcast" that Selassie was a coward. Others recognized that without Selassie's presence on the world stage, there would have been no voice that could have spoken adequately to the European powers on behalf of Ethiopia's survival as a nation.

For African American poets who were interested in using the passion trope, the speech that Selassie delivered to the League of Nations in 1936 was a signal event of the Italo-Ethiopian War. (As Selassie was not a role model for Hughes and other social-realist poets, their work composes the opposite side of the debate and does not recognize the relevance of Selassie's passion.) P. J. White Jr.'s "Vestis Virumque Cano" (*Opportunity*, January 1936: 10) puts the passion-lynching trope in perspective, though White's sonnet, which was published months before Selassie's transfiguring speech, is mired in an abject treatment of the entire race-war theme. Published in the same month as Haywood's "Via Crucis," White's poem constructs the opposite pole of the nigger/Christ dyad; in White's treatment of Selassie, there can be no transcendence. The white American's response to the Ethiopian "potentate" is inevitably, "Now, who the hell let these damned niggers in?" (line 14). Subsequent poems on Selassie's speech by Marcus B. Christian ("Selassie at Geneva") and by Violet G. Haywood ("Selassie") were published in 1938 and in 1939, respectively, well after Selassie's speech. These poems contextualize the historical drama surrounding Selassie in terms of a romantic-subjective religious discourse. In Christian's sonnet, the failure of the League initiates the end of the world, and the concluding couplet proclaims, "As weaker nations vanish, one by one . . . / Blow, bugles! Armageddon has begun!" (lines 13–14). In Haywood's poem Selassie's speech is equated (at the expense of all historical detail) with Christ's betrayal in Gethsemane—"He walked into a garden, too" (line 1).

After eight months of fighting, the Italians were able to bring their muddled campaign to a victorious conclusion. On May 5, 1936, Italy occupied Addis Abba and a few days later annexed all of Ethiopia. This catastrophic event met with little response from African American poets, the most significant exception being Langston Hughes. Hughes's programmatic attitude toward world events demanded a poem, so he supplied one. Hughes's response was "Broadcast on Ethiopia," a forty-seven-line send-up of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Hughes's poem parodies the modernist document-poem, though it also takes aim at Ezra Pound's poetic sequence on the First World War, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Where Pound's poem laments—

> There died a myriad,
> And of the best, among them,
> For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
> For a botched civilization (lines 98–101)

Hughes answers,

> Mussolini,
> Grit your teeth!
> Civilization's gone to hell!
> Major Bowes, ring your bell! (lines 31–35)

Hughes's poem is an example of the revolutionary impact of radio on the culture of the thirties: "Radio broke down what MacLeish called 'the superstition of distance': 'the superstition that what is done beyond three thousand miles of water is not really done at all; . . . that violence and lies and murder on another continent are not violence and lies and murder'" (Stott 137). While radio may generally have consolidated the collective identity of African Americans toward a closer association with the Ethiopian underdogs, in "Broadcast" Hughes responded to the occupation of Ethiopia with an eccentric mixture of irony, comedy, and ambiguity that emotionally distanced the reader from the catastrophe:

BROADCAST ON ETHIOPIA

The little fox is still.
    The dogs of war have made their kill.
    Addis Ababa
    Across the headlines all year long.
    Ethiopia—

Tragi-song for the news reels.
Haile
With his slaves, his dusky wiles,
His second-hand planes like a child's,
But he has no gas—so he cannot last.
Poor little joker with no poison gas!
Thus his people now may learn
How Il Duce makes butter from an empty churn
To butter the bread
(If bread there be)
Of civilization's misery.

MISTER CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

DJIBOUTI, French Somaliland, May 4 (AP)—Emperor Haile Selassie and imperial family, in flight from his crumbling empire, reached the sanctuary of French soil and a British destroyer today. . . .

HE USED RHYTHM FOR HIS COMPASS

Hunter, hunter, running, too—
Look what's after you:

PARIS, May 4 (UP)—COMMUNIST STOP FRANCE'S SWEEP LEFT. Minister of Colonies Defeated. Rise From 10 to 85 Seats.

France ain't Italy!

No, but Italy's cheated
When *any* Minister anywhere's
Defeated by Communists.
Goddamn! I swear! Hitler,
Tear your hair! Mussolini,
Grit your teeth!
Civilization's gone to hell!
Major Bowes, ring your bell!

(Gong!)

Station XYZW broadcasting:
MISTER CHRISTOPHER COLOMBO

> Just made a splendid kill.
> The British Legation stands solid on its hill
> The natives run wild in the streets.
> The fox is still.
>
> Addis Ababa
> In headlines all year long.
> Ethiopia—tragi-song.

Hughes's poem, effecting an aleatory methodology, places the thirties reader within the modern experience of tuning back and forth across a radio dial: this familiar yet relatively exciting and novel activity brings in news, music, and a talent contest. The randomness of the assembled texts is illusory, for the mediating consciousness of the speaker (in Eliotic terms, Hughes's Tiresias[17]) has determined that the *broadcast* is *on Ethiopia*. More importantly, the speaker makes partisan comments, bringing up the issue of Ethiopian slavery in the eighth line.[18] When in line 36 the speaker says, "Major Bowes, ring your bell!" telling the host of the "Original Amateur Hour" to expel "Civilization" from the talent contest, it is understood that the intermittent shows are devices that comment on world politics. The speaker has inserted the war into the broadcast and has then assumed the role of the voting public and ousted the failed performance of bourgeois civilization.

Some of the questions raised by "Broadcast on Ethiopia" may be resolved by noting that the poem's venue was *American Spectator* (July–August 1936), a left-wing publication. The appearance of "Broadcast" in such a publication not only separated the poem from Hughes's African American readership but also placed the poem before a readership that consisted of radical sophisticates who would be familiar with the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. For such a readership, Eliot was in particular the sign of everything that was culturally and politically objectionable. A straw man for leftist critics, Eliot was associated with fascism, elitism, and the enervation of bourgeois capitalism.[19] Hughes's appropriation and parody of the Eliotic style before such a readership was a sure sign that he knew his approach would be read as a send-up of *The Waste Land*, one of the major texts opposed to leftist aesthetic production in the 1930s. Hughes has incorporated and transformed some of Eliot's major motifs, such as the dog motif:

> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying "Stetson!
> "You were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> "Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

> "Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
> "Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
> "Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
> "You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"
> (*The Waste Land* lines 69–76)

The dog in "Broadcast" is cut from a different cloth than Eliot's dreadfully burrowing dog. The fox/dog dyad of "The little fox is still. / The dogs of war have made their kill" (lines 1–2) plays on the association of the packs of hounds used to hunt foxes, and thereby the lines achieve an unavoidable association with class privilege, so that for Hughes the Ethiopian fox has been dispatched by the ruling class. In the fourteen lines that follow the opening metaphor—the fascist dogs have killed the little fox—Hughes exhibits little sympathy for either the Ethiopian populace or the routinely iconic Haile Selassie. The first line demotes the lion of Judah to a fox, and the ninth line reduces Selassie to a child; in the eleventh line, he is a "poor little joker," and in the news broadcast of lines 18–20, he is a refugee "in flight from his crumbling empire." Having dismissed Selassie from serious consideration, the speaker reveals himself to be a Marxist concerned with a world revolution that will treat the present governments of Europe just as the fascists have treated Ethiopia: "Hunter, hunter, running, too— / Look what's after you" (lines 22–23). Hughes directs his efforts toward delineating a class-based collective identity in which Haile Selassie has been assigned to the "them" side of the us/them dyad.

The topical thrust of Hughes's poem changes at the fifteenth line, "MISTER CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS," where Hughes has inserted three lines from the Fats Waller song "Mr. Christopher Columbus."[20] A hit in 1935, the comic jazz song would have been familiar to readers. Hughes's inclusion of a jazz lyric is an echo and parody of the improbable jazz lyric in *The Waste Land*:

> O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
> It's so elegant
> So intelligent (lines 128–30)

The use of Waller's cartoonish song in a poem addressed to a major event in Western history erases a tragic interpretation of the war. Hughes's thesis is that only the capitalist-communist class war was real, so the Italian–Ethiopian race war was not to be taken seriously by revolutionaries. Through his reference to the newsreels (line 6)—newsreels were shown in newsreel houses all over Manhattan—Hughes's poem dismisses the war as profit-driven. By

inference, sensationalized news was but one more form of entertainment and escape used by the masses during the Great Depression. Thus, he mocks the masses and the "news"—"Tragi-song for the news reels." Waller's complex song anarchically revises the historical discovery of the Americas: despite Waller's lyrics, Columbus did employ the compass on his voyages. Waller's song is itself a surrealistic heteroglossia in which Waller assumes a rapid succession of disparate personae: the American common man, the mock-authoritative academic, the Negro stereotype, and the aesthete. Layered on these layers is yet another level of wordplay, so that Waller declares the world "roundo" and their condition "soundo," a device that Hughes may have used to further connect Eliot's poem (with its "OOO") to his. Despite the apparent heteroglossia of Hughes's broadcast and its kaleidoscopic intertexts, the "Broadcast" is centered on the manifest occurrence of subjectivity, when the "I" who asserts that "Italy's cheated / when *any* minister anywhere's / Defeated by Communists. / Goddamn! I swear!" (lines 27–30) raises its voice to shout down the counterthesis, "France ain't Italy!" (line 26). The recorded version of Waller's song concludes with a sham history lesson recited in a stilted manner ("In the year 1492 / Columbus sailed the ocean blue"), and a final phrase is delivered as an ironically admonitory "What'd I say?" It was customary for Waller to close a recorded song by inserting a non sequitur, such as "One never knows do one?" at the end of "Your Feets Too Big." This signature device framed the completed song in a larger and consistent persona that was more authentic than the succession of voices that were assembled throughout his songs. In this way Waller asserted a final, authoritative, personal identity over all of his subvoices. With his "I swear" (line 30), Hughes's Marxist-revolutionary speaker, similarly, inserts his voice over and above the discourse network of the radio and "enthrone[s] the reflexive individual as the principal operator in history and human consciousness as the principal originator of messages" (Winthrop-Young 401). Despite the politics aired in the poem, Hughes's agitation-propaganda ultimately gives way to a speaker situated in bourgeois subjectivity.

With Selassie's flight from Ethiopia, "Broadcast" changes from a parody of high-modernist poetry to a Marxist comedy in which Hughes seeks to dismiss Selassie, Hitler, and Mussolini as a "tragi-song" (line 43), last season's hit song that no longer elicits emotions from the listener. Hughes's response to the end of the Italo-Ethiopian War did not address the war's human cost, nor did it take into account the effects of the war in destabilizing the League of Nations and the dire consequences for the world order. Though he generally avoided sentimentalizing Ethiopia and Haile Selassie, Hughes gave into this temptation in "Broadcast," a poem that propagandizes for inhumane regimes, so that Hughes produces a hollow, sentimental treatment of the

technological world of mass communication, forcing the poem to confirm his belief in an inevitable "SWEEP LEFT" (line 24).

J. Harvey L. Baxter, like other poets writing on the Italo-Ethiopian War (with the exception of Hughes) resolved the problems raised by the uneven battles, the defeat of the Ethiopian army, and Italy's conquest of Ethiopia by iconizing Haile Selassie. Selassie's speech before the League of Nations came, rather as a last resort, to fulfill the meaning of the enigmatic phrase that stood prophetically at the center of African American Ethiopianism—"Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" (*KJV* Psalms 68:31). In January 1936, many months before Selassie's speech, Rufus Gibson published his thirty-eight line poem "The Voice of Ethiopia" in *The Crisis*. The poem concludes,

> Long since have ravenous hordes despoiled our land,
> Long centuries did they our trust betray.
> *Now Ethiopia must stretch forth her hand*
> First unto God for refuge and for strength,
> That we may now our Native land reclaim
> And drive usurpers from its breadth and length.
> O sons and daughters mine, let not in shame
> Men rise to speak of Ethiopia's name. (lines 31–38; emphasis added)

Gibson's sonnet separates the emancipation of Ethiopia and the men rising to speak. However, the hurried and unrealistic compression of the military reclamation in two lines (lines 11–12) deemphasizes the war of liberation and subordinates fighting to speaking Ethiopia's name in the concluding couplet. This makes the speech-act, which is given emphasis by its place in the concluding line, synonymous with Ethiopia's emancipatory agency; Gibson seems to prepare the way for Baxter's Selassie-centered treatment of the Ethiopian crisis. In "Oh, Hang Your Heads, A Voice Accusing Cries," Baxter takes on the unique technical difficulties of reducing Selassie's climactic speech to the League of Nations to the thematic and formal limitations of an English sonnet—compressing nearly 4,000 words into 104 words. This literary exercise combines the documentary impulse with the need to enshrine and sublimate what was for many African Americans the emperor's most significant act—a redemptive speech-act (literally and figuratively). Baxter seeks to substitute Selassie's address to the League of Nations for victory on the battlefield. The sonnet thus attempts to transform the military defeat of the Ethiopians into the emperor's moral victory over Italy and the League. As we might expect, Baxter's romantic-documentary treatment of Selassie's

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contradicts what purported to be factual accounts of the event. *Time Magazine* described Selassie as "the bird-like little Ethiopian" who spoke while "Italian journalists in the press gallery . . . bellowed jeers and curses at the Emperor, screamed 'Viva Il Duce!'" (*Time Europe,* July 13, 1936).

Baxter's sonnet bypasses the subject of Italy's military atrocities, a subject so near the heart of Selassie's speech that *Time* magazine was compelled to quote Selassie's harrowing account of Italian military tactics: "Groups of nine, 15 or 18 aircraft followed one another so that the fog issuing from them formed a continuous sheet. It was thus that, as from the end of January 1936, soldiers, women, children, cattle, rivers, lakes and pastures were drenched continually with this deadly rain. In order to kill off systematically all living creatures and in order more surely to poison the waters and pastures, the Italian command made its aircraft pass over and over again" (*Time Europe,* July 13, 1936). As the *Time* article indicated, Selassie's speech was simultaneously factual and noble. Nothing of this tenor is projected by Baxter's sonnet, which narrates the event through exaggerated histrionics, as though it were a scene dramatized by Shakespeare; indeed, line 6—"And rid your ghastly togas of the stain"—may be interpreted as an allusion to the assassination in *Julius Caesar.* Baxter's poetic line is pseudo-Shakespearean pastiche: while *stain* and *ghastly* belong to the Shakespearean lexicon (47 and 8 usages, respectively, in Shakespeare's plays), in Shakespeare there are *robes* but no *togas*. Certainly, Baxter's lines "a voice accusing cries, /And points a finger shaking in your face" (lines 1–2) does not describe Selassie's actual speech; journalists believed that the emperor appeared to be "in total control and thus contempt and not anger was the emotion he felt" (Schwab 70–71).

Selassie's speech was also marked by factors of negative identity, for the Italian journalists (according to Selassie's autobiography) "started to whistle continuously with the intention of obstructing Our speech and rendering it inaudible" (Schwab 71). Moreover, the speech itself was delivered in an unknown language: "Ethiopia's Emperor read his speech in Amharic, a dignified language in which the syllables telescope into each other so closely that for minutes at a time His Majesty seemed to be uttering one enormous word" (*Time Europe*). Therefore, it is not surprising that the subtext of Baxter's sonnet is freighted with the trope of the passion-lynching,[21] which was already a familiar construct for the African American interpretation of the Italo-Ethiopian War. In Baxter's sonnet the lynching motif is announced by associating Selassie with Christ ("King of Kings"), by "oh hang" (line 1), and by the multiple readings that may be derived from "Don the ashy sackcloth, raid the hair" (line 5), with its implicit theme of death and mourning[22] and with its lexicon of lynching (*ash, hang,* and *raid).*

OH, HANG YOUR HEADS, A VOICE ACCUSING CRIES
(A KING OF KINGS BEFORE THE LEAGUE)

Oh, hang your heads, a voice accusing cries,
And points a finger shaking in your face.
Bewails of sickly treachery and lies,
Of noble oaths that welter in disgrace.
Don the ashy sackcloth, raid the hair
And rid your ghastly togas of the stain;
Albeit that your proffered words were fair,
Time has revealed your pompous speech was vain.
I did not ask for bounties of your blood,
Demand your sons for sacrifice supreme,
Yet I was led, believing that you would
Be succor and a shield to the extreme.
Bereft of friends, by evil foes beset,—
"God will remember, time will not forget."

While much of the sonnet is a paraphrase of Selassie's speech, Baxter has consistently shifted the meanings of the original words. The first seven lines have little to do with Selassie's original text, while the sestet paraphrases some of the words of the speech: "Albeit that your proffered words were fair, / Time has revealed your pompous speech, was vain" (lines 7–8) paraphrases Selassie's assertion that "all this was in vain: the arbitrators, two of whom were Italian officials, were forced to recognize unanimously that in the Walwal incident, as in the subsequent incidents, no international responsibility was to be attributed to Ethiopia" (Selassie "Appeal"). The weakened "I" that asserts itself in the sestet of "Oh, Hang Your Heads" characterizes Selassie's actions negatively—"I did not ask" (line 9)—and passively—"Yet I was led" (line 11), yet in the "Appeal" there is no hint of such a tendency toward self-cancellation:

> The Ethiopian Government never expected other Governments to shed their soldiers' blood to defend the Covenant when their own immediately personal interests were not at stake. Ethiopian warriors asked only for means to defend themselves. On many occasions I have asked for financial assistance for the purchase of arms. That assistance has been constantly refused me. What, then, in practice, is the meaning of Article 16 of the Covenant and of collective security? (Selassie "Appeal")

In "Oh, Hang Your Heads" the subject position differs between the octave and the sestet. The "Appeal" begins "I, Haile Selassie I, Emperor of

Ethiopia, am here today to claim that justice which is due to my people, and the assistance promised to it eight months ago, when fifty nations asserted that aggression had been committed in violation of international treaties." Why, then, has Baxter suppressed the first person in the octave in favor of a version of Selassie who cannot claim himself to be an "I" and must refer to his own disassociated *voice* and *finger* instead of enunciating himself as an "I," as he did in the "Appeal"? Baxter implies that Selassie's subject position as the racialized abject-Other has been conflated with an already assassinated Julius Caesar; although Baxter's version of Selassie delivers a funeral oration like Antony, he is also speaking from the grave about himself. For Baxter, Selassie is in effect a political corpse. As Kristeva observes, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject." (1982 4). Indeed, in a reversal of subject and object, Baxter's Selassie invokes God in the last line of the sonnet and thereby confirms his political abjection (though the real Selassie did not invoke God in the "Appeal"). As may be seen in many other poems in the African American antilynching discourse, Baxter has consigned his victim, Selassie, to the consolation of eternal life in God's kingdom. Selassie presented himself to the League of Nations as an imperial figure and was able to maintain that identity even though his speech accomplished nothing directly. When Baxter at last allows Selassie to assert himself as "I" in the ninth and eleventh lines, Selassie is reduced to a figure separated from blues subjectivity only by the pseudo-Shakespearean cast of his lament—"Bereft of friends, by evil foes beset" (line 13)—which is not far from "My friends don't see me, no, they just pass me by, / I wouldn't mind it so much, but they hold their heads so high" (Oliver Paul 81).

The concluding line of the sonnet, "God will remember, time will not forget," is Baxter's stylistically deflated rendition of Selassie's "God and history will remember your judgment ("Appeal"). However, this was not the conclusion of Selassie's speech but only the end of the ninth section of his ten-part speech. Baxter surrenders the opportunity to depict the sense of defiant expectation that characterized the portentous conclusion of Selassie's "Appeal": "Representatives of the World I have come to Geneva to discharge in your midst the most painful of the duties of the head of a State. What reply shall I have to take back to my people?"

Race war is a topic distant from the twenty-first century. Yet the prospect of race war was an inescapable component of African American culture during the thirties. One factor that brought race war to wide attention in the thirties was the activity of George S. Schuyler, America's best-known black journalist. Schuyler was an iconoclastic social critic and a pioneering, prolific, and innovative genre writer who wrote fearlessly about the issues of his day. One such topic was Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Outraged by the Fascists' takeover of the ancient, independent African kingdom and believing

that African Americans should voice their objections and offer assistance to Ethiopia, Schuyler turned to fiction to arouse his public. Schuyler's serialized novels were published in the *Pittsburgh Courier,* a widely distributed publication that provided Schuyler's writings (and the idea of race war) a considerable audience of African American readers. In fact, while Schuyler was writing his story on the Italo-Ethiopian War, he lived in Mississippi, where he worked to increase the *Courier*'s circulation. Printed as weekly serials, "Black Internationale" appeared in the *Courier* from November 1936 to July 1937, and "Black Empire" ran from October 1937 to April 1938. Reviews of Schuyler's serials and accounts of his career do not accurately describe these works. Most accounts are restricted to reporting that the serials narrate the exploits of the Black Internationale, a radical African American group equipped with scientific superweapons and led by a charismatic sociopath, Doctor Belsidus, who succeeds in creating an independent nation on the African continent. What is routinely omitted is that Belsidus was determined to exterminate the white race, and he would have ethnically cleansed the planet of the white race had his key agents been more fanatical. Doctor Belsidus did eradicate white people from the African continent.

Schuyler also published two other serials in the *Courier*—"Ethiopian Murder Mystery," set in Harlem and concerning the murder of an Ethiopian prince, and "Revolt in Ethiopia," concerning a plot to arm the Ethiopian fighters. In these fictions Schuyler sought to dispel commonly held misconceptions about Africa and the relationship of African Americans to Africans.

I have brought Schuyler into the discussion of Baxter's sonnets because I feel that such a comparison assists in the evaluation of Baxter's treatment of the Italo-Ethiopian War. It is clear that Schuyler chose serialized science fiction and detective fiction in order to communicate serious ideas to the African American populace during a time of crisis. Schuyler's Ethiopian serials are pulp fiction with no literary polish or psychological complexity; they are in the final analysis propaganda disguised as entertainments. While it is not at first obvious that there is a connection between Baxter's poems on Ethiopia and Schuyler's serialized stories, the suitability of Baxter's sonnets is put into perspective by Schuyler's success with popular forms. It is doubtful that Baxter would have done better in attempting to influence African Americans on behalf of Ethiopia with modernist-experimental, documentary-montage poems. It is also arguable that Baxter's inaccurate depiction of an emotional Haile Selassie (particularly, in his concluding sonnet) was a similarly apt choice. In an ideal world, Baxter would have retained Haile Selassie's composure in his rendering of the Emperor, but in communicating with African Americans in the thirties, such a strategy would no doubt have caused his poem to miss its mark. Baxter's accusatory posture carried the requisite emotional tenor that allowed his poems to reach his black audi-

ence. Like Schuyler's pulp serials, the sonnet was not culturally threatening to the African American reader,[23] and Baxter's familiar tone of passionate affront was in the range of attitudes that are commonly heard in African American sermons. As I have shown above, it is also an attitude commonly encountered in the blues.

During the Depression, African Americans gained an increased sense of participation in the creation of national identity even though there was at every level of American life a united effort to exclude them. As Alexander M. Bain has shown, Schuyler placed his prescient and corrective analysis of the ultimate meaning of the Italian fascist adventure in Africa at the disposal of his wide African American readership:

> In his July 1935 "Views and Reviews" column Schuyler asks *Courier* readers to balance the urge to "do or die for dear old Ethiopia" against the imperative to organize at home. "As an old soldier," Schuyler opines, "I would certainly like to participate in such an adventure and press a machine-gun trigger on the Italian hordes as they toiled over the Ethiopian terrain. . . . But it is all I can do to meet the exactions of the landlord, the butcher, the groceryman, the laundryman, the public utilities . . . and the other parasites that feed upon me." . . . Regardless of their identification with "dear old Ethiopia," Schuyler warns his readers that fantasy can only be validated through some correlation to meeting the demands of the home front. . . . But he ends the column by proclaiming that "the Ethiopian-Italian embroglio" [*sic*] will wreak worldwide violence on the "parasites," and that he is "frankly tickled at the prospect. All the great exploiting powers of the world who are squeezing and exploiting the colored brethren in Africa, Asia and America stand to lose everything by another world war." (950)

As the above passage demonstrates, Schuyler had an awareness of both domestic and international realities, which he effectively related to the troubles of the present and to the looming dangers of the future. In contrast with Schuyler's realistic grasp of the crisis as battle, poverty, and oppression, African American poets retained their interest in the person of Haile Selassie. Marcus Christian's sonnet "Selassie at Geneva," published in *Opportunity* in June of 1938, maintains the centrality of Selassie's passion until it reaches the thirteenth line, where its subject is finally made clear—the annexation of Austria by Germany in March of 1938.

SELASSIE AT GENEVA

They could have stayed the iron hand of might

And fought for right down to the earth's last man,
But louder voices brayed into the night,
So jackals ended what the League began.
Now suave-voiced diplomats drone on and on;
Geneva's air is rife with fear and hate,
While at the council-table fights alone
The fallen ruler of a member State.
Pile lies upon wrongs, bring the curtains down
Upon the closing scene of this last act;
The King of Kings now yields his ancient crown
To those who signed the Non-Aggression Pact,
As weaker nations vanish, one by one . . .
Blow, bugles! Armageddon has begun!

Here the documentary tendency has entered only to the degree that references to "member State" and the "Non-Aggression Pact" situate the poem as a recapitulation of Selassie's 1936 speech in Geneva. In Schuyler's terms, the sonnet is immersed in *fantasy:* there is biblical imagery ("iron hand," "jackals," "King of Kings," and "Armageddon"), dramatic imagery ("bring the curtains down / Upon the closing scene of this last act"), and unevenly applied quasi-Shakespearean rhetoric ("And fought for right down to the earth's last man"). Christian's sonnet obsessively connects the failure of nerve by the European powers during the Ethiopian crisis to the events that in 1938 were leading to world war. However, as compelling as the tragic-subjective reading of world history was for Christian and other Ethiopianists, the phase of identification with a black imperial subjectivity did open African Americans to new social identities invested with agency and autonomy that prepared the way for an even wider participation in the new social conditions that were soon to follow.

Schuyler was a complex and contradictory figure: he demanded much from his audience, while at the same time he disparaged not only African Americans but also the human race.[24] Schuyler hoped to mobilize his readers to directly assist the Ethiopian cause, a project that was far too difficult to be undertaken in the face of the United States government and the disorganization of African American institutions. There were too many intervening levels of myth, taboo, fear, and trauma that needed to be cleared away for African Americans to grapple with the distant, exotic, and horrifying war that simultaneously energized and enervated. What the Italo-Ethiopian War did, however, was bring to the attention of African Americans the dangerous nature of the modern world with its aggressive global fixations on race, a problem that had previously presented only intimate and local connotations.

Michael Kimmel observes that "the project of the self—of an identity that one 'works on' for one's entire life—is itself the cornerstone of modernity" (x). Thus, as African Americans were brought into the modernizing mainstream by travel, education, journalism, literature, film, and above all radio, individually and socially they rapidly evolved new and sophisticated psychological faculties. As I have stated above, "the preparation for war, is the beginning of the modern industrial economy" (Virilio). For African Americans, it was the beginning of a new form of subjectivity—one that was less self-alienated, more fluid, and more transparent. Pauli Murray described this new understanding of the participatory African American self in "Until the Final Man" in 1940:

> Oh, brown brothers, freedom is but to stand
> Erect from earth like stalwart trees
> That rear defiant heads against the wrath of storms,
> Roots wed with earth, deep-dwelling;
> To grow independently as leaves,
> Each from its own bough,
> Absorbing sunlight to itself;
> To rise in formless mists,
> All heaven to take shape in,
> And to return distinct and separate as raindrops;
> To know the vast equality of sands upon the shore,
> To each in time the wave returning. (lines 18–29)

Haunted by the threat of race war through the Depression, African Americans eventually recognized the nature of the even more complex and perilous actualities that faced them at the end of the decade, a situation given testimony by the militarized images on the covers of *The Crisis* throughout 1940 and by the caption that queried in December 1940—"When Do *We* Fly?" (emphasis in original). The NAACP organized a letter-writing campaign (*The Crisis,* November 1940, 357) to encourage African Americans to send letters to the president, to generals Marshall and Abrams, and to the commissioners in charge of hiring at defense plants. When the United States finally entered World War II, labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a march on Washington to protest job discrimination in the military and other defense-related activities. In response, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, stating that all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, would be allowed to participate fully in the defense of the United States.