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Review

NADIA NURHUSSEIN, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America*

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Reviews

city (p. 182). The chapter also considers other spaces such as night clubs and the Ethiopian highland rally in discussions pertaining to the transformation of space in the second half of the twentieth century.

Methodologically, Bromber's refreshing work draws mostly on primary sources such as newspapers, personal conversations, and memoirs as well as secondary history books. Perhaps the one thing worth mentioning is how the analysis relating to sports in the early twentieth century is entirely limited to Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase's rule. A contextual and historical study of the place of sports in the pre-Ḥaylā Śəllase era would have allowed Bromber to make links with the century upon which she focuses. For example, Bromber suggests that the emperor promoted the boy scout movement as a means to enable the transforming of young boys into soldiers (p. 51). This was also true of nineteenth century Ethiopia, for boys were trained in physical fitness to serve as warriors from an early age. Such links would have allowed us to observe more acutely how Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase actually transformed the urban scene. The interesting question that arises here is: did the emperor try to create loyal soldiers and cadets through the promotion of the boy scouts programme with the idea that the traditional ways of training young boys would create a youth that would inevitably challenge his rule?

Nonetheless, the book is a great source to consult for those interested in Ethiopia's modern history from the point of view of cultural and social transformations, as well as for those interested in global sports studies.

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NADIA NURHUSSEIN, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America* (Princeton, NJ–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019). xv, 259 pp. Price: €35.00. ISBN: 978-0-691-19096-9.

Black Land is a literary criticism work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American poetry, novels and plays. The book is divided into eight chapters, with an introduction and conclusion all dealing with how Ethiopia fed African American creative productions revolving around their own racialized politics, and notions of international black solidarity and imperialism. At the heart of it is the space Ethiopia occupies as a mythical land as well as a historical-political entity. The book explores selected African American literary and cultural productions presented following a chronological development of historical events in Ethiopia from Emperor Tewodros II's relations with England (specifically, the Napier expedition of 1867–1868), until the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia in

1935 under Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase. *Black Land* presents the development of a trans-continental black nationalism and solidarity inspired by Ethiopia's rulers, Ethiopia's mythical historical past as well as internal North American socio-political realities during a period when Ethiopia was at the height of its presence in the works of African American intellectuals.

Nurhussein is clear from the get-go about the theoretical framework she will adopt about Ethiopia and its history. She leans on revisionist historical readings of Ethiopia's past by drawing mostly on scholars of Oromo studies (Mohammed Hassen) who view Ethiopia as an expanding empire that was as much a part of the scramble for Africa as the European countries in the late nineteenth century. It is from here that she launches her critical readings of various African American books, poems, theatrical productions as well as newspaper articles, drawings and images pertaining to Ethiopia and its rulers. Nurhussein demonstrates how important Ethiopia was to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African Americans as a 'model of black empire' (p. 10) but also brings to light the contradictions behind this; namely, that Ethiopia was itself an empire that was subjugating other black people (p. 11). This is a running theme throughout the book, '[t]o honor a black king [...] proves troublesome from a democratic pan-African perspective [...], there is a persistent tension between the desire to celebrate the grandiosity of a historic black empire on the one hand and the commitment to democratic ideals on the other' (p. 144). Nurhussein says that many 'African American writers (like Hughes) viewed Ethiopia, an imperial state that had doubled in size during Emperor Menelik's reign, through both imperial and anti-imperialist lenses' (p. 165).

Nurhussein is an associate professor of English and Africana studies at Johns Hopkins University who analyses selected works by authors such as George S. Schuyler, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, Harry Dean and Walt Whitman in the book under review. These selected works have been complemented with archival and historical research. For example, when discussing literary works about Ethiopia's Emperor Tewodros II, Nurhussein begins with a brief historical account of what transpired to make him famous outside Ethiopia. Tewodros had attempted to get skilled workers from England to help his country produce weapons but had eventually arrested the missionaries and other representatives that came to Ethiopia frustrated at Queen Victoria not taking him seriously enough. This led to the Napier expedition in which Britain sent a large army (British Museum workers too) to help rescue the prisoners. Thus, Tewodros gained international fame; and Nurhussein demonstrates how some in the European and American media praised him for daring to stand up to the British Lion, while others mocked his folly (pp. 36–50). She discusses British poetry about this

Anglo–Ethiopian event,¹ and then links it to Emperor Tewodros’ reception in African American literary circles.² The book develops this way until the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia, discussing works pertaining to the various historical moments happening in Ethiopia in relation to African American internal struggles with Jim Crow.

As a historian, the reviewer thinks the reader might benefit from some corrections in what concerns Ethiopian history. Primarily, Nurhusein uses the word Abyssinia as though it were historically or contemporarily a term of identification for the country in discussion (pp. 6, 70). Calling Ethiopian rulers ‘Abyssinian’ or their ambitions, the country’s terrains, cultures, and so on ‘Abyssinian’ is constant throughout the book (see for instance pp. 70, 121, 131). If we are to begin with Emperor Tewodros, Ethiopia’s succeeding rulers and their correspondences and seals declare ‘King of Kings of Ethiopia’ and not Abyssinia. In addition to this, Nurhusein writes, ‘[a]lthough it was not until the 1931 constitution that the country of Abyssinia officially took the name “Ethiopia,” the correspondence between the two names goes back much further’ (p. 6). While true that Abyssinia (some argue it was a local ancient place name) and Ethiopia seem to have some conflation in the minds of—often—foreign writers and travellers, historically, 1931 only saw the ratification of Ethiopia’s first ‘modern’ constitution in place of other traditional forms of legal administration; namely, as often approximately assumed, the *Fəṭha Nəgäst* (‘Law of Kings’, the authoritative law book of the country). It did not name the country Ethiopia, and this conflation of the ratification of a constitution with the naming of the country is strange.

Another comment concerns the 1896 battle of ‘Adwa which is an important historical event in the elevation of Ethiopia’s image in African American creative works. Nurhusein writes that ‘the Battle of Adwa in 1896, during which the Ethiopian military countered the Italians’ modern mountain guns with spears and rifles, ended with the defeat of Italy’ (p. 178). The assumption here is that Ethiopians were under-armed. In actuality, the main reason Ethiopia was able to defend itself was Emperor Mənilək’s strategic collection of weapons in the years he ruled first as king, and then as King of Kings.³

These comments are not intended to push readers away from the critical discussion on late nineteenth and early twentieth century African American literary

¹ See for instance E. Davidson’s ‘The Death of King Theodore’, in E. Davidson, *The Death of King Theodore and Other Poems* (Newton-on-the-moor: A. Davidson, Newcastle: E. J. Blake, Alnwick: H. H. Blair and J. Davison, 1874), 1–4.

² For example, P. L. Dunbar’s ‘Ode to Ethiopia’, in P. L. Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, introduction by W. D. Howells (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1898), 30–32.

³ See R. Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 150.

culture that is presented in *Black Land*. If anything, the two examples are only mentioned to highlight the need for careful reading of the histories of countries like Ethiopia, which as the author demonstrates, are prone to occupy mythical and ambiguous imaginative spaces internationally.

In sum, Nadia Nurhusein demonstrates how, by bringing Ethiopia and its history into dialogue with African American literary studies, one can unveil the complexities behind African American questions, opinions, beliefs about transcontinental racial solidarities and grander questions about the feasibility of building a race-based empire that has been the focus of works by famous African American literati.

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JANE PLASTOW, *A History of East African Theatre, I: Horn of Africa*, Transnational Theatre Histories (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). xvi, 305 pp. Price: €58.84. ISBN: 978-3-030-47271-9.

A History of East African Theatre, volume I, is part of a multi-volume project to document and write a history of theatre in the Horn of Africa. This first volume focuses on three theatre cultures, Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean. Subsequent volumes intend to cover six other East African countries (p. 2). In this volume, Jane Plastow presents the transnational links of these regions through theatre while providing the space to discuss events particular to each country. She argues that ‘theatre did not exist prior to the colonial period and that all current manifestations are hybrids’ (p. 5) and lays down this premise as the foundation for her discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century theatre in East Africa. The outcome presents a socio-politically contextualized and—within an East African context—internationally linked century in which theatre was introduced and developed in the region.

This volume is divided into three chapters and an introduction which lays out the purposes and the goals of the book. The three chapters present excerpts of selected plays alongside a politico-historical presentation of the country under discussion. The first chapter focuses on Somali theatre and the history of its development. Somali theatre is shown to have advanced a Somali linguistic trait—poetry and song—with it; *qaraami* and *belwo* (p. 62). It is also unique for its largely unscripted (especially until the 1970s) and improvised nature, whereby a play performed today will feature different conversations and dialogues in subsequent performances (p. 73). Plastow also shows how transnational the Somali play is as it could easily be reproduced in all parts of Eastern Africa where Somali was spoken, i.e. Djibouti, Aden, Somaliland, and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia