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Colonization

Derek Duncan

On Friday 4 October 1935, the *Scotsman* newspaper's lead headline 'Outbreak of the Italo-Abyssinian War' confirmed Italy's long-anticipated invasion of Ethiopia:

The war began according to messages from Addis Ababa, with an air bombing attack by the Italians on Adowa – scene of the crushing Italian defeat of 1896 – and Adigrat – the first places of importance beyond the Eritrean frontier.¹

The report's opening lines capture the geographical, historical, and affective co-ordinates of Italy's colonial endeavour. Eritrea, strategically located on the Red Sea, was established as Italy's first colony in 1890. Attempts to expand into Ethiopia led to humiliation at the Battle of Adowa (Adwa) with the victory of an African army over would-be European colonizers.

Ethiopia, one of the few parts of Africa still free from a direct European colonial presence, remained in Italy's sights until the invasion in 1935, spear-headed by Mussolini's fascist regime. In the interim, Italy also laid claim to the coastal regions of Libya, parts of Somalia, the Greek Dodecanese Islands, as well as Tianjin, a small territorial concession in China. Compared to other European nations, Italian colonization started late and was relatively limited in scope. At the time of the second invasion of Ethiopia, one of the most significant events in world politics in the 1930s, the processes of decolonization had already begun elsewhere. Italy's occupation was brutal and Ethiopian resistance fierce. The Italian Colonial Empire declared in 1936

¹ *Scotsman*, Friday, 4 October 1935, p. 9.

turned out to be short-lived and Italy lost all its colonial possessions in the course of the Second World War. Yet, as Neelam Srivastava has argued, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia galvanized anti-imperial movements across the globe.² Its transnational implications continue to be felt.

The *Scotsman's* lead article was accompanied by a number of shorter pieces that tracked the invasion's ripple effects across the world: the announcement of a forthcoming protest organized by anti-fascist Italian migrants in Argentina as well as reports of civil disturbances in Toulouse and New York directed at resident Italian communities mapped Italy's transnational histories of mobility and settlement.³ In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Italians had emigrated in large numbers to North and South America as well as across Europe in response to economic underdevelopment in the recently unified state. Plans hatched at about the same time for the occupation of East Africa were underpinned by political anxieties about Italy's subordinate place in Europe at a time of rapid colonial expansion. These plans were also informed by the idea that an Italian territorial presence in Africa might be sustained by providing a better destination for its citizens looking to emigrate.⁴ Indeed, settlements of Italians abroad were often referred to as 'colonies', and emigrants and their descendants retained many of the benefits of Italian citizenship. The articles appearing in the *Scotsman* were also of marked interest to the local reader in the 1930s because of the established presence of Italians in Scotland itself.⁵

Characterized by the crossing, breaking, but also the establishment of boundaries and borders, colonization as a practice of occupation and settlement is grounded in political, economic, and social differentials of power, enforced through coercion and violence. This violence is cultural as well as physical. Stuart Hall talks about a 'colonization of the mind' induced by agencies such as the education system that promote and naturalize the

² Neelam Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930–1970* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). For a detailed account of the bombing raids and subsequent acts of violence see Alberto Sbacchi, 'Poison Gas and Atrocities in the Italo-Ethiopian War', in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 47–56.

³ Popular opposition to the invasion in Scotland itself intensified hostility to Italians living and working here. See Wendy Ugolini, *Experiencing War as the 'Enemy Other': Italian Scottish Experience in Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 38–39.

⁴ Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵ Terri Colpi, *Italians Count in Scotland: The 1933 Census, Recording History* (London: The Saint James Press, 2015).

self-serving values and perspectives that uphold that system of domination.⁶ Mary Louise Pratt's influential and flexible concept of the 'contact zone' is an effective way of thinking about how colonization operates through the multiple layers of cultural encounter. She defines these layers as '*social spaces* where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today'.⁷ The 'contact zone' is where relationships between colonizers and colonized are experienced and negotiated, and their injurious legacies forged. It is a space of unequal social and cultural fusion and of transformation.

Pratt's concept situates the temporal and spatial contours of Italian colonization as an expansive and enduring project. To think about these contours in terms of a transnational 'contact zone', as Srivastava does, brings into play a multiplicity of connections, ensnared in a common demographic logic or matrix, albeit ostensibly disparate in their location and nature. Colonial expansion and migration are not, however, equivalent vectors of demographic mobility. Yet in this instance, they were, in Pratt's terms, forged through 'highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' in Italy itself and then reiterated abroad.

Until national unification in 1870, Italy itself had been occupied by foreign powers for centuries. The project of national unification was channelled through Vittorio Emanuele, the French-speaking King of Sardinia and Piedmont, who became King of Italy in 1861. Political unification did not translate easily into a politically unified state and Italy's regions remained socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Debates about, and perceptions of, the new nation in the late nineteenth century were girded by the belief that economic underdevelopment and endemic poverty in Italy's South constituted its defining problem. The region's perceived intractable cultural and social backwardness was seen by some through the optic of benign concern, but by others through the lens of nineteenth-century ideologies of degeneration and racial hierarchy. Colonization and migration were touted as solutions to, but also seen as symptoms of, its alleged backwardness, while some argued that the Italian South had in effect itself been colonized. This view would be later developed by Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist thinker, whose work on the 'subaltern' position of the South and the violence inflicted on it became very influential in postcolonial studies emanating in particular from India and Latin America.

⁶ Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 110.

⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6 (my emphasis).

Yet as Rhiannon Welch has persuasively argued, debates on the racial composition and origins of Italy made the question of national identity fraught.⁸ The investment in a comprehensive albeit contradictory ideology and experience of economic and cultural entitlement grounded in racial classifications and hierarchies became particularly acute in both the emigrant and colonialist experience. Southern Italians especially in the US were distanced, socially as well as racially, from privileged white Anglo-Saxons on account of their darker skin tone, and the physical proximity of Italians to indigenous people in Africa was a constant source of social and political anxiety. Miscegenation was the feared consequence of the 'contact zone'. To counter this fear, anthropologists had also tried to justify the putative 'whiteness' or cultural superiority of Ethiopia as a positive rationale for colonization. Race was a malleable, imprecise, unstable but very powerful tool.⁹

The uncertainties of racial difference certainly figured in the protests held in New York against the invasion of Ethiopia, which had become an emblem of African liberation and a particularly potent symbol of the pan-African movement in the wake of the victory at Adwa. Harlem and Brooklyn, where the protests against the invasion in 1935 were most intense, had significant Italian as well as African American populations, and protest was directed at local Italian businesses as well as at Fascist Italy itself.¹⁰ There was a high level of support for Mussolini and the invasion among pro-fascist members of the Italian community in the US who raised \$500,000 for the imperial cause bringing the conjoined logic of the two types of Italian 'colony' into tight alignment.¹¹

These local conflicts are the subject of Claude McKay's satirical novel *Amiable with Big Teeth*.¹² Born in Jamaica, but primarily associated with the

⁸ Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

⁹ For a varied set of perspectives on the racialization of Italians in the US see *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). For a concise summation of the racialization of Italians in the UK and elsewhere see Ugolini, *Experiencing War*, pp. 26–27.

¹⁰ The invasion also prompted hostility to Italians settled in Edinburgh and the boycotting of their businesses. See Ugolini, *Experiencing War*, pp. 38–39.

¹¹ Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 148. For an account of the ways in which the Scots Italians participated in Fascist community organizations including offering support for the campaign in Ethiopia see Ugolini, *Experiencing War*, pp. 55–89.

¹² Claude McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017).

literary culture of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, McKay had lived in Europe and North Africa for a number of years and was deeply involved in global debates on black and proletarian liberation. His Celtic surname is itself the inheritance of Scottish involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery.¹³ Set in Harlem, the novel is an ironic commentary on the self-serving fervour of competing political factions:

The tides of Italy's war in Ethiopia had swept up out of Africa and across the Atlantic to beat against the shores of America and strangely to agitate the unheroic existence of Aframericans. Suddenly the people were stirring with action and churches and lodges and clubs and the street were filled and eloquent with protesting crowds. The burden of the protests was 'Help Ethiopia'. The Aframerican newspapers headlined the news of the conflict.¹⁴

The author depicts a range of affluent, well-educated, and politically engaged members of Harlem's Black community as well as figures from liberal white circles and a duplicitous representative of Comintern, the Communist International, attempting to win African American support. The novel also acknowledges in passing Italian anti-fascist opposition to the invasion and the Italian migrant contribution to radical politics in the US. The intrigue circulates around Lij Alamaya, an Ethiopian envoy trying to secure support for his nation's cause. Srivastava makes the salient point that 'McKay's imagination is both localized and transnational'.¹⁵ While the novel satirizes the aspirations of the Black middle classes in Harlem, more ambitiously, it sets out '[a]n Afrocentric narrative that attempted to restore both centrality and significance to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in the development of a black political consciousness'.¹⁶ Her contention that the novel has 'an implied Harlemiter reader at its centre' offers a further co-ordinate to Italian colonization's transnational 'contact zone'.¹⁷ Yet the novel simultaneously de-centres the Harlem reader's perspective when it comes to the question of race. The district's African American wealthy elite struggles to move, socially and logistically, across the city, and the novel's primary exploration of race, mobility, and space translates the latest invasion of African territory by a white colonial

¹³ See, for example, the essays in *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*, ed. by T.M. Devine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire*, p. 120.

¹⁶ Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire*, p. 122.

¹⁷ Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire*, p. 123.

power into a longer history of domination. Lightness of skin tone makes the city more accessible to some and also in part explains the appeal of the Ethiopian envoy's fair-skin to both black and white Americans. Lij Alamaya, however, objects to approving suggestions he might 'pass' as white. Early in the novel, a newspaper report on the Emperor of Ethiopia's declaration that his country 'was not a "Negro" state [...] and that Ethiopians did not consider themselves kin to the Aframericans' causes consternation amongst his supporters in Harlem.¹⁸ The controversy leads to a discussion of race as a highly localized mode of social categorization. Alamaya explains his nation's identification as an African rather than a 'Negro' state, and as 'Ethiopian' rather than 'Abyssinian'. 'Negro' is a 'European creation', and not a useful term for black self-identification let alone empowerment. 'Ethiopia' is the 'ancient original name', and geographically more expansive than Abyssinia.¹⁹ This discussion illuminates McKay's neologism 'Aframerican' as a critical gesture of self-invention and resistance to the racist logics of white America. Although 'Negro' was then a commonly used term in the US, it appears infrequently in the novel and only in the direct speech of particular characters. Most notably it occurs in a conversation denouncing the simian or 'inhuman' representation of Aframericans in art, a representational practice implying that 'Hitler is right when he says in *Mein Kampf* that Negroes are half apes'.²⁰ After Italy entered the Second World War, the Scottish press represented Italians as subhuman using identical imagery.²¹

Postscripts from the 'Transnational Contact Zone'

The abrupt shift of focus to Nazi Germany recalls the transnational 'colonization of the mind' mentioned by Hall through the common lexis of racism. His more general reflections on the term 'postcolonial' as a lens through which to look back at colonization stress that its value depends on how it is able to align complex entanglements of time and space. The postcolonial, he argues, 're-reads "colonisation" as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural, "global" process – and it produces a decentred, diasporic or "global" rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives'.²² From

¹⁸ McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, p. 114.

¹⁹ McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, p. 119.

²⁰ McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, p. 230.

²¹ Ugolini, *Experiencing War*, p. 43.

²² Stuart Hall, 'When was the "Post-colonial"?: Thinking at the Limit', in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies: Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 242–60 (p. 247).

this perspective, the re-evaluation and re-interpretation of ‘colonization’ and its aftermaths can never be over nor definitively situated in clear-cut national terms.

The practices of ‘re-reading’ and ‘rewriting’ raise question of language and agency in the spaces of transnational encounter. Pratt argues, for example, that the management of language was an essential tool for imposing or subverting hierarchies of colonial domination in the ‘contact zone’. Through the urbane, multi-lingual figure of Lij Alemaya, McKay’s Afrocentric narrative consistently insinuates the difference of an Ethiopian as well as an American perspective into Mussolini’s colonial narrative. Conversely, on 30 June 1936, when Haile Selassie, the deposed Ethiopian Emperor, addressed the League of Nations denouncing Italian war crimes, particularly the use of outlawed chemical weapons, in the face of loud heckling by Italian journalists, he chose to deliver his appeal in Amharic, rather than in French or English, the organization’s two official languages. Haile Selassie had a high level of competence in both but explained (in French) that he would be able to express himself with greater feeling in Amharic. The *Scotsman* described him as ‘[a] frail, lonely figure, speaking in a language none of the other delegates understood’.²³ His impassioned address was received in translation and the economic sanctions the League had previously imposed on Italy were lifted.

In her study of the politics and practices of translation of medieval Irish literature into English, Maria Tymoczko draws on the work of anticolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Edward Said to argue that throughout the period of colonial occupation, translation and the concomitant suppression of the Irish language constituted a ‘tangible, physical oppression’.²⁴ That said, non-translation can also be used to silence unwelcome voices. Ghirmai Negash, for instance, draws attention to the inaccessibility of global translation markets for work written in African languages. In his discussion of two texts about the early phases of Italian colonization written in Tigrinya, a language shared by Eritrea and parts of Ethiopia,²⁵ he draws

²³ *Scotsman*, 1 July 1936, p. 13.

²⁴ Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 19.

²⁵ Ghirmai Negash, ‘Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone: African Responses to Italian Colonialism in Tigrinya Literature’, *Biography*, 32.1 (2009), 74–88. The texts he discusses are Fesseha Giyorgis, *Notizie del viaggio d’un Etiopico dell’Etiopia all’Italia. In Vero Tigray* [translated title] (Rome: Tipografia della Casa Editrice Italiana, 1895) and Ghebreysus Hailu, *The Story of the Conscript* [translated title] (Asmara: Petro Silla Printing Press, 1950). The latter text has since appeared in English translation: Ghebreysus Hailu, *The Conscript: A Novel of Libya’s Anticolonial War*, trans. by Ghirmai Negash (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press, 2013). An English

specifically on Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone', to illuminate the complexities of subject formation under colonial rule. The texts adopt contrasting stances towards Italian colonization, shedding light on the complicities as well as the resistances of the 'contact zone'. The voice of the colonized is not singular. The violence of the invasion and its aftermath has been more recently documented in English and in Italian from the perspective of the Ethiopian diaspora. High-profile writers such as Aida Edemariam, Gabriella Ghermandi, Dinaw Mengestu, Maaza Mengiste, and Abraham Verghese now contest the 'colonization of the mind' as the transnational 'contact zone' dilates into the present of the metropolitan consciousness. Yet, returning to Srivastava's observation on McKay's 'Harlemite reader', is it worth asking what sort of reader these postcolonial texts anticipate? Unlike Haile Selassie, these writers speak in the language of colonization. Their texts habitually contain words in Tigrinya or Ahmaric and sometimes a glossary reminding readers of the reverse linguistic encroachment of the transnational encounter and the cognitive challenges of translation. Processes of translation are not simply matters of linguistic competence, but of cultural co-presence and culturally transformative knowledge production.

Although I am now in Edinburgh writing about events that took place at some distance in both space and time, there are occasions when distances collapse and a single and apparently singular instance allows a critical hypothesis about transnational connectedness to assume material form. The 'contact zones' of colonization stretch wide. In 2001, during a clear out in St John's Scottish Episcopal church in Edinburgh, an Ethiopian Tabot, or consecrated altar piece, was discovered 'in a Victorian leather case at the back of the cupboard'.²⁶ The Tabot, a colonial possession, had been purloined by a military officer after the Battle of Magdala in 1868 at the time of Britain's own colonial incursion into Ethiopia. The church minister who made the discovery recognized its significance and the Tabot was returned in 2002. The biography of this sacred, obdurate object traces the postcolonial connected contours of de-colonization as a zone of transnational contact traced equally, and only apparently unpredictably, through time and space.

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translation of the earlier text is also available: Hailu Habtu, 'The Voyage of Däbtära Fesseha Giyorgis to Italy at the end of the 19th Century', *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 16 (2000), 361–68, <https://www.persee.fr/doc/ethio_0066-2127_2000_num_16_1_982> [accessed 24 March 2021].

²⁶ For details of the discovery and restitution see <<http://www.afromet.info/treasure/archives/000030.html>> [accessed 15 February 2021].