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African Americans and the Construction of Solidarity with Ethiopia, 1935–1936

ABSTRACT

While practical aspects of African American solidarity with Ethiopia in the years 1935-1936 received considerable scholarly attention, little has been written on the process of the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia, or how African Americans came to think of Ethiopia as deserving of their solidarity. To answer this question, this study analyses several African American publications' (*Afro-American*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and *Associated Negro Press*) articles about the Italian aggression against Ethiopia. To address why African Americans mobilized in thousands to support Ethiopia and expressed solidarity with the African empire, the analysis includes the letters to the editors of *The Chicago Defender* and *Afro-American* in the years 1935 and 1936. The process of the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia was based on African American racial identification with Ethiopians, which was strengthened by the appeal of Ethiopia as a historical model of Black nationhood and the religious identification of African American Christians with Ethiopian Christianity. This same process was challenged by a minority of African Americans, who disputed Ethiopians' Blackness and claimed Ethiopians looked down on other people of African descent. These challenges were successfully countered by emphasizing similarities in the physical appearance of African Americans and Ethiopians, and by reports on Ethiopians' positive attitude towards African Americans. As African Americans increasingly saw the hypocritical treatment of Ethiopia as analogous to the racist treatment they experienced at home, the moral feeling of ressentiment against racial discrimination spilled into the international arena and strengthened the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia.

BY

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In response to the Italian aggression against Ethiopia in the aftermath of the Wal Wal incident in November 1934, thousands across the globe mobilized in support of the African nation-state in 1935 and 1936.[1] In the United States, the US African diaspora—African Americans—was at the forefront of political mobilization in support of Ethiopia. African Americans established Black solidarity groups, such as Friends of Ethiopia and United Aid for Ethiopia, and were key to the formation of multiracial groups founded for the same purpose, like Harlem's Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia. These groups had—alongside other African American organization, such as Pan-African Reconstruction Association, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Garveyite groups, and African American churches—organized pro-Ethiopian demonstrations and sought to aid the country by organizing prayers and talks on Ethiopian history and politics, collecting financial and medical aid, and attempting to send volunteers to fight on the front.[2] By the summer of 1936, a congruence of several factors—the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa in May 1936, Haile Selassie's exile in Britain, the League of Nations decision to lift its ineffective sanctions on Italy, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War—resulted in a decrease of pro-Ethiopian political agitation in the US. Nevertheless, the years 1935-1936 stand out due to unprecedented African American engagement with US foreign policy.[3] As American historian Joseph Fronczak puts it, the political activism of these years "pressed together popular politics and geopolitics, providing common people with unprecedented access to a question of international affairs."[4]

While political mobilization in solidarity with Ethiopia was a global affair,[5] this study adopts a narrower focus as it examines African Americans' construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. In other words, the study examines how and why African Americans came to think of Ethiopia as deserving of their sacrifices even though the vast majority of African Americans had no personal or familial links with Ethiopia. Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robing D.G.

1 Joseph Fronczak, "Local People's Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 2 (2015): 245–274; Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 107–117.

2 For the African American responses to the Ethiopian crisis and Italian invasion, see Edward O. Erhagbe and Ehimika A. Ifidon, "African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian Crisis, 1935–1936: The Practical Dimension of Pan-Africanism," *Aethiopica* 11 (2008): 68-84; Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936–1941* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo–Ethiopian War, 1935–1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

3 See Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 37–81; Alvin B. Tillery, *Between Homeland and Motherland: Africa, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Black Leadership in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

4 Fronczak, "Local People's Global," 246.

5 Fronczak, "Local People's Global," 246.

Kelley emphasize that historians must remember "that diasporic identities are socially and historically constituted, reconstituted, and reproduced."[6] The same applies to relations between the diaspora and the imagined homeland—in this case, Africa—since its meaning changes, at least partially, as it is reconstituted in diaspora.[7] The present study, then, can be read as a contribution to the study of the global African diaspora within the US context as it examines how diasporan identity and its connection with the African continent changed in the context of European imperialist aggression against an African state.

Contrary to most works on the topic,[8] the main concern here is not the practical dimensions of solidarity, but rather its discursive foundations. The study approaches this question through the analysis of four African American publications' reportage on the Italian aggression against Ethiopia. In addition to *The Chicago Defender* and *Afro-American*, the two largest African American newspapers at the time,[9] the essay also analyses the NAACP's journal *The Crisis* and the press releases of the *Associated Negro Press* (ANP). They were chosen due to the NAACP's position as the largest and most influential civil rights group at the time and the fact that most African American publications were serviced by ANP press releases.[10] African American publications were often viewed as playing a crucial role in coordinating campaigns, sharing information about the invasion, and mobilizing public opinion in support of Ethiopia. While all of these are undeniably true, such an emphasis neglects the role of African American publications as sites where African American public opinion was shaped and contested. As Stuart Hall writes in relation to cinema, identity is "constituted not outside but within representations."[11] By analyzing African American publications, then, the process of diasporan identity formation in relation to the African continent in general and Ethiopia in particular can be explored. Because the letters to the editor provide insight into the "space in which the meaning and significance of unfolding narratives

6 Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robing D.G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 19.

7 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 224–225, 230–237.

8 For a focus on practical dimensions of solidarity, see Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans"; Harris, *African-American Reactions*; Scott, *Sons of Sheba's*.

9 Michael A. Lord, "Baltimore Afro-American," in *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History: The Black Experience in the Americas*, ed. Colin A. Palmer, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Detroit: Macmillan USA, 2006), 184.

10 Natalie J. Ring, "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=372; Gerald Horne, *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press: Claude Barnett's Pan-African News and the Jim Crow Paradox* (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

11 Hall, "Cultural Identity," 237.

and events are contested," the inclusion of letters to the editor of *The Chicago Defender* and *Afro-American* allows one to bring this function of the African American press to the fore.[12] Moreover, they enable the analysis of readers' reactions to and interpretations of events and reporting.[13] In sum, letters to the editor allow for the reconstruction of popular attitudes that sustained solidarity with Ethiopia among the African diaspora in the US in the years 1935-1936.

The study consists of three sections. First, the article analyzes how racial identification with Ethiopians enabled the construction of solidarity. While racial identification was a necessary condition for solidarity with Ethiopia, it was not a sufficient one. Were it not for Ethiopia's historical legacy as a model of Black nationhood and its importance for African American Christians, solidarity with Ethiopia would not have reached the proportions it did. Second, it examines the grounds on which the minority of African Americans opposed solidarity with Ethiopia and evaluates what impact this had on the construction of solidarity. Last, the study examines how *ressentiment*—a French term defined as a moral emotion originating from a historical injury and/or injustice that leads to feelings of bitterness, rancor, anger, ire, and indignation among those wronged, even after said injury was committed[14]—impacted the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. By analyzing African American responses to the issue of Ethiopian slavery, the study argues that because African Americans saw the treatment of Ethiopia as analogous to the racist treatment they experienced in the US, feelings of *ressentiment* fueled the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia.

Foundations of solidarity: race, history, and Christianity

To understand how African Americans came to stand in solidarity with Ethiopia, one must begin by accounting for the racial identification of African Americans with Ethiopians. In other words, one must account how, as Michael Onyebuchi Eze puts it, African Americans came to see themselves and Ethiopians as belonging to the same "metaphysical unity."[15] In the context

12 Allison Cavanagh and John Steel, "Introduction," in *Letters to the Editor: Historical and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Allison Cavanagh and John Steel (Cham: Springer Nature, 2019), 2.

13 Note that the letters to the editor provide an editorialized view of readers' opinions as the editors sought to present the range of readers' opinions while also stylistically improving the letters. See Cavanagh and Steel, "Introduction."

14 See Didier Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 3 (June 2013): 249–267.

15 Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "Pan-Africanism and the Politics of History," *History Compass* 11, no. 9 (2013): 676.

of Italian propaganda's racialized language of Italy's "civilizing mission" in Ethiopia, it is unsurprising that people of color employed a racial interpretation of the conflict.[16] In a July 1935 *Crisis* article, George Padmore argued that solidarity with Ethiopia presented an opportunity to "demonstrate to the peoples of Africa that their descendants in the New World have not forgotten their ties of blood and race. For when all is said and done, the struggles of the Abyssinians is fundamentally the part of the struggles of the Black race."[17] Likewise, *The Chicago Defender*'s coverage of the meeting of the Negro World Alliance held the same month in Chicago emphasized how "America's black millions become aware of the threat to the only country they can call their own."[18] African American authors at the time presented the same sentiment of racial identification with Ethiopia. In September 1935, *The Associated Negro Press* published Robert Carlston's poem "Delenda Est Ethiopia" which spoke of Ethiopia as "a nation of color so bold that dares to independence hold" in which "folks like you and me are thrusting."[19] For many historians, like Robert G. Weisbord, African American solidarity with Ethiopia was based on "a strong racial identification with their beleaguered brothers in Ethiopia."[20]

There is no doubt that racial identification played a key role in the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. However, racial identification was a necessary but insufficient condition for the construction of solidarity. If the construction of bonds of solidarity with Ethiopia were a simple process of racial identification, it is rather unclear why only the Ethiopian conflict managed to arouse such widespread outrage among African Americans. While both the US occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the scrutiny of Liberia's humanitarian record received attention among the African American press, the reactions remained limited and beyond the interest of ordinary African Americans.[21] The conflict in Ethiopia inaugurated a new and unprecedented period of popular engagement with US foreign policy among African Americans.[22] As Roi Ottley put it in 1943, there is "no event in recent times that stirred the rank and file of Negroes more than the Italo-Ethiopian war."[23] As the remainder of this contribution argues, the appeal of Ethiopia as a model of

16 Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans," 68–69.
17 George Padmore, "The Missionary Racket in Africa," *The Crisis* 42, no. 7 (July 1935): 214.
18 "US Policy on Ethiopia is Criticized," *The Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1935, 2.
19 Robert Carlston, "Delenda Est Ethiopia," *The Associated Negro Press*, September 9, 1935, 9.
20 Robert G. Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans, and the Afro-American* (London: Greenwood Press, 1973), 110.
21 See Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans"; Fronczak, "Local People's Global"; Plummer, *Rising Wind*.
22 Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, 58; P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776–1991* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1994), 111–115.
23 Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 111.

Black nationhood and the religious identification with Ethiopian Christianity strengthened African American racial identification with Ethiopia.

Nadia Nurhussein argues that since the late nineteenth century, Ethiopia represented "a bound and delineated geographic space onto which to project abstract Black nationhood."[24] Ethiopia's ancient history, tracing back to the kingdom of Aksum, coupled with the fact that Ethiopian independence was preserved during the "Scramble for Africa," made it an "alternative imperial force" with which the African diaspora in the US could identify.[25] Contrary to Haiti and Liberia, the only other independent Black states, Ethiopia had also proven itself capable of preserving its independence from foreign encroachment. The defeat of the Italian army at Adowa in 1896 and Ethiopian diplomacy at the League of Nations proved Ethiopia's ability to defend its independence through military force and diplomacy.[26] In an era when African Americans sought an alternative to White imperial powers, a Black empire's ability to preserve its independence made Ethiopia an appealing model of Black nationhood. For W.E.B. du Bois, Ethiopia was "an example and a promise of what a native population untouched by modern exploitation and race prejudice might do."[27] An additional factor in the development of solidarity with Ethiopia was its continuous presence in press coverage, which enabled the adoption of the symbolism of Ethiopia by many organizations in the US, such as Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association.[28] Some African Americans even settled in Ethiopia prior to the Italian invasion.[29] Racial identification of African Americans with Ethiopia, then, was underpinned by its role as a model of a Black nation-state that managed to compete with White powers. In this context, Italian aggression was interpreted not only as an aggression against Ethiopia, but also as an aggression against Black nationhood in general.

The African American press often invoked Ethiopian history to construct bonds of solidarity with Ethiopia. In March 1935, *The Defender* published an open letter, allegedly written by an Ethiopian, which emphasized how Ethiopia had survived many challenges in its history. Ethiopia, "more than

24 Nadia Nurhussein, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 12.
25 Nurhussein, *Black Land*, 1.
26 Ian S. Spears, "The Ethiopian Crisis and the Emergence of Ethiopia in a Changing State System," in *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*, ed. G. Bruce Strang (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 42–44.
27 W.E.B. du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View," *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 1 (October 1935): 85–86.
28 Nurhussein, *Black Land*, 14–15; Robert G. Weisbord, "Black America and the Italian-Ethiopian Crisis: An Episode in Pan-Negroism," *The Historian* 34, no. 2 (1972): 231–234.
29 Alberto Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1997), 6.

1400 years old [. . .] [has] seen the burial of Rome and Constantinople, and to us the governments of Europe were borne yesterday."[30] While "a new trial" faced Ethiopia, the author asserted that the imperial "rulership of our king [. . .] has been a strong weapon against all our foes."[31] Therefore, Mussolini had to remember that Ethiopia's "judgement is with God."[32] The emphasis on Ethiopia's history and its imperial governance, then, sought to give hope to the readers of *The Defender*. For if Ethiopia outlived Rome and Constantinople, how could a government "borne yesterday" destroy it? Sometimes, the appeal to Ethiopia's history was less direct. Reuben S. Young's *Crisis* article called on African Americans to "help [Ethiopia] by using concerted pressure on our government to use every effort to prevent an attack by Italy."[33] This call to action follows a recounting of the emperor Menelik and Haile Selassie's "effort to consolidate the empire" and "to lay foundations for the change from feudalism to capitalism," frustrated by "machinations of the big powers."[34] In this article, the call to solidarity was based upon the recognition of the efforts of the Black empire to centralize and reform, which was continuously thwarted by the White powers. These appeals to the idea of a Black empire—as both a historical example of a state capable of competing with imperial powers and as an empire inching towards modernity—represent a broader trend of the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia based on its imperial history.

The readership of *The Defender* and *Afro-American* shared such a conception of solidarity with Ethiopia. For a reader of the *Afro-American*, the Ethiopian crisis presented an opportunity to develop "a closer relationship of our own race group" and to "show disapproval of this high-handed attempt by Italy to grab the ancient kingdom."[35] A letter to *The Chicago Defender* argued that "Ethiopia, as a black nation, the very last one on earth," offered the opportunity for African Americans to "wake up and try to become a respected race."[36] Following the Italian invasion, another reader emphasized that Ethiopia's defeat constituted "a calamity to the entire race."[37] These letters to the editors show how Ethiopia's history reinforced the racial identification of African Americans with Ethiopia. Due to the appeal of the history of the Black empire as a historical and contemporary model of Black nationhood, Ethiopia was transformed into the last Black nation on

30 Guebra-Kristos Kema, "An Ethiopian Writes Open Letter to the American People," *The Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1935, 1.
31 Kema, "An Ethiopian," 2.
32 Kema, "An Ethiopian," 2.
33 Reuben S. Young, "Ethiopia Awakens," *The Crisis* 42, no. 9 (September 1935): 283.
34 Young, "Ethiopia Awakens," 263.
35 Fabius Howell, "Our Duty to Aid Abyssinia," *Afro-American*, March 2, 1935, 4.
36 Charles Rothwell, "What the People Say: Long Live Ethiopia," *The Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1935, 14.
37 James W. Taylor, "Ethiopia, Last Haven," *Afro-American*, December 28, 1935, 6.

Earth: it offered more than Liberia and Haiti ever could. This sentiment was well captured by Mae Ida D. Solo-Billings, an occasional contributor to *The Defender*, who wrote that "our [African American] future history and well-being is inexorably linked with that of Ethiopia."[38] For African Americans living under the Jim Crow system of racial discrimination, the threat to Ethiopia represented a threat to Black nationhood.[39] As African Americans elevated Ethiopia to the position of a symbol of Black nationhood and as the only Black country capable of successfully resisting foreign encroachment, they viewed the loss of its independence as a calamity for people of African descent across the globe. Solidarity with Ethiopia, then, was not simply a product of the racial identification of African Americans with Ethiopians—rather, it was underpinned by an appeal to the Ethiopian imperial model of Black nationhood.

Religious identification with Ethiopia was another factor that enabled the construction of solidarity among African Americans. While in the 1930s Caribbean, Rastafarianism played an important role,[40] the predominantly Christian African Americans identified with Ethiopian Christianity. Ethiopia held an important place in the hearts of Black Christians in the US due to its Biblical significance and status as one of the oldest Christian nations.[41] Psalms 68:31, which read "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God,"[42] was often interpreted as a liberation prophecy for the African continent under the leadership of a pious leader; for many, Haile Selassie was the prophesized prince.[43] The sacral importance of Ethiopia to Black Christendom was such that many of the Black churches that emerged in the nineteenth century adopted the name Abyssinian, or Ethiopian, churches.[44] In a letter to *The Chicago Defender*, a reader expressed his view that "Ethiopia and black people of the world are going to come out [of war] alright" for "David, the Psalmist, tells the world what Ethiopia and the black people [. . .] are going to do."[45] As the war progressed, a letter to the *Afro-American* pondered whether "the Ethiopians have the same divine rights under the sun to exist as other people?"[46] Clearly not, if, as another letter put it, "white man's idea of Christianity is" the "killing [of] defenseless women

38 Mae Ida D. Solo-Billings, "What the People Say: The Doughty Ethiopians," *The Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1935, 14.

39 Weisbord, "Black America," 236; Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship*, 96.

40 For a comparative discussion of religion's role in the Caribbean and the US, see Fikru Gebrekidan, "In Defense of Ethiopia: A Comparative Assessment of Caribbean and African American Anti-Fascist Protests, 1935–1941," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1995): 153–155.

41 Tillery, *Between Homeland*, 66.

42 Psalms 68:31 (King James Version).

43 Tillery, *Between Homeland*, 66.

44 Scott, *Sons of Sheba's*, 12–22; Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship*, 90.

45 Jas M. Web, "Mussolini vs. Ethiopia," *The Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1935, 16.

46 Benjamin Price, "Ethiopia and Divine Rights," *Afro-American*, December 14, 1935, 6.

and children."[47] The readers of African American publications identified with Ethiopian Christianity, which, like the appeal of the Ethiopian model of Black nationhood, amplified the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia.

Similarly, African American publications emphasized Ethiopia's anti-Islamic character in its importance for Black Christendom. In addition to appeals to Christian symbolism, the press often highlighted Ethiopia's role as a bulwark against the spread of Islam in East Africa. *The Defender*'s open letter, discussed above, spoke of "the oldest Christian nation" without whom "all of Africa would be Mohammedan."[48] He continued that for all the service Ethiopia did for Christendom, its "reward" was "that the Italian comes to our door today and demands our death."[49] The letter appealed to the Christian readers, then, by emphasizing the historical importance of Ethiopia for Christianity, while highlighting its imperial history as discussed above. Joel Augustus Rogers, who later became *The Defender*'s correspondent to Ethiopia and wrote prolifically in support of its cause, reported in *The Crisis* that Ethiopia was "a Christian Verdun against Mohammedanism."[50] Articles like these established Ethiopia not only as a fellow Christian nation, but one which sacrificed much as a regional force against Islam.

African Americans often contrasted this with Italian Christianity, which they saw as a smokescreen for Italian imperialism. George Padmore argued that the "technique which Mussolini is now trying to apply to Abyssinia" was based on the British conquest of Uganda, which began with missionaries and ended with "soldiers with machine guns."[51] This abuse of Christianity "for predatory designs against colonial peoples" was to fail, for "the Ethiopians are more determined than ever [. . .] to defend the 3000 years' independence of their country."[52] A satirical article in the *Afro-American* echoed these sentiments when it warned, "Haile, you have made a serious error, almost unforgivable, by reading the Bible [. . .] and following it to the letter."[53] European Christianity was purported to be good only for sending "missionaries with the Bible in one hand and a club in another" so that they could exploit African "diamonds, iron and silver."[54] In the eyes of African Americans,

47 J. W., "Italian Christianity," *Afro-American*, November 2, 1935, 6. Please note that the usage of racial language in all quotations in this article is original from the cited text and has not been modified.

48 Kema, "An Ethiopian," 1–2.

49 Kema, "An Ethiopian," 2.

50 Joel Augustus Rogers, "Italy Over Abyssinia," *The Crisis* 42, no. 2 (February 1935): 39.

51 Padmore, "Missionary Racket," 214.

52 Padmore, "Missionary Racket," 198, 214.

53 Lucius C. Harper, "On How to Become Civilized," *The Chicago Defender*, October 19, 1935, 12.

54 Harper, "How to Become," 12.

European commitment to Christianity was ingenuine. As a reader of *The Defender* put it, there was little to Italian Christianity but a "desire to gain possessions of the gold, silver and precious stones of Africa and especially of Ethiopia."[55] Contrary to Ethiopia, European powers were concerned with Christianity only if they benefited from it.

Ethiopian struggle against the Italian aggression, was indeed, as Padmore put it, "the part of the struggles of the black race" for African Americans.[56] However, it did not end up a part of the global struggle solely by the virtue of Ethiopians' black skin. While racial identification was a necessary condition for the outpouring of solidarity with Ethiopia among African Americans, it was shaped by the fact that Ethiopia presented an alternative (imperial) model of Black nationhood, and by the religious identification of African American Christians with Ethiopian Christianity. These factors enabled the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia among the African diaspora in the US and resulted in the popular mobilization of African Americans in the years 1935-1936.

African American opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia

It would be wrong to assume that all African Americans supported the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. As Arno Sonderegger emphasizes in the case of Pan-Africanism, opinions of people of African descent were "by no means uniform [. . .] infighting was always a factor."[57] In the years 1935-1936, a minority of African Americans opposed the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. For them, African Americans should "fight our own battles, get all we can, and let the Italians and Ethiopians do their own fighting."[58] They justified their isolationist stance by disputing Ethiopians' Blackness and by claiming that Ethiopians held negative attitudes towards other people of African descent. Such opposition, designed to undermine racial identification with Ethiopia, received significant attention from Ethiopia's supporters. Therefore, it is important to account for the role African American opposition played in the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia.

While most African Americans agitated in support of Ethiopia in 1935, several argued that Ethiopia was undeserving of their support as it was not

55 Alexander Morisson Jr., "On Pope Pius," *The Chicago Defender*, September 28, 1935, 16.
56 Padmore, "Missionary Racket," 214.
57 Arno Sonderegger, "Ideas Matter: Framing Pan-Africanism, its Concept and History," *Stichproben: Vienna Journal of African Studies* 20, no. 38 (2020): 11.
58 Frank St. Claire, "He Advocates an Isolationist Policy," *Afro-American*, September 28, 1935, 6.

a Black nation. Several African Americans felt Ethiopia was not Black due to Ethiopians' reluctance to use the word "Negro" to describe themselves and due to the royal family's emphasis on their Semitic heritage.[59] Ralph Matthews, a columnist for the *Afro-American*, wrote that he could not get "overly enthused on behalf of the conquering Lion, Haile Selassie, because I have seen little evidences that either he or any of his subjects believe us to be their kinsmen."[60] Not only was there a lack of kinship between Ethiopians and African Americans, but Ethiopians never extended their solidarity to African Americans. As Matthews put it, Ethiopians did not even "pen a sharp note to Uncle Sam after every lynching."[61] For these reasons, he concluded, the war had "to be fought without me."[62] Likewise, a letter to the *Afro-American* implored its readers to "stop hunting hostilities on behalf of a people who claim Semitic origin."[63] With the mobilization among African Americans reaching unprecedented levels in 1935 and all energy seemingly reserved for Ethiopia, even *The Chicago Defender*, otherwise at the forefront of solidarity with Ethiopia, satirized volunteers signing up for service in Ethiopia. The satirical call for volunteers promised each African American volunteer "his own rock behind which to hide in case the battle gets hot" and "a military outfit [. . .] which will make it easy for them to run."[64]

While opposition to Ethiopia toned down after the Italian invasion, possibly because Italian atrocities became known, it reemerged in the summer of 1936 when Italy conquered Addis Ababa and Haile Selassie fled to England. In August 1936, after the League had lifted its sanctions on Italy, *Afro-American* published an interview with Colonel Hubert Julian, one of the few African Americans to serve in Ethiopia as a part of the emperor's air force, in which he alleged Ethiopia lost "due more to Haile's 'white brain' trust rather than to Mussolini's war machine."[65] Not only did he find that the emperor prioritized White advisors, but also that Ethiopians "despise American educated colored people," which was made clear by the fact there were "82 American and West Indian families poverty stricken in Ethiopia [. . .] starving because Ethiopians refuse to cater to skilled black artisans when there is a white man who can do a job."[66] Their disdain for people of African descent in America was further evidenced by the fact there was "no colored American officially invited to the coronation of Haile Selassie."[67] In other words, as

59 Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans," 80–81; Gebrekidan, "In Defense," 152.
60 Ralph Matthews, "Watching the Big Parade," *Afro-American*, March 9, 1935, 4.
61 Matthews, "Watching," 4.
62 Matthews, "Watching," 4.
63 Meeba A. Ficklin, "A Pill for Ethiopia's Supporters," *Afro-American*, August 31, 1935, 4.
64 "Uncle Eph Says," *The Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1935, 9.
65 "Why Ethiopia Lost!," *Afro-American*, August 22, 1936, 20.
66 "Why Ethiopia Lost," 20.
67 "Why Ethiopia Lost," 20.

Ethiopians held only disdain for African Americans, they were not deserving of their solidarity. Nonetheless, opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia was a minority position in the years 1935-1936, demonstrated by the number of editorial stances sympathetic to Ethiopia, the prevalence of positive news coverage, and the continuous mobilization of African Americans.[68] However, opposition to solidarity received significant attention by those supportive of Ethiopia because it challenged the foundations of African American solidarity.

Such challenges undermined racial identification with Ethiopia. After all, had the argument that Ethiopians were not Black won the day, Ethiopia's significance as a model of Black nationhood and its importance to African American Christianity would be lost, too. In response, the pro-Ethiopian authors emphasized how Ethiopians and African Americans shared many physical features. In the lead-up to the invasion, W.E.B. du Bois argued that "Ethiopia is Negro" for the "pictures of Abyssinians" displayed "Negroid" features.[69] Moreover, he disputed the idea that Ethiopians cannot be Black due to the former's intermixing with people of Semitic origins, since "humanity was mixed to the core."[70] Similarly, Gladys L. Wilson argued in a piece for *Defender* that even if "the ruling classes in Abyssinia are mixed with Semitic blood," this cannot be taken to mean that they were not black: "whenever a race has been in a close proximity with another, there has been [. . .] mixture."[71] To claim Ethiopians are not Black was as ridiculous as to claim "Southern Italians [. . .] because they are mixed with Moorish blood" are not Italian.[72] Ethiopian mixed racial heritage did not imply that Ethiopians were not Black—as long as they displayed the same racial features as people of African descent in the US, African Americans viewed them as deserving of their solidarity. The press often supported these claims with photographic material that sought to dispel any remaining doubts. For example, Joel Augustus Rogers, who was a war correspondent in Ethiopia during the invasion and published a pamphlet on the country, wrote that "every Ethiopian this author has seen would be a Negro," followed by pictures of Ethiopians on the next page.[73] The opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia led to an increase in discussion on the true race of the Ethiopian nation, a discussion that relied on physical appearance as its primary attribute.

Likewise, the reports on the negative attitude of Ethiopians towards

68 Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans," 79–81; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 51–53.
69 Du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications," 82.
70 Du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications," 82.
71 "Gladys Wilson Traces Blood: Disputes Those Who Say Ethiopians Are White," *The Chicago Defender*, October 26, 1935, 24.
72 "Gladys Wilson," 24.
73 Joel Augustus Rogers, *The Real Facts About Ethiopia* (1936; repr., Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1982), 5–6. Citations hereafter refer to the 1982 publication.

other people of African descent were countered by the press. The December 1935 issue of the *Associated Negro Press* featured an interview with Augustina Bastian, who served as a nurse in Ethiopia in the early stages of the Italian invasion. In the interview, she emphasized how she "did not find any feelings against American Negroes."[74] Similarly, *Afro-American* reported on prince Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro's visit to the US and quoted him saying "there is a decided blood relationship between the Ethiopian and the Negro. We are of the same people and race."[75] The press also set out to explain why Ethiopians were hesitant to use the word "Negro." As Dr Malaku E. Bayen, Haile Selassie's representative, explained to African Americans, "we are not Negroes we are Ethiopians [. . .] you should not accept a nickname given you by another country."[76] In this way, the African American press sought to provide further context to the Ethiopian statements that were used to justify African American opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia.

While it is hard to establish the effect of dissenting voices on the political sentiments among African Americans, it seems that arguments in favor of solidarity with Ethiopia won the day. For example, the Ethiopian delegation's fundraising tour of the US, while facing some issues, continued to raise funds for Ethiopia throughout 1936 through American Aid for Ethiopia and similar organizations.[77] In May 1936, news of Italians' mass executions of Ethiopian soldiers led to rioting in Harlem, and high tensions between Italians and African Americans in New York persisted throughout the summer.[78] These developments, coupled with continuous positive coverage of Ethiopia, show that racial identification with Ethiopia, seen as key by both supporters and opponents of solidarity with Ethiopia, survived through 1936.[79] Opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia was constructed through the contestation of events and facts, fought out on the pages of African American publications. Such publications contributed to convincing African Americans that Ethiopians deserved their solidarity.

Ressentiment, Ethiopian slavery, and African Americans

Another potential obstacle to African American solidarity with Ethiopia was

74 G. James Fleming, "Eyewitness Tells About Colonel Julian," *Associated Negro Press*, December 30, 1935, 6.
75 "Ethiopians Related to Us, Visiting Consul Declares," *Afro-American*, December 28, 1935, 12.
76 "Ethiopians not Negroes–Bayen," *Afro-American*, October 24, 1936, 9.
77 Harris, *African-American Reactions*, 80-84.
78 William R. Scott, "Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934–1936," *The Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 2 (1978): 130–131.
79 Scott, *Sons of Sheba's*, 213–214; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 55–56.

the issue of Ethiopian slavery. Ethiopian slavery—a form of unfree labor that included trade in persons and coexisted with other relations of dependency—was legal before 1935; however, it was in decline since the 1920s, and Haile Selassie had taken steps towards its gradual abolition.[80] Like other imperial powers, Italy, and Western press sympathetic to Italian imperialist ambitions, used Ethiopian slavery to justify its aggression.[81] For example, on October 14, 1935, *The Daily Mirror*, a New York-based newspaper, published an editorial that displayed pictures of debtors and slaves in chains, arguing that "if Mussolini plans, as he undoubtedly does, to end in Ethiopia the condition that you see illustrated here, your conscience might forbid you to interfere with him."[82] Occasionally, African Americans cited slavery as a reason for opposition to solidarity with Ethiopia. Josephine Baker, an African American singer and actress, was one of the few to do so. *The Chicago Defender* reported that she supported Mussolini because Haile Selassie "keeps her people in bondage."[83] The following pages first analyze how African Americans sympathetic to Ethiopia responded to Ethiopian slavery. Their responses, this study argues, can be explained by reference to African American feelings of *ressentiment* against the national and global systems of racial discrimination. As African Americans viewed the treatment of Ethiopia as analogous to the treatment they experienced in the US, their *ressentiment* extended into the sphere of international relations.

African Americans sympathetic to Ethiopia responded to Ethiopian slavery either by arguing that Ethiopian slavery was unlike chattel slavery, emphasizing the obstacles for abolition, or by arguing that Ethiopia was unfairly singled out. The former group argued that Ethiopian slavery was unlike Atlantic chattel slavery. In 1935, du Bois argued "the institution of domestic slavery [. . .] which survives in Ethiopia, has nothing in common with the exploitation of slaves through the [Atlantic] slave trade."[84] Similarly, Joel Augustus Rogers' 1937 pamphlet on Ethiopia claimed Ethiopian slaves were "members of the family" and their condition was "never as degrading as American slavery."[85] Moreover, the African American press emphasized Haile Selassie's efforts to gradually abolish slavery and blamed the lack of

80 Giulia Bonacci and Alexander Meckelburg, "Revisiting Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia," *Northeast African Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 8–15.

81 Bonacci and Meckelburg, "Revisiting Slavery," 15–16; Erhagbe and Ifidon, "African-Americans," 69. For the connection between humanitarianism and empire, see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

82 "Once More, Consider 'Civilization' in Ethiopia," *The Daily Mirror (US)*, October 14, 1935, 19.

83 "Josephine Baker Pledges Aid to Italy," *The Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1935, 1.

84 Du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications," 86.

85 Rogers, *Real Facts*, 19.

central authority for the slow pace of such efforts. As Reuben S. Young argued in *The Crisis*, "proclamations against slavery were ineffective except in the immediate territory of the Emperor."[86] Emphasizing social and economic consequences, Rogers asserted "it was impossible, however, to bring about immediate emancipation because large numbers of the slaves had no homes. Turned adrift they would become beggars or bandits."[87] For some African Americans, Ethiopian slavery was unfortunate, but as it was incomparable to Atlantic slavery and Ethiopia made efforts towards its gradual abolition, Ethiopian slavery was not an obstacle to solidarity.

Others emphasized that Ethiopian slavery, while problematic, was not exclusive to Ethiopia, and that the White world had nothing better to offer to people of African descent. After all, slavery and forms of unfree labor indistinguishable from it were practiced across the colonial world, including in Italian colonies. Reporting on the League of Nations proceedings in Geneva, *Afro-American* noted how the Italian delegate to the League "had to admit that slavery exists in the Italian colonies" following the publication of a report that concluded that "a system of compulsory labor, analogous to chattel slavery, obtains in the Italian possessions."[88] A few weeks later, the *Associated Negro Press* pondered "why Mussolini doesn't free the slaves in the Italian colonies of Tripoli and Eritrea if he is so fond of freedom?"[89] The charge with which Italy justified its aggression against Ethiopia applied to its colonial possessions, too. Additionally, the African American press emphasized that this was not a problem exclusive to Italian colonies. Mae Ida Solo-Billings reminded the readers of *The Chicago Defender* that there was "no hue and cry against England's great 'slave mines' in South Africa; nor does [. . .] any righteous nation seem concerned about the existence of the same kind of slavery in the English ruled Hong Kong."[90] In the context of the use of humanitarian concerns for imperialist ends, which the African Americans also witnessed in the League members' treatment of Liberia in 1930s,[91] African Americans doubted that the colonial powers could offer any better future to Ethiopians. As African American singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson told the *Associated Negro Press* in January 1936:

> My sympathy is with all the Ethiopians. It would seem that those people could get along without the kind of civilization that European nations do

86 Young, "Ethiopia Awakens," 262.
87 Rogers, *Real Facts*, 20.
88 "League Learns of Slavery in Italy's African Colonies," *Afro-American*, June 22, 1935, 6.
89 A. E. White, "Italian Wants to Know Why Mussolini Doesn't Free Slaves in Tripoli and Eritrea," *Associated Negro Press*, July 20, 1935, 3.
90 Mae Ida Solo-Billings, "Ethiopia and Slaves," *The Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1935, 12.
91 For how concerns about slavery were used to criticize the Liberian government and Pan-Africanist responses to it, see Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism*, 111–115.

> with bombs and machine guns. There may be serious problems—slavery, for example, but Ethiopia could work out her own problems in time. There is no reason to believe Italy can work them out for her.[92]

In the context of widespread colonial use of unfree labor, Italian concerns for slavery in Ethiopia were recognized by African Americans as an attempt to provide a veneer of legitimacy to their aggression. Accordingly, Italian occupation could not be an improvement for Ethiopians, free or enslaved. Whether the Ethiopian slavery was comparable to Atlantic chattel slavery or not, the experience of Africans across the continent demonstrated that colonial rule could not constitute an alternative.

Ethiopia being unfairly singled out on the issue of slavery fueled African American feelings of *ressentiment* and strengthened bonds of solidarity with Ethiopia. Because African Americans saw the treatment of Ethiopia as analogous to the treatment of people of African descent in the US, singling out of Ethiopia became another example of racial discrimination in the international arena. Already in May 1935, George Padmore warned the readers of *The Crisis* that Ethiopia was a price "white Europe" was ready to pay to preserve European peace, for the "white man's continent is more important than the black man's."[93] To even "the most liberal whites," Italian expansion in East Africa was acceptable because they believed "that the blacks are unfit to rule themselves and that Italy will civilize them."[94] When the contents of the Hoare-Laval Plan, which proposed for most of the Ethiopian territory to be ceded to Italy, became public in December 1935, similar sentiment was repeated by others. Frank Marshall Davis, the managing editor of *Associated Negro Press*, wrote that "the loss of white prestige" was "a greater evil than threats of Italian rivalry" for White powers.[95] Ethiopia, in the words of *Defender*, was put "on the auction block."[96] Such word choice, invoking the treatment of Africans at the hands of White slave traders, shows how African Americans perceived the treatment of Ethiopia.

Henry L. Rockel was even more explicit when it came to drawing parallels between the treatment of Ethiopia and African Americans. His *Defender* article emphasized how the different treatment of Ethiopia and Italy by the international community reflected the treatment of White and Black assailants under the US justice system:

92 "Paul Robeson Airs His Views and Sails," *Associated Negro Press*, January 13, 1936, 3.
93 George Padmore, "Ethiopia and World Politics," *The Crisis* 42, no. 5 (May 1935): 139.
94 Padmore, "Ethiopia," 157.
95 Frank Marshall Davis, "World in Review," *Associated Negro Press*, December 19, 1935, 1.
96 "Sacrifice Instead of Sanctions," *The Chicago Defender*, December 21, 1935, 16.

> When black rapes white, he is executed first and judged afterwards, but when white [. . .] rapes black, there is a marked difference of treatment of the white malefactor. The same white persons who would have pulled the noose about the neck of the black and applied match to the fagots piled about his body, are content to stand idly by while the white villain outrages the black victim. [. . .]. This is no exaggeration of what has taken place in regard to Mussolini's conduct in Ethiopia.[97]

Italy was, like the White assailants in the US, supported by the inaction of others, and even rewarded by a peace proposal that sought to "take the possessions of the black victim and deliver them to the white rapist."[98] In the eyes of African Americans, the Ethiopian invasion was proof, as a reader of the *Afro-American* put it, that:

> We have no rights that the white man is bound to respect [. . .] people of African descent are held in contempt and loathing, trodden under foot, and despised by millions of white people. The white people of Maryland believe this, and so does Mussolini.[99]

Similar sentiments were further entrenched in the summer of 1936 when it became clear that Ethiopia lost the war and the African American press began reporting on Italian plans for occupation. *Associated Negro Press*, for example, warned that Italian plans for racial segregation in Ethiopia indicated "a possibility that native Abyssinians may eventually share the fate of the American Indians by being crowded into oblivion."[100] For African Americans, the treatment of Ethiopia was analogous to the treatment they—and other persons of color—experienced under the US system of racial discrimination.

This *ressentiment* among African Americans made responses to the issue of Ethiopian slavery possible. As Mihaela Mihai argues "reasoned argument [. . .] does not constitute the only mode of engaging legitimately in politics," emotions and desires are just as important.[101] *Ressentiment* thus allowed African Americans to construct solidarity with Ethiopia despite Ethiopian slavery. This does not mean that African Americans were blind to Ethiopian shortcomings—after all, African Americans agreed that Ethiopian slavery was regrettable. Rather, they felt that the colonial powers offered nothing better. As Solo-Billings put it, "no native African will ever tell you that the rule of a

97 Henry L. Rockel, "The Rape of Ethiopia," *The Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1936, 11.
98 Rockel, "Rape of Ethiopia," 11.
99 Robert F. Stansbury, "Help Ethiopians," *Afro-American*, July 20, 1935, 4.
100 "Italy to Keep Races Separate in Ethiopian Colonization," *Associated Negro Press*, June 24, 1936, 15.
101 Mihaela Mihai, "Theorizing Agonistic Emotions," *Parallax* 20, no. 2 (2014): 34.

righteous race has dawned in Africa."[102] In this context, African Americans extended their solidarity to Ethiopia despite Ethiopian slavery. Moreover, feelings of *ressentiment* further strengthened the African American solidarity with Ethiopia that was built upon their racial identification with Ethiopia, the appeal of the Ethiopian historical model of Black nationhood, and Ethiopian Christianity. It was this combination that made possible what Brenda Gayle Plummer calls "a curious complementarity between foreign and domestic affairs" among the people of African descent in the US.[103]

Conclusion

The present study of the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia among African Americans in the US in the years 1935-1936 offers several insights into the global history of the African diaspora. To begin with, it demonstrates that solidarity with Ethiopia was not predetermined, but constructed through political agitation. While African Americans' racial identification with Ethiopia was a necessary condition for the construction of this solidarity, it was not sufficient. Ethiopia, contrary to Haiti or Liberia, was recognized as an alternative (imperial) model of Black nationhood and held religious importance for African American Christians. As this analysis of the articles and letters to the editor demonstrates, it was the combination of these three factors that enabled the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia among so many African Americans.

Similarly, the opposition of the minority of African Americans to the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia lends further credence to the view that solidarity was politically constructed rather than predetermined. A minority of the readers of and contributors to African American publications argued Ethiopia was undeserving of African American solidarity: they argued that Ethiopians were not Black and viewed other people of African descent negatively. Such opposition put the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia under strain and necessitated response from sympathetic African Americans, who emphasized the physical similarities between themselves and Ethiopians, as well as disputed claims of the latter's negative attitudes towards other people of African descent. Importantly, even the nature of racial identification with Ethiopia had to be constructed, indicated by the presence of both advocates and opponents in the African American press. In sum, the first and second section of the dissertation reiterate the need for the global history of the African diaspora to not take diasporan identities for granted. Rather,

102 Solo-Billings, "Ethiopia and Slaves," 12.
103 Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 37.

they tend to be part of historical and political processes of constitution and reconstitution, which continuously reinterpret the relationship between the diaspora and the African continent.

Moreover, this study highlights the role emotions played in this process, a dimension that has so far been underexplored. The singling out of Ethiopian slavery in the context of widespread colonial systems of unfree labor fueled feelings of *ressentiment* among African Americans against the systems of racial discrimination. The African diaspora in the US saw the treatment of Ethiopia as analogous to their treatment at home, enabling these feelings of *ressentiment* to spill into the arena of international relations. Many African Americans reasoned that the colonial powers could not offer an alternative to people of African descent. In such a context, the issue of Ethiopian slavery never became a major obstacle to the construction of solidarity with Ethiopia. In the end, African Americans' solidarity with an African country facing imperialist aggression was upheld by emotions against racial discrimination just as much as by any other factor.

Ultimately, this study shows that global histories of the African diaspora—and beyond—can benefit from the analysis of printed media not only as a "second-order mirror of what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak."[104] In 1935 and 1936, the African American press became a site where the events of the international crisis caused by Italian aggression against Ethiopia came to be interpreted. Not only did African American publications contest the actions and justifications of the Italian state, but African Americans also addressed and contested other African Americans' interpretations of the events in the realm of international relations. In this way, the African American press became a site where solidarity with Ethiopia was constructed. The analysis of the letters to the editors of the *Afro-American* and *The Chicago Defender* shows how ordinary African Americans engaged with these events, and how they contested their importance and meaning. To conclude, this study arrives at a more complete view of why African Americans vociferously extended solidarity to Ethiopia, and, therefore, how they reconstructed their diasporan identity in the years 1935-1936.

104 Hall, "Cultural Identity," 237.