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*The African American*  
**SONNET**

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A LITERARY HISTORY

TIMO MÜLLER

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# *Contents*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IX

INTRODUCTION

*Troubling Spaces*

3

CHAPTER 1

*The Genteel Tradition and the Emergence  
of the African American Sonnet*

15

CHAPTER 2

*New Negro and Genteel Protest:  
The Sonnet during the Harlem Renaissance*

39

CHAPTER 3

*The Sonnet and Black Transnationalism in the 1930s*

57

CHAPTER 4

*The Vernacular Sonnet and the Afro-Modernist Project*

75

CHAPTER 5

*Poetics of the Enclave:  
The Sonnet in the Age of Black Nationalism*

91

CHAPTER 6

*The Spaces of Black Experimental Poetry*

109

NOTES

129

WORKS CITED

143

INDEX

167

## *Chapter 3*

### THE SONNET AND BLACK TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE 1930S

One of the most influential statements of Harlem Renaissance poetics, W. E. B. Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), begins with an anecdote about travel. While black Americans understandably demand full citizenship, Du Bois notes, there are moments that make them question the desirability of joining the American mainstream. For him, one such moment was a visit to the Scottish Highlands.

In the high school where I studied we learned most of Scott's "Lady of the Lake" by heart. In after life once it was my privilege to see the lake. It was Sunday. It was quiet. You could glimpse the deer wandering in unbroken forests; you could hear the soft ripple of romance on the waters. . . . A new day broke and with it came a sudden rush of excursionists. They were mostly Americans and they were loud and strident. They poured upon the little pleasure boat,—men with their hats a little on one side and drooping cigars in the wet corners of their mouths; women who shared their conversation with the world. They all tried to get everywhere first. They pushed other people out of the way. They made all sorts of incoherent noises and gestures so that the quiet home folk and the visitors from other lands silently and half-wonderingly gave way before them. (290)

While Du Bois frames his anecdote in terms of race ("We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not"), he arrives at its central insight by way of travel—the leisurely, cultivated travel of the gentleman abroad. The Americans appear vulgar to him because they disturb the tranquility of his first solitary exploration, because their noisy competitiveness disturbs his own cultured interest in the scenery, and above all because they compare unfavorably

to the Europeans who populate the area. “Criteria of Negro Art” thus opens with a nod to genteel transnationalism but radicalizes its political implications. The outside perspective afforded by travel, in Du Bois’s view, allows African Americans to recognize and overcome white America’s attempt to universalize its own worldview. Instead of aspiring to white standards, he suggests, the cultivated black traveler will bring a variety of experiences and perspectives to bear on the struggle against racial oppression at home. This is what Du Bois did from the 1930s onward, when he turned first to communism and then to Pan-Africanism as means of black liberation. His comments in “Criteria of Negro Art,” published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, highlight the continuity of transnational perspectives in African American culture.

Following the seminal work of James De Jongh, Ann Douglass, and R. Baxter Miller, scholars have widely acknowledged the transnationality of the Harlem Renaissance. Throughout the twenties Harlem was transformed by an unprecedented influx of migrants from the rest of African America and the Caribbean. Artists working in Harlem interacted with other ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities as a matter of course, and those working elsewhere contributed ideas and innovations from around the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of the sonnet is one indicator of this transnationality. Claude McKay and Countee Cullen were among the first to explore the potential of the form for negotiating their relationship to Europe and Africa. Many histories of African American literature suggest, however, that the transnational reach of the Harlem Renaissance faltered in 1929, when the economic crash drained the resources available to African American literati. With few exceptions, scholarship on the African American 1930s focuses on national concerns and regards social activism and folk expression as the shaping forces of literary production. Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright are central figures of this narrative, while transatlantic travelers like Cullen and McKay are cast aside as remnants of an earlier period.<sup>2</sup> There is much to be said for the productivity of social and folk poetry, but a closer look at the sonnets from the period shows that transatlantic exchange remained an important factor in African American literature throughout the 1930s. The only area of transatlantic exchange that has received sustained scholarly attention is the communist movement, but the sonnets direct attention to two other areas in which transnational concerns shaped African American writing: travel and Pan-Africanism.

Both travel writing and Pan-Africanism had a longer tradition in African American culture, one that can be traced back as far as the first slave narratives and the emigration societies for freed slaves in the mid-nineteenth century. Both were prominent during the Harlem Renaissance, whose leading



representatives frequently traveled to Europe and Africa while the masses were attracted to Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" rhetoric. In his study *Artistic Ambassadors: Literary and International Representation of the New Negro Era* (2013), Brian Russell Roberts shows that considerable effort went toward securing ambassadorships for African Americans, and that literary travelers negotiated the ambivalences of being regarded as unofficial ambassadors for a country that denied them full citizenship at home. The social turmoil of the 1930s added further dimensions to black transnationalism: travelers faced the charge of escapism and social irresponsibility while at the same time the communist movement put African Americans into contact with a supposedly global struggle against exploitation, racism, and colonialism.

Despite its frequent theoretical critiques of nationalism, the communist movement drew liberally on national symbolism and strove for a fraternity of workers' republics conceived along national lines. Yet the influence communism exerted on American writers was transnationalizing in more ways than one.<sup>3</sup> The ideal of solidarity among workers undermined the sovereignty of the nation state, as governments around the world were quick to realize. It also motivated intellectuals to look beyond national boundaries, and communism became a main impulse behind African Americans' engagement in debates over international politics and anti-imperialism. Many African Americans on the left also engaged communist policy itself, in the shape of directives from the Moscow-based Communist International. Scholars including Barbara Foley, Gerald Horne, and William J. Maxwell have pointed out that African Americans were no mere recipients of Comintern directives; on the contrary, they subjected such directives to critical discussion at home and sometimes even in Moscow. While these debates were often one-sided and ideologically narrow, they did much to uncover the arbitrariness of American racism and its role in perpetuating social inequality. From the mid-thirties, moreover, the communists appropriated Pan-Africanist positions to broaden their appeal with African Americans, which provided another impulse to look beyond national boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas travel and Pan-Africanist poets of the thirties found in the sonnet a genre congenial to their transnationalism, communist writers showed little interest in the form. McKay occasionally references communism in his travel sonnets, as we will see, but he had severed his ties with the movement by that time. Cullen's sonnet on the Scottsboro Boys is titled "Not Sacco and Vanzetti" but makes no further reference to the communists although they were instrumental in organizing legal defense for the defendants.<sup>5</sup> Only the regional poets Marcus Bruce Christian and Octave Lilly published a handful

of sonnets protesting social inequality that echo communist ideas. Christian's "McDonough Day in New Orleans" (1934), the strongest of these sonnets, details the privations that go into a black girl's festive dress and protests racial as much as social oppression. Lilly's "Saint Charles Avenue" (1938) draws on many of the strategies McKay explored two decades earlier to fault readers for tolerating the lethal effects of social inequality. While both of these poems were published in *Opportunity* magazine, they remained isolated specimens of social protest in the African American sonnet of the period.

The many communist sonnets published by white writers at the time raise the question of why communism and the sonnet did not come together in African American literature. One answer might be that the Comintern tended to conceive African Americans as peasants bound to the local soil, whereas the sonnet, as we have seen, emphasized mobility and intellectual recognition. A related factor was the Black Belt thesis, which held that blacks in the American South constituted an oppressed nation of peasants under white feudal rule. While the Black Belt thesis stressed black self-determination, it effectively bounded African American identity within a conventional territorial nationalism. This ambivalence was particularly noticeable in the literary scene. The communists were early champions of African American literature, as Henry Louis Gates and others have noted, but only when that literature could be read as "social" or "folk" art. Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Richard Wright became the exemplars of such writing, and their prominence ensured that African American literature of the 1930s is still largely perceived in these categories.<sup>6</sup>

For the marginalized transnationalists among black writers, the sonnet offered a means of resisting the limiting implications of folk and social art. While the form was not regarded as incompatible with a leftist agenda, the communist tendency to equate African American writing and folk expression put black poets in a special position. In their hands, the sonnet asserted a degree of mobility and cultivation that the racialized expectations of leftist critics tended to discourage or occlude. It was thus a resistant form but not an escapist one, as Jon Woodson notes in *Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s* (2011), the only extended discussion of the African American sonnet of the period. While Woodson rightly emphasizes the tension between the collective framework of leftist politics and the individualism enacted in the sonnet, his reduction of this individualism to romantic subjectivity is problematic on several counts. The notion that a romantic subjective voice was in itself subversive at this late point in African American literary history is anachronistic (see Chapter 1) and

occludes the range of individualities explored not least in the travel sonnet, whose existence seems to have escaped Woodson.<sup>7</sup> The following discussion expands on his and other accounts of African American writing in the 1930s in that it highlights the importance of the travel sonnet and the Pan-African protest sonnet. Poets used both forms to negotiate the collectivist demands of social and folk writing, and to explore geographical, intellectual, and poetic alternatives to national constraints.

#### TRAVEL, MIGRATION, AND THE SONNET

Some historians of African American writing have drawn a direct line from the slave narrative to twentieth-century travel writing in order to posit mobility as a constitutive category of the African American experience. This broad claim elides the differences between the enforced mobility of slavery and the leisurely connotations of modern travel, and it disregards the fact that before the late twentieth century few black Americans had the time and opportunity to travel outside the United States. The leading writers of the 1920s and 1930s were a privileged minority in this respect, and their reports from abroad were read with interest in *The Crisis* and other publications. Yet the slave narrative genealogy points to an important feature of African American travel writing: such writing complicates the hierarchy of privileged traveler-observer and objectified local population that scholars of travel writing have identified as a template of the genre.<sup>8</sup>

It was the emergence of postcolonial studies that drew attention to this hierarchy and revived scholarship on travel writing in the process. Scholars like Steve Clark, Patrick Holland, and Graham Huggan have pointed out, however, that early postcolonial approaches tended to view the encounter between the traveling colonizer and the local population in binary oppositions such as active/passive and mobile/static, thus effectively reinscribing the power structures they were exposing.<sup>9</sup> This binary model was complicated when travelers from the colonies began to visit the metropolis. The genre-specific power structure of travel writing (the observer defining the observed) now unfolded against the larger, racialized power structure of the colonial system. The writings of African Americans traveling to Europe further complicate this constellation. Marked as racially other yet often perceived as representatives of an economically and politically dominant nation, African American travelers needed to negotiate a variety of subject positions from which to write. They found themselves thrust in shifting self/other constellations as

they crossed national, ethnic, and social boundaries. Studies and anthologies of African American travel writing illustrate the variety of ideological currents underlying such writing, which often congeal in the question of race. One example is Langston Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (1945), which ironically chronicles the various races locals ascribed to him in the United States, Mexico, and Western Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The sonnet, like poetry in general, is seldom discussed by scholars of travel writing even though its history is marked by travel. After originating in medieval Sicily, the form spread to country after country, accommodated new languages, and assimilated to regional and national cultures. It acquired a mediating function similar to that of human travelers, with whom it shared the strategy of reporting new observations in a familiar cultural framework. Joachim du Bellay's travel sonnets in *Regrets* and *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558), the latter translated fairly literally by Spenser as *Ruins of Rome* (1591), inspired a long tradition of brief poetic sketches recording a picturesque scenery and the speaker's response to it. The travel sonnet heightens the tensions between subject and object and between individual and community that characterize travel writing in general. By putting the observing speaker in a privileged position it foregrounds his power of definition while at the same time emphasizing his distance to the observed scene. When the African American writers Alpheus Butler, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay turned to the travel sonnet, they enacted a many-faceted black transnationalism and explored a broad range of subject positions, from Butler's leisurely gentleman-observer to McKay's unruly vagabondage.

Butler's "Travel Sonnets," a section of his collection *Make Way for Happiness* (1932), are the first sequence of travel sonnets published by an African American. Butler writes in the genteel tradition and assumes the persona of the aloof connoisseur familiar from colonial travel and postcolonial tourism.<sup>11</sup> Despite their broad geographical range—the sequence covers locations in the United States, Cuba, Europe, and Asia—his sonnets remain distant from the places he describes rather than engaging them. Here is Butler's response to a "Castle in Spain":

A modern youth, while looking at these walls,  
 Recalls quaint pictures from a merry past.  
 These come to live again. Soon romance calls  
 Within this house built then to stay and last. (lines 9–12)

The sonnet draws on several distancing devices. The speaker's personal response is routed through that of a generic "modern youth," which turns the travel experience into an allegory. The historical scene in the speaker's

imagination is presented as more interesting than the scenery he actually encounters. This impression is underscored by descriptors such as “quaint” and “exotic,” which recur throughout the sequence and suggest that an otherwise unassuming scenery only becomes worthy of interest because of the associations the cultivated traveler brings to it. While Butler succeeds at times in gauging the cultural diversity he encounters in such places in Paris and Havana, his aloofness prevents the kind of engagement with the foreign from which travel poems usually draw their energy. He typically projects the “romance” of his own imagination on the scene he finds before himself, which leaves the hierarchies of conventional travel writing intact. This might have been the reason why Cullen, who traveled in a similar style and with a similar outlook, abandoned the travel sonnet after a few initial attempts.

Cullen’s first trip to Europe was part of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his father, a pastor and devout Christian. The places Cullen most wanted to see on the way were Paris and Rome, cities that epitomized the European cultural heritage and were associated with some of his favorite poets. Two of the earliest African American travel sonnets, “At the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem” and “To Endymion” (subtitled “Rome, August 1926, after a visit to the grave of Keats”), were inspired by this trip and appeared on adjacent pages in his 1927 collection *Copper Sun* (75–76). In subsequent years Cullen spent most of his summers in France, immersing himself in the language and literature he was teaching in New York. He rarely referred to these experiences in his poetry, however, and even the Jerusalem and Rome sonnets transmit little information about their locations beyond the references in the paratext. They are poetic meditations on endurance in the flow of history, a quality Cullen finds both in the ancient wall and in Keats’s poetic legacy. Like Butler, Cullen keeps his distance from the scenes he describes by foregrounding his own reflections and associations.

It was McKay who explored the full complexity of the black traveler’s encounter with the foreign, and turned the sonnet into a congenial medium for these explorations. In a way, Harlem was already a part of the transnational experience for McKay since he had moved there from the Caribbean and never fully settled in the United States. In Harlem he found his way into the urban counterculture and associated with communist circles as well as the Caribbean diaspora. His first trip to Europe was to Russia on an invitation from the new communist government, and when the United States government denied him re-entry because of his communist ties he became a self-styled “vagabond.”<sup>12</sup> His travels in Europe and Northern Africa were thus involuntary to a considerable degree, and they were rarely undertaken on the kind of financial basis that would have allowed him to remain aloof of local ways.

The sonnets inspired by these travels, known as the Cities sonnets, date from the mid-1930s but remained unpublished in McKay's lifetime. They have recently been recovered amid a general surge of interest in his transnational experience. While some scholars have tried to recuperate this experience into a national agenda by describing his travels as "tragic" or as motivated by an "obsession" to find a "place he could call 'home,'" McKay's life and work are now widely taken to exemplify the trajectories, challenges, and opportunities of the twentieth-century black migrant experience.<sup>13</sup> Since scholarly discussion has focused on his prose writings and his Jamaican poetry, the crucial role of the Cities sonnets in his evolving transnationalism has not yet come under scrutiny. These sonnets, we will see in the following, correct and extend some of the claims made about McKay's transnationalism by previous scholarship.

The Cities sonnets record McKay's attempts to come to terms with the unadulterated experience of new places and cultures. A sensitive traveler, he immerses himself in the atmosphere of each city but remains aware of his inability fully to understand and participate in the foreign culture. Where Butler's sonnets are overly refined, McKay's are raw, unfinished, and often unsuccessful from an aesthetic point of view. They present his immediate impression of a city from the privileged perspective of the educated traveler, but at the same time they reflect on this perspective, drawing attention to the traveler's outside status. While the cities are often described as communities that take the traveler into their fold, McKay remains a misfit, a self-conscious outsider who is only traveling through. His refusal to commit to any form of organized collectivity stands in sharp contrast to the implicit demands of most of the cities he visits. In their different ways, the contested spaces of Northern Africa as well as the European capitals of imperialism (London, Paris) and totalitarianism (Berlin, Moscow) require the visitor to position himself within or toward bounded communities. While he does not systematically challenge these boundaries, McKay uses the travel sonnet to question and resist them in various ways.

McKay's tendency to conceive the indigenous community as "folk" suggests that he is negotiating the tensions between individuality and collectivity against the background of contemporary debates among leftist and African American critics. Like these critics, he regards the folk as a homogeneous, collective entity defined by its rural simplicity. In "Barcelona," a triple sonnet, he describes a festival where the "folk" come "together / From pueblo, barrio, in families" (I.4). In "Fez," the locals appear to him as a "folk so strangely sad": a community unfathomable in its shared sensuality that leaves the traveling observer "haunted" by the glimpses it affords him (8, 5). As in his encounters

with communism and the African American bourgeoisie, McKay distances himself from these collective entities. He emphasizes his individuality by foregrounding his own perception of the local “folk.”

Since his perception relies primarily on the visual dimension, the sonnets can be read as manifesting the ‘imperial gaze’ of the colonial traveler (Spurr 13–27). “Fez” is marked as a visual appropriation of the city by its opening words, “Mine eyes saw Fez”; in “Barcelona” the traveler locates himself on the city’s “natural towers,” watches its “blue carpet spreading to their feet” (lines 2–3), and generally establishes the visual as a leitmotif of the poem. In both poems McKay contrasts the superiority of the appropriative gaze with the thrilling experience of abandoning ratio and control in the city’s sexualized underworld. In “Barcelona” the traveler descends from the mountains “Down—to your bottoms sinister and strange: / The nights eccentric of the Barrio Chino” (II.8–9); in “Fez” he glances at the “hood[ed] beauty” of virgins in the “dim passages” of the city (lines 4, 6); in “Marrakesh” his gaze travels from the “high ramparts” of the city walls to the “Salome-sensual dance of jeweled boys” in Berber tents (lines 1, 13). By foregrounding this subjective response, McKay dramatizes the ambivalence of his own position in between national and cultural communities. He is torn between identifying with the local folk and distancing himself through a sexualized, imperial gaze.

Both of these strategies open his sonnets up to charges of Africanism. As John Cullen Gruesser shows in *White on Black: Contemporary Literature about Africa* (1992), Africanism often manifests in the tendency to perceive the continent as a “blank slate” on which various preconceptions and stereotypes can be projected (3–8). McKay’s emphatic subjectivity and reliance on the imperial gaze veers into such projection at several points. Arguably, however, his Cities sonnets document no facile Africanism but rather the poet’s attempts to understand the foreign without resorting to reductive collective templates. The second sonnet on “Tanger,” for example, opens with a critique of colonial exploitation that highlights the stranded vagabond’s affinities with the city. Tanger is described as an “iron pirate fettered now,” forced to watch the ships go by with their “golden cargo” (II.1–5). The octave concludes with an unanswered question—“What thoughts are hid behind your lowered brow?”—that sounds the note of Africa as a blank slate. Instead of projecting his thoughts on that slate, however, the speaker transfers this role to present-day tourists who “stop to gaze at you in chains / And purchase from the souks a souvenir” (II.9–10). Distancing himself from the touristic gaze, the speaker turns to the countryside, the bled or bilad, where he senses the true soul of this community:

But in the bled the rugged mountaineer,  
 Invoking God in fierce fanatic pride,  
 Lives by the shattered glory that still remains. (II.12–14)

Both the tourists and the folk are contrasted with the traveler, who communicates with each sphere but remains individualized and apart. This triangular setup complicates the conventional opposition between colonial traveler and colonized locals, and it highlights the ambivalent position of the traveler, who is more observant than the tourists yet unable to explain the folk spirit he fathoms in the countryside. On the basis of McKay's prose texts, the scholars Joel Nickels and Robert Philipson have argued that McKay sought to replace fixed communities like those of class and nation by a more flexible vagabond community of spiritual kinship. The Cities sonnets complicate that reading as well. Instead of developing a vagabond community like "The Ditch" in *Banjo* (1929), they dramatize the individual traveler's encounter with local communities that are bounded, rooted in the land, and ultimately inaccessible. Rather than promising easy identification with the foreign, McKay's sonnets seem oriented toward a transnational ethos of empathetic communication. The traveler cannot fully understand the African communities—cannot know the "thoughts" behind their "lowered brow." He can avoid being a mere tourist, however: by resisting Africanist projection, by empathizing with his environment, and by responding to a city's populace, street life, history, and architecture in a manner that combines the intellectual and the sensual. It is this ethos that McKay underscores when he repeatedly casts the traveler as a lover praising the beloved city.

One of the forms of transnational solidarity that scholars have identified in McKay's oeuvre is communism. While McKay had rejected communism by the late 1920s, the movement and its underlying ideas seem to have been on his mind when he was composing the Cities sonnets. The increasing communist activity in the United States would have worked to that effect, as did the controversial discussion of Stalinism among Western communists.<sup>14</sup> McKay's negotiation of communism in the Cities sonnets reflects his general stance on bounded communities: he recognizes the strength they exert but ultimately remains skeptical of the claims they make on the individual. In "Moscow," for example, McKay nostalgically recalls his visit to the city ten years earlier and praises the "human" communism of Lenin he encountered there (line 14). Ultimately, however, the poem undercuts the collective ethos of the movement by alluding to Stalin's inhuman rule and emphasizing the speaker's sensual response to the buildings, ornaments, and sounds of the city. McKay's



reservations about strategies of collective empowerment such as communism and cultural nationalism are palpable throughout the Cities sequence, even where he indicts racist and colonial oppression.

The uneasy relationship between McKay's anti-colonialism and his individualist transnationalism manifests in the first "Tanger" sonnet. The sonnet evokes an atmosphere of "hate" and warfare between the cultures and religions that come together in the city. It suggests that this atmosphere is sustained, if not caused, by arbitrary colonial power:

Morocco's severed head is Europe's ball  
 Kicked from goal to goal and all around—  
 In the African game of the European (l.9–11)

The fact that these sonnets were never published might explain the inferior quality of the last line and the prosaic diction McKay slips into whenever he wants to drive home a point. Nevertheless, the passage illustrates the continuities between his earlier protest poetry and the political perspective he brings to his travel sonnets. The unremitting, visceral imagery recalls the protest of "If We Must Die" and "A Roman Holiday" (see Chapter 2), and the international outlook adumbrated in his early socialist sonnets comes to fruition in the confidently judgmental conclusion of the first "Tanger" sonnet. Kicked around between the colonial powers, McKay ironically notes, Morocco is "desolate and helpless from intrigue / And aptly christened International!" (lines 13–14). His redefinition of "International" strips the word of its associations with grand affairs and aloof cosmopolitanism; instead, the capital letter emphasizes its communist overtones.

On a more literal level, the word draws attention to the powerlessness and silence of those in between the established nations. They become mere footballs, or indeed "game" (an earlier, better version of line 11 read "African game of Europe's little league"), for the dominant nation-states of the time. McKay proves himself aware of and sympathetic with these in-between communities, but at the same time he remains unaffected by their fate. Neither silent nor powerless, he assumes a position of superior insight into their situation that enables him to voice their plight in the language of the cosmopolitan educated elite. McKay occasionally called himself an internationalist (*A Long Way* 300), but the "Tanger" sonnets signal that he is not inter-national in this debasing sense. Using vocabulary not yet available at the time, his position and outlook can be described as *transnational* in that he remains independent of national struggles and their debilitating effects. This transnationalism is empowering but

at the same time limited in its reach. It relies on individualism—on one's readiness and ability to leave a place behind when things get unpleasant. It combines the liberating transgression of vagabondage with its social irresponsibility.

As these examples show, the travel sonnet of the thirties negotiates the dynamics at the core of black transnationalism: the relationship between home and abroad, roots and routes, identity and mobility. The sonnets of Butler, Cullen, and McKay are susceptible to charges of stereotyping and projection, and some enact the privileged role of the observing traveler. Yet the very phenomenon of African Americans traveling and publishing their impressions undercut some of the structuring oppositions of Western travel writing. McKay explored this subversive quality more radically than his contemporaries, highlighting the black traveler's uneasy subject position in between communities variously defined by race, nationality, or geography. In his *Cities* sequence, both the observing traveler and the observed locals emerge as composite identities that cannot be adequately understood in binary terms such as oppressor/oppressed or mobile/static. The sonnet becomes a testing ground and an emblem of this troubling transnationalism. Traditionally structured by the opposition between observer and observed, it offers a means of dramatizing, examining, and questioning this opposition. In its exploration of flexible conceptions of self and other, home and foreign, the African American travel sonnet of the 1930s presciently addresses concerns that would come to shape debates around African American identity from the late twentieth century onward.

THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR, THE PROTEST SONNET,  
AND TRANSATLANTIC PAN-AFRICANISM

While the travel accounts of black writers reached a limited number of contemporaries, questions of black transnationalism returned to center stage in 1935. As fascist Italy prepared to invade on the country then known as Abyssinia, the last African nation free from colonial rule, African Americans took a strong interest in the fate of Emperor Haile Selassie and his people. During the lengthy lead-up to the invasion both parties struggled for the support of international public opinion. Since the United States government's doctrine of neutrality left black Americans with few options for material support, writers and journalists felt it their duty to raise consciousness and strengthen solidarity with the Ethiopian cause. While their interest waned rather quickly, the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935/36 captured the imagination and the emotions of more African Americans than any other

international event of the time. It inspired an outpouring of literature not only on the war itself but on Abyssinia, Africa, and Pan-African brotherhood.<sup>15</sup>

Scholarship on the literary response to the Italo-Ethiopian crisis has remained scant. John Cullen Gruesser and Ichiro Takayoshi have examined prose writing on the crisis and identified the transnational struggle against colonialism as a main impetus. The only sustained discussion of the poetic response, Woodson's *Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants*, notes that the use of "archaic" devices like the sonnet might be a reason for the scholarly neglect of poets such as J. Harvey L. Baxter, Marcus Bruce Christian, Owen Dodson, and P. J. White. Woodson further suggests that these poets helped create an imagined community between blacks in Ethiopia and the United States, thus blurring the boundary between individual and collective identities and between the local and the global.<sup>16</sup> The sonnet was particularly suited for negotiating these categories, as the travel poets of the period had demonstrated. A closer look at the Pan-Africanist sonnets published in response to the Italo-Ethiopian crisis confirms both the pervasiveness of transnational concerns in African American writing of the thirties and the continuing tension between genteel conventions and radical political protest.

Pan-Africanism had taken various shapes since its inception as an organized movement. Initially associated with the project of settling free blacks in the self-governed African nation of Liberia, it acquired a wider agenda in a series of international conventions from 1900 onward. The Pan-African Congresses propagated the cultural and spiritual unity of all people of African descent, defended the sovereignty of the free black nations (Haiti, Liberia, Abyssinia), and envisioned a unified Africa governed by blacks. Their activities were complemented, and sometimes contradicted, by grassroots efforts like Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, which kept the idea of African American emigration to the mother continent alive well into the twentieth century. Garvey regarded black people as a community lateral to established nation states but like many Pan-Africanists used nationalist tropes to imagine unity among black people and propagate joint political action. Pan-Africanism is therefore often equated or conflated with black nationalism, itself a highly ambiguous term whose connotations range from the communist Black Belt thesis to the Black Power movement and the anticolonial struggles after World War II (see Chapter 5). The continental strand of Pan-Africanism, which propagated a united African nation from which whites and their culture were to be excluded, can indeed be called nationalist in the conventional sense. In the thirties, however, the Pan-Africanist movement was dominated by its transatlantic

strand, whose idea of transnational black solidarity challenged geographical and discursive boundaries across the Black Atlantic.<sup>17</sup>

The sonnet, which had traveled from the Mediterranean through Europe to the Americas and back across the Black Atlantic, epitomized this boundary-crossing impulse. While the protest sonnet had been a formative element of the Harlem Renaissance, it had fallen into disuse in the 1930s—presumably because protest was now associated with the communist movement, which as we have seen discouraged the use of conventional poetic form by African American poets. The outstanding poets to adopt the Ethiopian cause in the United States, Langston Hughes and Melvin Tolson, disregarded the form and drew on social and folk poetry to voice protest.<sup>18</sup> The minor poets might have looked to McKay, however, for models of effective protest in the sonnet form. McKay had published a number of international protest sonnets early in his American career, which led the Pan-Africanist movement to claim him as one of its own. He encouraged this reading when he claimed that his most famous work, the sonnet “If We Must Die,” was written for the “abused, outraged and murdered, whether they are minorities or nations,” all over the world. St. Clair Drake, another writer of sonnets and traveler of the Black Atlantic, liked to conclude his Pan-Africanist speeches and essays by quoting from McKay’s “Like a Strong Tree,” and the historian Colin Legum cited the sonnet “Outcast” as an epitomic manifestation of the movement. The sonnet thus gained Pan-Africanist credentials, while its European ancestry remained an insurance against the primitivism that the African American middle-class tended to suspect in all things African.<sup>19</sup>

This double function made the sonnet a fitting medium for literary interventions on the Italo-Ethiopian crisis. Since the political debate around the crisis largely took place in Europe, culminating in the emperor Haile Selassie’s speech before the League of Nations at Geneva, these interventions could not simply collapse the idea of black solidarity into Back-to-Africa rhetoric. Instead they negotiated the shifting political, cultural, and emotional alliances at play around the Black Atlantic. Tropes of Africa as the motherland or root of black culture remained in wide use, as did the civilizationist notion that much of Western culture could be traced to ancient Africa. The main challenge for writers on the crisis was to address an African country that had long stood synecdochally for the entire continent in a spirit of admiration and solidarity without reiterating outmoded essentialisms.<sup>20</sup>

The sonnets of Baxter and Christian indicate the range of possible responses to this challenge since they approach poetry and the Ethiopian conflict from very different vantage points. Baxter was an aspiring member of the black

bourgeoisie whose provincial background and genteel values left him out of touch with the cultural and aesthetic developments of the preceding decades. Christian was a socialist who corresponded with leading Harlem Renaissance poets, published in black news media from *The Crisis* to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and researched black folk life for the WPA's Negro Writers Project. Both took up the most widespread motif of Ethiopian protest: the contrast between the exiled emperor's passionate struggle for support and the world powers' hypocritical neutrality, which was brought out most starkly by Selassie's Geneva speech.

Baxter's sonnet on the speech, "Oh, Hang Your Heads, a Voice Accusing Cries," adopts the emperor's voice and compresses his speech into a series of metaphorical images that rather gratuitously evoke such commonplaces as the sufferings of Christ, the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the lynching of African Americans. As Woodson points out in his discussion of this sonnet, Baxter's rendition stands in unfortunate contrast to the emperor's actual speech, which was delivered in quiet dignity and impressed the horrors of Italian chemical warfare on the audience through mere factual retelling. The "exaggerated histrionics" of Baxter's sonnet, which opens with an image of the emperor pointing "a finger shaking in your face" (line 2), rob the speech of both dignity and effect (Woodson 182–85). The conclusion, "God will remember, time will not forget" (line 14), is taken almost verbatim from the speech but sounds curiously deflated after this parade of over-dramatized images.

Christian's "Selassie at Geneva" (1938) is a more controlled rendition of the same event. It uses the Petrarchan volta to keep apart the theatricality of international politics and the tragic potential of Selassie's struggle. The octave recounts Ethiopia's desertion by the Western powers in bitter tones. The sestet identifies the emperor's speech as "the closing scene" of this disingenuous performance and builds toward an impressive, dramatic conclusion:

Pile lies upon wrongs, ring the curtain 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! (*High Ground* 34; lines 9–14)

Both Baxter and Christian cite the trope of the King of Kings, blending the emperor's official designation with the Biblical reference to Jesus Christ (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14, 19:16). While Baxter ineffectively mixes his allusions, Christian uses the trope as a structuring device, a pivot on which the poem

swings from disillusioned political commentary to the apocalyptic threat of the conclusion.

Christian generally succeeds in avoiding primitivist overtones by focusing on realpolitik and on the specific lessons to be learned from the Ethiopian failure. Baxter's 1936 collection *Sonnets to the Ethiopians*, by contrast, remains caught up in paternalistic stereotypes about Africa that tend to undermine his calls for action. The opening sonnet, for example, uses the plural "we" to identify with the Ethiopians and establish a transnational fraternity of oppressed peoples. Instead of citing instances and perpetrators of oppression, however, it foregrounds the victimhood of the oppressed: "The world's a mummery of goggy lies, / And we are victims of its undertow" (3, lines 1–2). This passive attitude carries over into the following sonnets, which are addressed to Africa or Ethiopia but read more like a catalogue of clichés about the continent than a negotiation of the contemporary crisis. The poet announces himself as "a singer, yet a champion / Of the undone, benighted folk," a vengeful Zeus whose poem is a "thunder-bolt to blast around / Each chain and pillory" (4, lines 3–6). He addresses the continent as "natal Mother" and reiterates the civilizationist notion that the continent preceded the Western empires in history and deserves esteem because its people have "Fought oft with Jew and Nomad Bible races" (4, lines 9, 14). Baxter does realize the new topicality of this notion. He mentions that "*Italia*" was among the cultures preceded and influenced by this primeval Africa, but in his clumsy sermonizing fails to derive any political leverage from such observations (5, line 12).

The artificiality of Baxter's protest may be most evident in those poems that borrow the vocabulary of McKay's "If We Must Die" and "America." Lines like "My hate is one indignant world of fire, / My anger is the madness of a tide" become implausible when they succeed one of his metaphor-laden reflections on the woes of "crafty Romans" and "France and England's tardy hand and pulse" (12). Nevertheless, these sonnets are of historical interest in that they provide insight into the range of Pan-Africanisms at play in black transatlantic discourse at the time. They foreshadow the tensions between universalism and black nationalism that would erupt in the 1960s, and they contain one of the first explicit formulations of a political transnationalism in African American literature. Moreover, they epitomize the dilemma that prevented most poets from taking the sonnet beyond the confines of the genteel tradition. When Baxter apologizes in his preface that "my meager and somewhat artless philippics bristle with too much ardor, and my temper of style fails to show the appropriate poise that should be apparent in a work of this kind" (xiii), he betrays the universalist presuppositions that were so firmly associated with

traditional poetic forms in the bourgeois imagination. His project of drawing on the cultural authority of such forms for the black cause follows in the steps of the genteel praise sonnets of the nineteenth century, but his clichéd notions and archaic phrasing fall behind even early figures like Dunbar and Braithwaite. Most African American sonneteers of the thirties were facing these problems, which might explain the comparative poverty of their efforts in the form. It was Langston Hughes, by then an undisputed eminence of African American letters, who would understand these problems and find a way to revive the form as the decade came to a close.