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Pan-Africanist in the court

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Pan-Africanist in the court

W. E. B. Du Bois and his vision of Ethiopian internationalism

Fikru Negash Gebrekidan

Introduction

One of the least studied legacies of W. E. B. Du Bois, as a preeminent Pan-Africanist and a scholar, is the collection of his writings on Ethiopia that spanned four decades. His essays on the East African nation appeared throughout the first half of the twentieth century as newspaper columns, journal articles, and book chapters. In tones alternating between romanticist, scholarly, polemical, and even prophetic, they provided a kaleidoscopic picture of country and people. At the personal level, Du Bois corresponded with high-ranking Ethiopian government officials, challenging their sense of parochialism or traditional worldview. In 1930 and 1948, for example, he advised that Ethiopia play host to a major Pan-African conference. He could not have been more prescient. In May 1963, a meeting in Addis Ababa between the newly independent African states resulted in the creation of the Organization of African Unity, a feat that few had then thought possible.1

This essay serves a few purposes. Since biographers have yet to appreciate the extent of Du Bois’s involvement with Africa, let alone Ethiopia, it fills a gap in the fast-growing Du Boisian historiography. For students of Pan-Africanism, it goes a step further. The chapter demonstrates how much Du Bois was involved in the framing of Ethiopian independence as the fulcrum of Pan-African politics. It also credits Du Bois as a major catalyst in the broadening of the Ethiopian national imagination during the first half of the twentieth century. The chapter’s last section concludes with a discussion on Du Bois’s Pan-African legacy to Ethiopian studies, an area where the Eurocentric worldview still prevails.2

Pan-Africanism after Paris

David Levering Lewis closes the first volume of his Pulitzer prize-winning biography on Du Bois with the year 1919. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, and died in Accra, Ghana, in 1963 at the age of ninety-five. The 1919 Pan-African Congress, held in Paris, France, with fifty-eight delegates in attendance, marked Du Bois’s metamorphosis from a national civil rights activist to a global anticolonial crusader. The Atlanta University professor had attended the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London as an ordinary
guest. Nineteen years later, he himself would convene the Paris race gathering, cited in most history textbooks as the first of a series of Pan-African congresses. The year 1919 was, in this regard, much more than a convenient point of transition between the two halves of a biography. It represented the coming of age of an icon at the international level, especially as pertained to the politics of empire and colonialism.³

The year 1919 can also be used to mark a shift in Du Bois’s thinking about the Horn of Africa. Du Bois’s 1895 PhD dissertation at Harvard University, which appeared as a book monograph the next year, was a study of the rise and fall of the transatlantic slave trade. The Red Sea and the Indian Ocean world came under purview much later. Du Bois included an obituary of Emperor Menelik in the February 1914 issue of the Crisis, the monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The news was a couple of months old, not to mention that it erroneously placed the Battle of Adwa in the year 1893 instead of 1896.⁴ In 1915 followed a two-part treatment of Northeast Africa in Du Bois’s widely read historical work, The Negro. In the first, the author provided a detailed sketch of the history of the ancient Nile valley civilizations, using it as a trope to debunk the Hegelian thesis of static Africa. In the second, the attention shifted to modern Ethiopia, for which the name Abyssinia was exclusively reserved, and which only took up a few paragraphs.⁵

It is against this background that 1919 facilitated the two instances that brought East Africa closer to home. The first was the aforementioned Pan-African gathering in Paris, held from February 19 to February 22 that year. If Senegalese Blaise Diagne, member of the French Chamber of Deputies, cut a figure as the most senior public official at the four-day meeting, Dr. Joseph Vitalien of Martinique stood out as its most worldly traveled. The West Indian medical doctor had spent an entire decade in Ethiopia serving in various capacities, including as Emperor Menelik’s court physician. On this occasion he represented Ethiopian interests, a fact that warranted mention at least in one of Du Bois’s correspondence years later.⁶

The second opportunity unfolded a few months later. In July, a four-man Ethiopian mission arrived in New York, Du Bois’s adopted hometown, bearing messages of congratulations to Americans whose sacrifice made the recent war victory possible. The delegation consisted of Dejazmatch Nadew, head of the mission; Kentiba Gebru Desta, interpreter; Heruy Woldeselasie, mayor of Addis Ababa and would-be foreign minister; and Persian-born Sinke, Nadew’s secretary. Bound by the age-old custom of primus inter pares, State Department staff received the olive-colored visitors with deference. But when Du Bois, editor of the Crisis, wrote to the State Department for a chance to meet with the guests, he was simply ignored. Undaunted, the September issue of the Crisis produced a brief report on the Abyssinian mission, which the October edition expanded into a full-feature article with a background picture of the men in traditional outfits.⁷

Henceforth, Ethiopia was no longer an abstract relic of a distant past, and few years would go by without Du Bois corresponding on Ethiopian matters. In 1921, for instance, Du Bois wrote to Kentiba Gebru in Addis Ababa, asking that his government send delegates to the second Pan-African Congress in London and Brussels.⁸ When no response came forth, Du Bois turned to a missionary group in nearby Sudan for help. P. A. Hamilton of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Khartoum had been receiving five copies of the Crisis every month for local distribution. “I want American Negroes to help in the development of Abyssinia,” Du Bois pleaded. “I want Abyssinia to know about the Pan-African
Congress. How can all this best be accomplished? With what influential persons can I get into correspondence?"  

The pursuit paid off in the long-term but in a less roundabout way. In July 1930, a memo from Professor Alain Locke alerted Du Bois of the upcoming call to his office by two eminent Ethiopians. At seventy-five, the now-familiar Gebru was on his way to the United States to negotiate a loan for a dam project, or a barrage, at the mouth of Lake Tana where the Blue Nile began its long meandering course. Serving as his assistant was Malaku Bayen, a graduate student at Howard University Medical School. During a stop in Paris the Ethiopians had caught up with Professor Locke, one of Bayen’s mentors, whose letter of introduction they solicited. Du Bois was elated by Locke’s message. “Recently, there were rumors of a commission of Abyssinians coming here which was to visit me but I have seen nothing of it,” he was to confide to a friend even before a fortnight had lapsed since receipt of the news.

By mid-August, Bayen and Gebru had been heard of. At least once, possibly twice, they had called on 69 Fifth Avenue, the Manhattan address of the NAACP headquarters. Du Bois’s follow-up missive to them began with a recognition of what he felt was a historic moment: “I wish to assure you, first, of my personal gratification at coming for the first time in direct communication with Ethiopia.” An eight-page draft, or a memorandum, was enclosed. The document opened with highlights of African American achievements: a rich tradition of resistance, ongoing struggle for civil rights, contributions to arts and literature, and vibrant institutions of higher learning and economic life. An outline of the preceding Pan-African congresses and their outcomes came next, followed by some analysis of the European domination of world economy through the manipulation of capital, credit, and patent laws. Regarding international politics, tips on tactical positions were offered, such as the need for the anticolonial forces in Africa and Asia to reach out to the anti-imperial powers of Germany and the Soviet Union.

Ethiopia needed to embrace the gold standard for the sake of a stable currency, the memorandum advised. Along with that, the government had to modernize the national economy, such as by keeping records of income and expenditure, as well as by creating a national banking and credit system. When negotiating with foreign powers, its experts had to watch for any sugar-coated costly business dealings. They had to learn from the negative examples of China, Egypt, and Algeria, countries whose national sovereignty was compromised because of the debt trap set by Western financial institutions. “Usually, loans to colored countries are for political effect with the idea that they are not going to be paid and that eventually the creditor country can foreclose and secure political control,” Du Bois forewarned. “Such loans are, of course, highly dangerous and Ethiopia, I am sure, would not consider them.”

A modernizing country needed to enrich its human capital, the recommendations continued. Until universities and vocational centers began producing local graduates, the talented tenth, Ethiopia had to make do with imported expertise. “Here the American Negro could be of the greatest use,” Du Bois proposed. “An electrical engineer has already applied to me and is ready to go to Ethiopia at any time,” he noted, adding: “It would be possible within the next ten years to furnish at least five hundred technicians for the development of Ethiopia from the United States alone.” Finally, the New Englander advised that the delegates, Gebru and Bayen, organize in New York and Washington as many brainstorming sessions as possible before heading back home. “Then, a fifth Pan-African Congress should be called to meet, not later than 1932, at Addis Ababa, and at this Congress efforts should be made to have the leading groups of Africans of the world represented.”
Out of the Du Bois-Gebru encounter rose cutting-edge ideas but without the means of implementing them. No Pan-African meeting took place in Addis Ababa in 1932, although the vision would inspire the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in the said city thirty years later. Neither did Du Bois’s alternative business plan prove more workable. Erring on the side of pragmatism, the memorandum had suggested that loans be sought out from the private banks of Germany and the United States, countries that posed few risks of colonial entanglement. Du Bois had even offered to liaise between the Ethiopian delegates and the Harlem-based Dunbar National Bank. “A delegation from Abyssinia has visited me twice for information and advice,” he wrote, requesting a meeting with bank president Charles Huitt. Huitt obliged but his response arrived too late, perhaps a day or two after Du Bois had already declared the initiative a failure. “The more I think of it the more I am convinced that nothing can be done with the banks of the United States at present,” his message of August 21 to Gebru and Bayen had concluded. 18

Lack of patience notwithstanding, the memorandum was a document of practical consequences. In 1931, Haile Selassie liquidated the foreign-owned Bank of Abyssinia, considered a factor in the country’s worsening financial woes, including the unfair balance of trade because of a weakened Maria Theresa thaler. In its place was established the government-owned National Bank of Ethiopia, much of the initial capital having been raised by the Emperor himself. 19 Loan negotiations for the dam construction discreetly ceased, a cautionary measure against involvement with the predatory multinationals. Foreign Minister Heruy Woldeeslasie visited Japan in 1931, while Ethiopia continued to cultivate tactical alliances with prewar Germany. This de facto policy of nonalignment would continue into the Cold War decades, during which Haile Selassie commanded as many fans behind the Iron Curtain as he did in the Western capitals. 20

The August meeting was a milestone in another aspect. It opened a channel of communication between the NAACP officer and the Howard University student Malaku Bayen, Ethiopia’s de facto representative in the United States. Bayen, who broke his engagement to the daughter of a government minister in order to marry an African American schoolmate, Dorothy Hadley of Evanston, Illinois, would prove to be a uniquely gifted Pan-African interlocutor. In September 1931, Du Bois had written to Emperor Haile Selassie requesting for a short uplifting message that the Crisis could publish in its upcoming November issue, which was to be dedicated to the celebration of its twenty first anniversary. 21 Knowing the Ethiopian palace protocol of not responding to personal communications, Bayen had to intervene. “You can be assured that His Majesty is very much interested in your movement,” he counselled, “and even if you do not hear from him, you should never think it would be a lack of interest.” 22

Du Bois and the Italo-Ethiopian war

In 1934, Du Bois resigned from the Crisis because of long-standing ideological differences with the NAACP executive board. A professorial job offer from Atlanta University filled the void. The next year saw the launching of the Negro Encyclopedia project, later renamed Encyclopedia Africana. Among the many prominent scholars Du Bois assembled for the task included Willis Huggins of New York City, then working on a monograph on Ethiopian history, 23 as well as William Leo Hansberry, sometimes known as the North American godfather of Ethiopian studies because of his role as co-founder of the Ethiopian Research Council at Howard University. 24 Caught up in a vortex of academic intrigue and institutional racism, Phelps Stokes and Carnegie Corporation reneged on their financial promise to
the encyclopedia, and the collaborative venture failed despite years of preliminary work. The vision did not totally expire, however, and *Encyclopedia Africana* would become a reality in 1999 under the joint editorial stewardship of Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Kwame Apiah.25

For decades, Du Bois had pursued his Pan-African agenda from the NAACP headquarters in New York City. He enjoyed the benefit of a seasoned secretarial staff on top of a comfortable salary that the revenue from the *Crisis* made possible. Against that, Atlanta’s provincialism came as anticlimactic to Du Bois’s involvement in international politics. In the summer and fall of 1935, at a time when the pro-Ethiopian mobilization in the Northern cities needed to rally around a national persona, physical distance discouraged Du Bois from stepping up to the plate. The recent fallout between him and the NAACP did not help either. When Walter White, the new executive secretary, suggested that Du Bois join a committee of preeminent Americans to take up Ethiopia’s plight in the White House, the ex-editor excused himself claiming a busy work schedule.26

As a private citizen, on the other hand, Du Bois remained a leading voice in the save-Ethiopia campaign. He was one of the featured speakers at Madison Square Garden in September, attended by over seven thousand New Yorkers.27 In January and February 1936, while on a winter recess from Atlanta University, he lectured to pro-Ethiopian gatherings at several Northeastern and Midwestern cities: Boston, Worcester, Buffalo, the District of Columbia, Chicago, and Peoria (Illinois), where he was also heard on a local radio station.28

His major literary contribution, before being serialized by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, appeared as a journal article in the influential *Foreign Affairs*. “Inter-Racial Implication of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View” was as much about the author’s own divergent frame of thought in the last third of his life as it was about Ethiopia. The scholar who once railed against race nationalists and social separatists now combined Marxian and racialist critiques of the war. It was an evolving, at times contradictory, worldview that Du Bois fully expounded in his seminal masterpiece of the same year: *Black Reconstruction*.29

The search for resources and markets fueled modern-day colonial conquests, Du Bois explained, presenting race and racism as consequent byproducts. A decade ahead of Eric Williams’s *Slavery and Capitalism*, he stood on its head the claim that racial arrogance drove European overseas expansion. He argued, instead, that “the profit from exploitation was the main reason for the belief in race difference.”30 To proponents of Rome’s civilizing mission who made much of Ethiopian slavery, Du Bois drew attention to the more heinous Atlantic system in which an entire group of human beings was reduced to a chattel. Even then, two wrongs never made right, and Italy’s unprovoked bellicosity was bound to destabilize the world further: “But if Italy takes her pound of flesh by force, does anyone suppose that Germany will not make a similar attempt?”31

Digressing from the orthodox analysis of class struggle, the professor saw racial nationalism as the natural pivot of anticolonial resistance. Even if Western powers had not discreetly lined up behind Italy, there were enough reasons why a worldwide Pan-African mobilization was inevitable, Du Bois reasoned. Ethiopian defeat signaled a collective racial tragedy, the ultimate triumph of whites over blacks. Of the three nominally independent black republics, only the East African nation had a promising economic potential. Liberia, whose diminishing sovereignty Du Bois had lamented in an earlier essay, was a de facto real estate property of the Firestone Corporation.32 Haiti, emerging out of two decades of American military rule, was left prostrate by international debts it could not repay for generations. “Ethiopia, on the other hand, had kept comparatively free of debt, had preserved her political autonomy, had
begun to reorganize her ancient polity, and was in many ways an example and a promise of what a native people untouched by modern exploitation and race prejudice might do.”

The ten-page essay foresaw an imminent Italian battlefield victory given the absolute superiority of its modern war machine. Yet the war was unlike previous wars, it cautioned, anticipating an unprecedented tumult in international race relations. In India, disillusionment with British rule would escalate to the point of compromising Gandhi’s strategy of passive resistance. China and Japan would reconcile cultural differences and form a formidable East Asian bloc. And across Africa and the West Indies, whose political dynamics Du Bois understood much better, even the most optimistic of black intellectuals would lose faith in the emancipating power of European liberalism and join full heartedly in their respective nationalist struggles for self-determination.

The millenarian tone proved too hyperbolic. Pro-Ethiopian sympathies in Asia and Africa did not translate into a mass uprising. In forecasting a Sino-Japanese rapprochement as a bulwark against white universalism, the Foreign Affairs article overstated the utilitarian value of Pan-Asianism. More poignantly, the proposition underestimated the extent of Tokyo’s war atrocities in China, which in the final analysis were no less barbarous than that of Rome’s in Africa.

In other respects, however, Du Bois’s observations were insightful, even prophetic. In Anglophone Africa and the West Indies, elites would enter a new phase of political radicalization from the mid-1930s on. In fact, in the political maelstrom of the second Italo-Ethiopian war was much more than a turning point in modern African nationalism. Out of the weakened League of Nations and the fading significance of international law would rise a rearmed and bellicose Germany intent on world domination. In the eighth volume of UNESCO’s General History of Africa, the late Ali Mazrui would trace the beginning of World War II to the year 1935, affirming Du Bois’s position on the Ethiopian crisis as a defining moment in mid-century world history.

In June 1936, a research grant from the Oberlaender Trust took Du Bois on a seven-month study tour across Western Europe, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. By the time the peripatetic returned to his home base in January 1937, much had transpired in the African scene. With the major figures in the Ethiopian patriotic resistance (the Black Lions) killed or captured, Mussolini’s dream of an East African empire had all but prevailed. In North America, infighting over money plagued the vocal pro-Ethiopian groups, among them Willis Huggins’s Friends of Ethiopia. Elsewhere, mainstream media turned its attention to recent European crises, such as the rearming of Germany and the civil war in Spain. The world, in other words, had accepted Ethiopia’s capitulation as a fait accompli, and Du Bois’s reaction was no different.

If there emerged a North American exception, it was the Harlem-based Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), an umbrella movement founded and led by Dr. Malaku Bayen. Bayen had been studying in the United States since 1922, at times serving as his government’s de facto representative in North America. Along with his African American wife and their two-year-old son, Malaku, Jr., the newly minted medical doctor returned to Addis Ababa in August 1935 to start his residency at the American mission hospital. The outbreak of hostilities a couple of months later saw the intern leave for the warfront as a Red Cross volunteer. A year later, the Bayens were back in New York so as to coordinate the propaganda work on behalf of the exiled Ethiopian government. Centralized fundraising drives such as the Save-Ethiopia stamp campaign enabled their newly formed EWF to thrive. Thanks to its weekly Voice of Ethiopia, with which it kept thousands of readers abreast of national and international news, including developments from the
Ethiopian warfront, EWF branches, or locals, soon sprouted in several cities across the United States and the West Indies.

Intermittent communications kept Du Bois in touch with EWF’s editorial team. On July 10, 1939, Bayen wrote to Du Bois, thanking him for his recent interview with the *Voice of Ethiopia* and enclosing the photograph taken of him on the occasion. Another letter in January 1940 requested for some uplifting words from the sage in acknowledgement of the paper’s completion of three years of uninterrupted circulation. The message did not reach the Atlanta professor in time for the anniversary note. Still, in his February reply, the latter expressed his good wishes: “You have, as you know, my deep sympathy in your work and my wish for its success.”

The next time Du Bois remembered the founder of the EWF, it was in the form of a eulogy. After struggling with lobar pneumonia and bouts of nervous breakdown, the medical doctor turned activist had passed away at an Upstate New York sanitarium on May 4, 1940. Prominent civil rights leaders from Mary Church Terrell to A. Philip Randolph, as well as several newspapers including the *New York Times*, expressed condolences. “He was an Ambassador of Pan-Africanism in a singularly happy sense,” Du Bois’s tribute read, describing Bayen as a bridge of two cultures. “Then came war, conquest and disaster. He struggled bravely and died in his fortieth year from what men call pneumonia and angels know as a broken heart.”

The year 1940 was, indeed, an ominous year in Pan-Africanist circles. Marcus Garvey, who was never short of admirers despite his contrarian position on the Italo-Ethiopian war, died in his London home on June 10. Huggins, the other pro-Ethiopian turned detractor, mysteriously disappeared in December, his body found in the Hudson River several months later. The most serious blow to the Pan-African scene in Harlem was, however, the untimely death of Bayen at the age of forty. After struggling gingerly for another year, the *Voice of Ethiopia* folded in September 1941. Leadership rivalry and factional splits ensued. A decade later, what was left of the once vibrant EWF was a shadow of its former self, an esoteric Rastafarian movement dominated by working-class West Indian immigrants.

The postwar years

By September 1944, the recent retiree from Atlanta University had reconnected with his old associates in New York City. His NAACP position as Director of Special Research suited his temperament, enabling him to entertain disparate ideas as well as travel widely. It was in this capacity that Du Bois, with colleagues Walter White and Mary McLeod Bethune, attended the United Nations’ founding conference in San Francisco in May 1945.

True to form, the occasion represented a grand convergence of thousands of journalists, interest groups, and government delegates from all over the world. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s charismatic sister, offered her suite at the Fairmont Hotel as a gathering point for African and Asian diplomats. The Ethiopian team of seven, which Du Bois complimented as “a delegation of insight and intelligence,” comprised the prime minister, the vice minister of foreign affairs, the vice minister of justice, the minister of finance, the ambassador to the United States and his secretary. Emanuel Abraham, Director General of the Ministry of Education and the youngest in the lot, served as Du Bois’s main interlocutor, their discussion providing background material for an essay in the *Chicago Defender*.

Efforts to involve African Americans in the Ethiopian postwar construction had yielded negligible results, Du Bois lamented in his June “Winds of Time” column. American blacks,
while possessing applicable knowledge and transferable skills, lacked a pioneering internationalist zeal. The remedy lay from within, Du Bois advised. African Americans needed to nurture a culture of idealism so as to engage in development works in Africa and the West Indies. In the Ethiopian context, this meant accepting "hard work, cold and hunger, absence of modern city facilities, ... but in the midst of a great people who someday with proper leadership are going to make a new name in the world equal to that of their forebears 3,000 years ago when they led the world." 47

In his closing, Du Bois tried to disentangle the pervasive stereotype about Ethiopian snobbery. He did not think the label was fair, although he could understand how cultural differences could easily shape such misunderstandings. Ethiopians did not share the social egalitarianism of Americans. Like Europeans, theirs was a class-conscious society in which formality and politeness could easily be misinterpreted for disinterest or arrogance, especially when reinforced by shyness with the foreign tongues. “On the other hand, in my knowledge of covering a number of years, I have found nothing but courtesy, desire of understanding, and especially a willingness to cooperate with American Negroes,” Du Bois reflected on his own encounters. “Naturally, like the Liberians and Haitians, they do not regard American Negroes the last word in civilization of manners. And they resent receiving unrequested advice from the people who know nothing about their country and, often, care less.” 48

No doubt that the flattering essay helped smooth some ruffled feathers. In fact, the first formal communication between the Ethiopian foreign ministry and the NAACP took place in its aftermath. Ahead of the 1947 U.N. General Assembly, the Ethiopian delegation wrote to Du Bois’s secretary, Hugh Smythe, requesting for a copy of the NAACP’s human rights proposal: Appeal to the World. “This is, of course, of great importance to us,” explained the letter, a follow-up to an earlier correspondence and a phone conversation. 49 Although it set the tone for the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the next year, NAACP’s Appeal to the World did not garner enough support for a resolution vote. Still, the transoceanic dialogue it initiated would have ripple effects. In 1954, Emperor Haile Selassie would tour the United States for the first time. Of the six New Yorkers whom he formally recognized during a dinner gala, three were African American public figures, among them the NAACP’s own Walter White. 50

Sylvia Pankhurst and Eritrea

Du Bois’s involvement with Ethiopia, which began in 1919, rose to a crescendo in the second half of the 1940s. For one thing, he enjoyed a two-way communication with the most influential Ethiopianist of his time, Estella Sylvia Pankhurst of Great Britain, as well as with the Ethiopian legation in Washington. For another, the conversations dealt with real and timely national concerns, such as the fate of post-Italian Eritrea and Ethiopia’s need for an outlet to the sea. From a modern world history perspective, the series of letters between Pankhurst and Du Bois represented a rare dialogue between white feminists and Pan-African nationalists. When examined from a critical race theory point of view, asymmetrical power relations in the form of white privilege dominated their correspondence. Ethiopia, in this context, not only served as a platform for the convergence of the century’s leading gender and racial ideologues, but it also demonstrated how unequal and problematic such intersections were.

Du Bois first learned about the radical politics of the Pankhurs in connection with the 1911 London Race Conference, which he himself was not able to attend. From Atlanta
University 31 years later, he wrote to Sylvia Pankhurst of the *New Times and Ethiopian News*, requesting for a copyright permission for some of her newspaper photographs.51 He did not hear from her until they met in person at the Pan-African conference of 1945, held in the Pankhurs’ hometown of Manchester, England. The sixty three year-old feminist came across as unconventional. Her note to Du Bois suggesting a Friday after-hour meeting, either at her house or at the venue of his choice in London, was untypical for even a progressive woman of her time.52 But, then, as the New Englander was soon to find out, so was her single-minded devotion to the Ethiopian cause.53

In her first transatlantic correspondence in April 1946, Sylvia Pankhurst requested that the NAACP officer use his influence to prejudice the State Department’s position on Eritrea. Rumors were that Britain was about to annex the ex-Ethiopian territory in the name of the U.N. Trusteeship Commission, and Pankhurst was concerned that Secretary James Byrnes would lend the plan a carte blanche.54 “I do not think you or most English liberals have any clear idea of the status and effort of American Negroes,” Du Bois wrote back, rather impulsively. Even if black Americans occasionally managed to intervene on behalf of Liberia and Haiti, for the most part Washington saw them as “busybodies,” he lamented.55

As early as 1930, Du Bois had insisted that a search for a sea outlet become a top diplomatic priority of landlocked Ethiopia.56 Once past the initial misunderstanding between him and Pankhurst, the latter’s plea required no further goading. In his role as president of the fifth Pan-African Congress, a position more titular than real, Du Bois endorsed the petition to the U.N. General Assembly, calling, among other things, for the reunification of Eritrea with Ethiopia, as well as for the withdrawal of British forces from the Ogaden.57 Later, writing in *New Africa*, organ of the Council on African Affairs, he defended Ethiopia’s claim over Eritrea on sociocultural, economic, and historical grounds.58 In still another op-ed, he cautioned Italian Americans not to fall prey to Rome’s jingoistic foreign policy rhetoric. Eritrea possessed too few resources to justify its restoration to Italy as a colony on economic grounds, he argued. If Italy showed interest in the reannexation of the sparsely populated, “half malarial and half desert” landscape, it could only be because of two reasons, either to deprive the people of the interior a natural sea outlet, or to acquire a staging ground for a future war of expansion.59

If the late 1940s represented a temporary convergence between the leading champions of white feminism and black anticolonialism, it was also a period of clashing Pan-African perspectives in tune with the polarized worldviews of the Cold War. Expectedly, the hegemonic narrative on the Horn of Africa was not without critics. St. Clair Drake, a young assistant professor at Roosevelt College in Chicago, did not challenge Ethiopian irredentism in the north but worried about its implications in the east. “I do not think that the American Negroes should suggest that Somaliland become a part of Ethiopia,” his thoughtful letter to Du Bois read. Drake’s conclusion, based on the research he undertook while in Britain, was that while 95 percent of Somalis rejected Italian trusteeship, less than 10 percent of them found joining Ethiopia an acceptable proposition. “I think that those of us who wish to see a greater Ethiopia should take a stand for an independent united Somalia embracing French, British, and Italian Somaliland,” Drake reasoned. “We could then encourage such a unit to voluntarily accede to Ethiopia.”60

Drake’s letter was a bellwether. All along, Du Bois’s writings and speeches had defined the foreign-policy position of the NAACP. This changed after Du Bois retired from the organization in fall 1948, according to Carol Anderson’s study of the NAACP’s role in colonial liberation struggles.61 Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and Henry Lee Moon, Du Bois’s successor, began to listen to grassroots voices that had sprouted in the ex-Italian colonies of
Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia, many of which were antithetical to the greater Ethiopia vision. For example, when Abdullahi Issa of the Nationalist Somali Youth League came to town to speak at the United Nations, White and Moon facilitated print and radio coverage of the man and his vision of Somali self-determination. Thus lay the NAACP’s contribution to the 1949 General Assembly resolution in which former Italian Somaliland was declared a U.N. trusteeship, albeit under the tutelage of its ex-colonial master.62

What finally marked Du Bois’s disengagement from East African politics came, rather, from the least expected quarters. By way of acknowledging Du Bois’s propaganda work on behalf of the Ethiopian government, in August 1948 Ras Imru invited the NAACP official to the Ethiopian legation in Washington. Expressing regrets that he had not been able to do this sooner, the ambassador hoped to use the opportunity to “acquaint” himself with the African American community, as well as to “exchange views of mutual interest in cultural, historical and other matters.” The legation promised to cover expenses incurred during the trip, and Imru himself signed the letter.63

Du Bois, who had just entered his eightieth year, half of that as a keen student of Ethiopian politics by his own calculation, welcomed the invitation. He too hoped to discuss how two significant black populations, thirteen million Americans and fifteen million Ethiopians, could support each other in their aspirations for mutual progress. The meeting fell far short of expectations, however. Du Bois not only found the ambassador’s preoccupation with domestic social issues irrelevant, but he also found it rather too frivolous and misled. “American Negroes are not responsible for discrimination in this land; they are the victims of it,” he admonished.64

The follow-up letter listed several facts challenging any hint of African American passivity: resistance against slavery, becoming a factor in the national economy, and achieving the enviable literacy rate of 80 percent. Enclosed was a copy of the NAACP’s human rights booklet, Appeal to the World, whose first chapter Du Bois suggested be translated into Amharic so that Ethiopians could appreciate the African American contribution toward universal freedom and equality. In his conclusion, Du Bois hoped for another round of conversation after Imru had read the booklet, proposing as their main agenda the further exploration of intergroup cooperation. “I would especially like to suggest the idea of a Pan-African Congress held in your country, with His Imperial Majesty as patron, to confer on present cooperation and future aims.”65

Du Bois and Imru would not cross paths again, although developments over the next several days were to draw them closer emotionally. In the evening of September 13, a few days after his meeting with Du Bois, Imru would become the target of a Jim Crow incident. At the Constitution Hall gathering, where President Truman was to make a speech, he left the venue abruptly as an usher tried to move him out of the special section reserved for diplomats.66 Initially, Imru chose to stay tight-lipped about the mistreatment. But once the fiasco was leaked to the media through a Yugoslavian representative present at the scene, the Ethiopian legation spoke publicly, unequivocally denouncing the practice of racial segregation.67 Appreciating the courageous stance taken by the ambassador, Du Bois sent a note expressing his “shame and chagrin” by what happened. “His Excellency thanks you very much for the sympathy you expressed on the treatment he had at Constitution Hall,” Imru’s secretary responded. It was as if Du Bois and Imru had finally stumbled on a common ground but were too self-conscious to give themselves a second chance.68

It would be some twelve years before Du Bois communicated again with the Ethiopian government. His correspondence with Pankhurst came to a halt, as did his op-eds and speeches on the Horn of Africa. But the divorce from the Ethiopian cause should not be
explained solely in terms of an unrequited Pan-African sentiment. Although Du Bois, in his ninth decade, was in relatively good physical health, he had limited resources to cope with the emotional wear and tear brought about by circumstances outside his control. His wife of 55 years, Nina Gomer Du Bois, had died in 1950 at the age of eighty. His explicit embrace of socialism had left him estranged from the NAACP, whose politics of pragmatism supposedly compromised lofty human rights ideals and moral integrity. Most of all, Du Bois’s life was left permanently scarred by the witch-hunt of McCarthyism. While producing no prosecutable charges, the extensive probe by the Justice Department had resulted in the confiscation of his passport, leaving him grounded for eight years.  

Ideally, the twilight years would have been the time for reaping the rewards of a half-century toil on civil rights and anticolonial crusade. Naturally, that could not come from the paranoid administration of Dwight Eisenhower. But some form of official recognition for the many decades of propaganda work on behalf of Ethiopia was not an unrealistic expectation, especially in light of the upcoming historic visit to the United States by Emperor Haile Selassie.Breaking silence, in February 1954 Du Bois wrote to Pankhurst requesting that a special arrangement be made for some well-placed “Negro Americans” to meet with the African sovereign. Pankhurst warmed up to the proposal, but in a tone that her counterpart must have found condescending and characteristically liberal.  

Ethiopians did not “welcome” the term “Negro” as applied to themselves or to their country, the ex-suffragette explicated. Her recommended adjectives for black people were Ethiopian, African, and Afro-American. “I think myself that Mr. Lawson is not wrong in referring to the Negroes of America as Afro-Americans, for I believe the term Negro can only apply to one part of Africa and the Africans in America have come from many parts.” Pankhurst was not racist in the conventional sense of the word. But neither was she perturbed by old fashioned paternalism and the open flaunting of white privilege. “I promise you that I will put the matter to His Imperial Majesty,” her letter concluded, “and I am sure he will do what he can to meet the desire of the Afro-Americans or Negroes, if you prefer to call them so.”  

In April, as the itinerary of the state visit was being finalized, Pankhurst confirmed that the foresaid Lawson of the United African Nationalist Movement would host the dinner party for the royal entourage. A few years back, James R. Lawson and a small band of UANM activists had staged a picket outside the St. Charles Catholic Church of Harlem, accusing it of past complicity to fascist Italy’s war crimes in Ethiopia. A judge sentenced the supposedly unruly protesters to thirty to sixty days in jail, an excessive punishment that was later suspended because of public uproar. However, instead of James Lawson, a namesake who was presented an award certificate by the Emperor during the June 2 grand banquet at the Waldorf Astoria was Bishop Robert C. Lawson, founder of the Harlem-based Refuge Church of Christ. Other honorees included Walter White of the NAACP, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Conspicuously absent from the list was none other than Du Bois, who in the first place planted the very idea of the special Pan-African gala.

In the end, magnanimity held the day. Du Bois would pen an honest tribute to Sylvia Pankhurst following news of her passing away in her retirement home in Addis Ababa in 1960. “My personal acquaintance with Sylvia Pankhurst was not great,” he confessed, although that did not prevent him from acknowledging her contributions to the Ethiopian cause as well as to the struggle for the improvement of race relations in Britain itself. Equally free of remonstration was Du Bois’s commissioned article for the Guardian in 1955, the last piece he wrote on the Horn of Africa. Haile Selassie had kept his domain
relatively free and united, and the postwar economy was beginning to grow, the essay lauded. There lay fundamental flaws, it also forewarned. Ethiopia’s progress and stability depended primarily on the wisdom of one man, rendering uncertain the country’s fate in the inevitable event of the sovereign’s death. “But what will follow his rule? A capitalist private profit regime, an increasingly democratic socialism; or some form of communism?” It was vintage Du Bois. The monarch’s ouster by a Marxist junta in 1974 would plunge the country in a downward spiral of political repression and genocidal civil war, a detriment from which Ethiopia would have yet to recover a half century later.  

Conclusion

On August 26, 1963, at the age of ninety-five, Du Bois died in his newly found home in Accra, Ghana. Exactly three months earlier, the world had witnessed an epic-making moment in African politics. In a memorandum to Kentiba Gebru and Malaku Bayen in 1930, and in a letter to Ras Imru in 1948, Du Bois had shared his hope for a Pan-African conference in Ethiopia. The idea he planted would bear fruits at a critical juncture in African history. At the wee hours of May 25, 1963, the all-Africa summit in Ethiopia concluded with the signing of the founding charter of the Organization of African Unity, OAU, a feat few had then thought was possible. Shirley Graham Du Bois was there, witnessing in person the coming to fruition of her husband’s life-long vision. Du Bois’s second wife, who flew in with the Ghanaian government delegation, saw the outcome as a major milestone, describing it in superlatives as “probably the most important gathering so far in this century.”

Between the founding of the OAU and the passing away of Du Bois, in the meantime, was an event that would have a lasting effect among Africanists. Manchester, the hometown of the Pankhurs, hosted in July 1963 the second Ethiopian studies conference, whose proceedings were published a year later in the Journal of Semitic Studies. The founding conference of Ethiopian studies was held in Rome four years earlier, led by Enrico Cerulli, a fascist war criminal whom the Haile Selassie government had declared persona non grata. Following the precedent set in Rome, most of the attendants in Manchester were Europeans, native Ethiopians numbering few and far between. Thus lay the Eurocentric roots of modern Ethiopian studies, which from the outset insulated itself from diaspora and continental themes.

Although the unveiling process of Ethiopian studies has begun in recent decades, among those bigger-than-life figures who have yet to be rehabilitated is W. E. B. Du Bois. In a 1948 letter to Ras Imru, Du Bois claimed to have followed Ethiopian history with “absorbed interest for the last forty years.” That was not an exaggeration. The doyenne Pan-Africanist had corresponded, lectured, and written about Ethiopia more than any of his North American contemporaries. An in-depth assessment of that corpus and its impact on transoceanic ties awaits. Meanwhile, a recognition of Du Bois as a catalyst of Ethiopian internationalism is in order. This is not to minimize the contribution of other African American contemporaries, at least one of whom has been Christened de facto godfather of Ethiopian studies in North America. Rather, this is to give due credit to Du Bois, whose public and private records confirm a prolifically vocal yet little acknowledged advocate of Ethiopian internationalism. Du Bois’s final project was the Encyclopedia Africana, which he revived afresh after he moved to Accra, Ghana, in 1961. Among his correspondents on the enterprise was the thirty four year-old Richard Pankhurst, son of the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. As founder of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and a prolific historian, Pankhurst would go on to become
a revered household name among Ethiopianists. Du Bois, more than any of his North American contemporaries, had maintained a close association with Ethiopia, both through scholarship and personal contacts. Yet he would remain a mostly enigmatic figure in Ethiopianists’ discourse of Pan-Africanism, a position from which this chapter hopes to have rescued him.

Notes
1 The inspiration behind this essay is the recently digitized database of Du Bois’s papers, courtesy of the library of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In the database are several hundred documents on Ethiopia, most of them letters of correspondence, and many of which are cited here for the first time. Hitherto unknown, the records constitute a treasure trove to graduate school research projects and PhD dissertations. Beyond that, they have the potential of adding a new layer to the study of Ethiopian history, laying the groundwork for what someday might grow into a cutting-edge transnational subfield in Ethiopian studies.
4 “His Majesty, the Late Menelik II,” Crisis 7, 4 (February 1914): 182–183.
8 Du Bois to Kentiba Gebru, May 26, 1921, Du Bois Papers.
13 Memorandum to Kentiba Gebru and Malaku E. Bayen, August 14, 1930, Du Bois Papers. Receipt of the memorandum was acknowledged by Bayen on August 26, along with a note expressing his personal gratitude. See Malaku E. Bayen to Du Bois, August 26, 1930, Du Bois Papers.
14 Memorandum to Gebru and Bayen.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
22 Bayen to Du Bois, September 11, 1931, Du Bois Papers.


30 Ibid., 84.

31 Ibid., 86.


34 Ibid., 88–92.


40 Du Bois, “As the Crow Flies,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 1, 1940.

41 Three weeks earlier, the *Chicago Defender* had erroneously reported Garvey’s death, setting off a series of premature newspaper obituaries. See “Marcus Garvey Passes Away in London,” *Voice of Ethiopia*, May 18, 1940.


45 Ibid., 508.
Pan-Africanist in the court


47 Du Bois, “Winds of Time.”

48 Ibid.

49 Letter from Ethiopian United Nations Delegation to Hugh H. Smythe, October 1947, Du Bois Papers. Emmanuel Abraham, one of the Ethiopian delegates at the General Assembly, mentions in his autobiography of serving on a committee. Although no detail is given of the committee’s task, there is a possibility that it was established to assess the merit of the NAACP proposal. Abraham, Reminiscences p. 66.


52 Sylvia Pankhurst to Du Bois, November 14, 1945, Du Bois Papers.

53 While the life of Sylvia Pankhurst’s has attracted several biographical works, the only one focusing on Ethiopia is the volume by her son Richard Pankhurst, the most prolific Ethiopianist. See Sylvia Pankhurst: Counsel for Ethiopia: a Biographical Essay on Ethiopian, Anti-fascist and Anti-colonialist History, 1934–1960 (Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2003).

54 Pankhurst to Du Bois, March 27, 1946, Du Bois Papers.


56 Memorandum to Gebru and Bayen, August 14, 1930, Du Bois Papers.


58 New Africa 8, 3 (March 1949), Du Bois Papers.


62 Ibid. 185–189, 197–203.

63 Imperial Ethiopian Legation to Du Bois, August 30, 1948, Du Bois Papers.

64 Du Bois to Imperial Ethiopian Legation, September 13, 1948, Du Bois Papers.

65 Ibid.

66 First reported in the September 16 issue of New York Times as “Color Line for Ethiopian Envoy at Science Session Brings Apology,” the story was soon picked up by international papers. In India, in particular, whose diplomats in the United States had been subjected to similar ordeals of Jim Crow, the scandal became instant news. See Gerald Horne, Paul Robeson: The Artist as Revolutionary (London: Pluto Press, 2016), p. 134.


79 Du Bois to Imperial Ethiopian Legation, September 13, 1948, Du Bois Papers.