Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

EDITED BY
DEBORAH WILLIS, ELLYN TOSCANO AND KALIA BROOKS NELSON
She reclines on a rock, propped on her elbow and squinting into the sun. A valley unfolds in wide, easy sweeps over her bare shoulders. That she is naked from the waist up is an uncomfortable detail, but not unusual. This is Ethiopia and this is 1937, and you know the larger history that frames this photograph, a familiar story involving words like invasion and war and Europe and colonialism. What you notice instead is the tiny cross that hangs around her neck and the rings that adorn four fingers of one hand. Her short curls are patted into a perfect bloom. She looks to be at the start of a smile — the set of her mouth suggests it, as if she were snapped in the middle of an easy verbal exchange with the photographer. Her pose echoes Manet’s *Olympia* but in this version, it is the Black woman who takes center stage, regal and sure, aware of her sexuality and seemingly in command of it.

Slivers of paper pasted onto the photo offer an Italianized spelling of her name, Balainesc [Belaynesh], and the town, Scianò [Shano]. At the bottom, in florid handwriting, is the date: 1937. Belaynesh is the first photo in an album once owned by an Italian soldier, a member of the Fascist army that invaded Ethiopia in 1935. The war ended in 1936 and Italy declared victory. This photo was taken a year into the Italian occupation of the country. On its own, it carries no real weight. It is exploitative but relatively benign, and not as bad as some. You turn the page, and the next, and the next and what stares back is a series of women, mostly Ethiopian, nearly all of them bare-chested, many completely nude. At first, you are simply taken aback by the
careful arrangement of the album. It is curated: photos organized and meticulously labeled, guided by a patient eye. Many photographs include a label with the subject’s name. The cities indicated form a zigzag across Ethiopia: Dessie, Shano, Debre Berhan, Debre Sina. At times, as if it is unacceptable to leave a picture unmarked, a label simply announces the subject as *donna abissina*, Abyssinian woman. This designation sheds light on the growing unease you have felt creeping in since you turned the first page of the album, and it solidifies when you pause to consider what is in front of you. Some of those deemed women are simply girls, their youth obscene in this context. The full horror sets in and builds, and you have to shut the album and put it away.

In 1935, Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in the hopes of colonizing it. His actions galvanized anti-fascist and pan-African protests around the world. Groups on both sides of the issue rushed to organize fundraising drives and marches. African Americans in Harlem held rallies in support of Emperor Haile Selassie and signed up to fight for Ethiopia. Pro-fascist Evelyn Waugh used the war as the setting for his satirical and racist novel, *Scoop*, in 1938. Across Italy photographs of East African women, often nude or semi-nude, were distributed to recruit young men into the fascist army. The world’s attention was riveted. News reports gave breathless accounts of an ancient African culture rooted in timelessness, both naive and crude, worthy of sympathy and caution. This was an epic battle easily framed in Homeric and biblical language. The world’s oldest Christian nation was preparing to face the nation blessed by the Vatican: it was a clash of gods. Here was a modern-day David preparing to meet its Goliath.

Yet despite all the noise, no one really expected Ethiopia to defeat the giant. Emperor Haile Selassie’s army was untrained in the tactics of modern warfare. Most of its military was comprised of peasants and farmers. Those answering the emperor’s mobilization call were told to bring whatever weapons they had, so they brought their spears and outdated rifles, many carrying the same guns their fathers used when Ethiopia rebuffed Italy’s earlier attempts to colonize it in the decisive Battle of Adua in 1896. Though the country’s telecommunication abilities were increasing, at the start of the war few of its commanding officers had radios. Fascist Italy, on the other hand, was known as one of the largest and most modern military forces in the world. It had
perfected air warfare and the use of poison gas to devastating effect in Libya. Still stinging from Italy’s defeat in 1896, Mussolini vowed to pour every resource into this war, to prove to the world Italy’s might. This was, as much as anything, an exhibition of Italian prowess. It was an effort to debunk the stereotypes of Italy as an affable, irresponsible Mediterranean country and present a muscular and violent European power. It was also a carefully orchestrated campaign to promote a cohesive Italian identity, one that melded an idealized masculinity with a devotion to fascism. Young men were encouraged to enlist in the new African adventure with promises of sexually compliant East African women.

The Italian army marched into Ethiopia singing a popular fascist song, *Faccetta nera*, Little Black Face. The lyrics speak of the soldiers’ authority over Ethiopian women, of the women’s expected willingness to accept the soldiers’ every command, to become their sexual slaves. Today in Italy, *faccetta nera* is considered derogatory, a term that evidences the hideous racism and misogyny that were a foundation of Mussolini’s fascist dreams. Fascist Italy would not only attack the military and political fabric of Ethiopia, but it would advance on its women as well. Women suddenly found themselves both the intended spoils of war and the territory on which a new kind of conflict was fought. They became objects of ridicule and desire, victims of military and sexual aggression.

As the 1935 Italian invasion escalated into pitched battles, Ethiopian women willingly stepped into the fray. They followed behind their soldiers, using song to coax greater acts of courage and condemn any sign of fear. They cared for the wounded and helped to bury the dead. They supplied troops with food and water. They put themselves in the path of danger, exposing themselves to the same destructive forces coming at their army. They, too, swallowed mouthfuls of poison gas in those brutal sweeps of Italian planes. They, too, suffered the devastations of bombings and artillery fire. As the war grew increasingly brutal, they were there, lifting their arms, raising their fists, their anthems and lamentations both a salve and a stinging rebuke in the midst of this new, horrifying reality.

I am looking at a dispatch from Harar that appeared in the *New York Times* in November 1935: ‘Woman General Leading 2000 Ethiopian Troops’, the headline shouts. It is a brief piece, but it confirms what
family stories and other accounts have told me before: that some women also turned themselves into soldiers. They fought in the front lines with men. Women lifted their rifles if they had them, raised their spears if they didn’t, and charged at the Italian army. Some women, like this one in Harar, even commanded thousands of men. They were powerful on the battlefield, but they were eventually powerless to harness the fickle nature of history and upend the assumption that war unfolded primarily in the world of men. They could not control what was spoken of them. They could not command the language of their legacy. They remained stuck in fragmented narratives, their numbers reduced to the one or two or three who managed to rise to the surface in newspapers, only to disappear again. What are left are the echoes of old songs and the pictures, like the ones in this album that I own, their achievements ignored and their stories deliberately distorted.

There is another photograph towards the end of the album of a woman named Bogalech from Debre Berhan. Unlike the others, she is fully clothed in her traditional Ethiopian dress. She has a shawl draped across one shoulder and stands with her chin raised, a rifle in her hand. The muzzle is pointed up, as if it is aimed at the sky. Bogalech is not afraid, nor is she demure. She looks determined and resilient, strong. She is a startling vision to come across in an album such as this. It would be easy to look at this picture and praise it for its positive portrayal of an African woman. Taken on its own, it might even symbolize the photographer’s leanings towards a more complex understanding of women. But in an album otherwise full of half-clothed or naked subjects, the photo of a woman with a gun becomes not a sign of female strength, but a mockery of it. Her implied weakness is exposed by all the other pictures that came before her. She is bound by their fate.

In 1936, after a brutal war that saw Ethiopians subjected to mustard gas, endless bombings and massacres, Mussolini declared victory. Ethiopia, however, would prove stubbornly rebellious to the fascist attempt to lay claim to the entire country. Italy’s increased use of force after Mussolini declared the end of the war did nothing to quell the rumblings across the country. The arrests and torture, the executions and transfers to concentration camps, the rapes, the racial segregation laws, the indiscriminate use of poison gas: none of it resulted in the total submission the fascists hoped for. Instead, Ethiopian fighters became
more determined to resist. Their numbers swelled and as the Italians increased their use of brute force, often targeting civilian populations, women and children joined other patriots, called arbegnoch. For them, Mussolini’s proclamation of victory was meaningless. The war had not ended, it had simply taken on new form.

The date pasted on Belaynesh’ photo, 1937, was a year of growing dissent across Ethiopia. Her relaxed image is a stark contrast to the conflict occurring beyond the valley and throughout the country. Her picture symbolizes how much is often left out and sanitized when recounting narratives of conflict. To look at her without context is to become complicit in the corrosive nature of conquest. It is to stand in front of one man’s fantasies and misinterpret his growing insecurities as signs of virility. It is to miss the finer details of a so-called victory. The photographs are an attempt to claim dominion over what refused to submit. It was an attempt to recreate a familiar trope in order to pretend everything was falling into place as expected. Because for the Italians, nothing was predictable. A placid face could hide a treasonous plan. No sign of obedience could be taken for granted. To look at someone familiar was not a guarantee of unencumbered recognition. To photograph a woman might demand the extra step of stripping her bare, not as a reminder of what a woman looks like but as an attempt to confirm what manhood means.

I have long been fascinated by the events of the years between Italy’s invasion and its expulsion. I have spent more than a decade collecting photographs from that period and another several years researching and writing what is my new novel, a book focused on the lives of Ethiopian women fighters during that time. I have used the pictures in my collection to peer into this little-known conflict, trying to decipher what might rest, unspoken, in the faces of those girls and women who stare at, or hide from that other invading force: the camera. I have been searching for what remains after the shutter’s release, after the photographer walks away and all a woman has is the conquered ground beneath her feet and a body that has been framed and focused and exposed. What remains after all is done, after a woman’s body has been declared both a trophy and the field on which a new kind of battle will be fought?
By 1941, fascist Italy was ousted from Ethiopia. Mussolini would be dead by 1945, hung upside down and displayed by the same people who cheered him into power decades before. History reminds us of the proud Italian partisans who fought to remove the fascist from power. We hear less about the first conflict and loss that began Mussolini’s downward spiral. As surely as Mussolini rose to power in Italy, there were women in Ethiopia, rich and poor, privileged and peasant, who helped to bring him down. Today, we cannot see them clearly enough: time has passed, most have died, and their history has been left to the new generations to dig up and find. It might be impossible to gather all their stories, but it is not so difficult to pause and look again when we encounter hints of their lives and ask what rests just beyond the frame. To help pull them out of obscurity, we must confront and embrace the same unstable ground they were forced to traverse as they fought for survival. It is the work of the imagination, but one made imperative by the realities of historical memory. We know that war has often minimized the power and place of women, yet we also know that Mussolini’s fascist regime was brought down in part by the very same mothers, wives, sisters, and lovers that it originally boasted were under its control. This was true of Ethiopia; it was also true of the women in Italy.

To claim a woman’s body as conquered is to underestimate the strength of that body. To deem it irrelevant or unworthy of the full rights accorded to all human beings is a deliberate erasure of what makes all of us, regardless of gender, valuable members of society. To see women as political fodder for greater public support is to forget what it means when one woman and another and another stand together and declare themselves an immovable wall. I go back to the album and force myself to look at the images, and I begin to consider the very real possibility that some of those women and girls might have stepped back into their dresses, walked away from the camera, and headed home to continue the fight for freedom.