

The Strange Career of a Black Utopia

Ethiopia, The Land of Promise. *A Book with a Purpose,* by Charles Henry Holmes (aka Clayton Adams)

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Abstract This essay presents archival information about Charles H. Holmes and argues that his understudied novel, *Ethiopia, The Land of Promise* (1917), represents an important chapter in the history of Afrofuturism and American speculative fiction. The literary critical relevance of *Ethiopia* emerges forcefully from Holmes's intertextual dialogue with other utopian and science fiction authors, such as Martin R. Delany, Sutton E. Griggs, Pauline E. Hopkins, Frances E.W. Harper, Edward Bellamy, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Holmes's critique of Jim Crow segregation enables the articulation of a "distinctly revolutionary" project for African American futurity.

Keywords African American fiction. Afrofuturism. Science fiction. Utopia. Charles Henry Holmes.

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Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-05-29
Accepted 2024-06-17
Published 2024-09-30

Open access

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Citation Fabi, M.G. (2024). "The Strange Career of a Black Utopia". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale*, 58, 9-26.

1 The Strange Career of a Black Utopia

For eight months, from March to October 1917, *Ethiopia, The Land of Promise. A Book with a Purpose* (henceforth *Ethiopia*) appeared in “*The Crisis Advertiser*”, first among the books on “The Negro and His Problems” (1917a, 252) and, starting in May 1917, among the “BOOKS BY PROMINENT NEGROES”. The advertisement specified that *Ethiopia* could be ordered by mail for 1 dollar through the Neale Publishing Company or through *The Crisis* itself.¹ The March 1917 advertisement read:

Ethiopia

By CLAYTON ADAMS

Mr. Adams, colored, writes of the Land of Promise in this powerful novel, – the adjective is used deliberately. The ancient Kingdom of Ethiopia has passed away, but its name still lives, not only as the proper appellation of the Negro race, but also figuratively, principally to designate the invisible kingdom of native Africans and their descendants. (“*The Crisis Advertiser*” 1917a, 252)²

The ad is misleading regarding the author, but revealing about the novel. On the one hand, it lists the author’s name as Clayton Adams, without any suggestion of its being the pseudonym of Charles Henry Holmes, who copyrighted the novel on 27 July 1917.³ Also, contrary to those of the other books in the list, the ad of *Ethiopia* offers no bio-biographical information about the author beyond his racial affiliation (“colored”). On the other hand, the advertisement’s brief description of *Ethiopia* foregrounds accurately the Ethiopianist motif of the novel, as it emerges from the title page’s shortened epigraph from Psalms 68:31 (“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands”), as well as from the author’s prevailing use of “Ethiop” to refer to African

1 The list of books on “The Negro and His Problems” specified the author’s ethnicity, because it included both black and white writers. The word “colored” was dropped when the title of the list changed to “BOOKS BY PROMINENT NEGROES”. *Ethiopia* was also listed in the section on “The Negro in Literature in 1917-1918” of the *Negro Year Book* published at Tuskegee (Work 1919). The section listed “[b]rief reviews” of “books on various topics” published by “Negroes [...] through standard publishing houses” (Work 1919, 133). Holmes’s entry reads: “‘Ethiopia the Land of Promise’ – Clayton Adams; The Cosmopolitan Press, New York 1917, \$ 1.00. In the form of a novel, discusses the race problem, especially lynchings. It is crudely written, but contains much truth. Is an addition to the books of fiction which deal with the race problem” (Work 1919, 133).

2 The advertisements appropriates the notion of invisibility connected with the “invisible empire” of the Ku Klux Klan. Regarding a similar appropriation by Sutton E. Griggs in *Imperium in Imperio*, see Fabi 2001, 50.

3 The Library of Congress received two copies of *Ethiopia*, and the novel was assigned the copyright registration number A476152. The copyright entry acknowledges the pseudonym. It reads “by Clayton Adams [pseud.]”. See *The National Union Catalog* 1973, 53.

Americans. In Holmes's novel, however, the term "Ethiopia" is used only "figuratively", as the ad indicates. As critic Hugh M. Gloster has noticed, the novel "belies" the international focus suggested by the title (Gloster 1965, 96). *Ethiopia* promotes a domestic project of cross-class unity and cooperation "of all Ethiopians" in the United States (Holmes 1917, 26).

At the same time, the "Kingdom" Holmes envisions is far from "invisible". It is a black nation-in-the-making with an identifiable land base in the southeast of "Unionland", a thinly disguised toponym for the United States. The members of the novel's black "Decemvirate" (Holmes 1917, 7) are negotiating to acquire "a tract that bordered on the sea coast" (Holmes 1917, 111), where to found a state free from the systematic injustices of segregation that Holmes lists in the Preface: "riots [...] in Atlanta, Springfield, New Orleans", "the disarming of the blacks by the militia", the lynching of women and the burning of men of the Ethiopian race", "the peonage system, the insecurity of life for the 'Ethiop', and the total lack of application of the law of the land" when African Americans are concerned (Holmes 1917, 5). The money needed for the purchase of the land has been collected through small donations, "mostly of one dollar" (Holmes 1917, 107), sent by millions of African Americans throughout the country who are in search of a place where to enjoy "untrammelled liberty and freedom" (Holmes 1917, 119) beyond the strictures imposed by Jim Crow.

These brief references to the plot reveal what the advertisement in *The Crisis* omits, i.e., that *Ethiopia* is a work of speculative fiction that portrays African American futurity both by offering a black-centred trenchant critique of the existing Jim Crow regime and by articulating a project to move beyond systematic racialized oppression. *Ethiopia* is an understudied "black militant near-future" novel (Tal 2002, 65) that demands more critical attention and contributes in unique ways to the ongoing scholarly effort to delineate the "prehistory" (Lavender 2019) of contemporary Afrofuturism. Despite its being included in African American bibliographies and discussed, often briefly and mostly with reference to its plot, in various critical essays to the present, *Ethiopia* has received little in-depth critical attention.

In this essay, I present archival information regarding Charles Henry Holmes and offer a close reading of the text. I explore how *Ethiopia* is indeed a "powerful" novel, as it was advertised in the *Crisis*, and how that power emerges most clearly when read within the tradition of African American speculative fiction, whose tropes and conventions were familiar to Holmes. *Ethiopia* dialogues with earlier and contemporaneous works in ways that foreground the characterizing aesthetics and politics of African American speculative fiction. In doing so, the novel creates a counter-public sphere where the black-centred depiction of segregation defies prevailing racist misrepresentations of Jim Crow, while developing the verisimilitude of

the emancipatory counterfactual project. The speculative economy of the novel dialogizes Holmes's systematic critique of present conditions, enabling the articulation of an alternative, if as yet counterfactual, project for African American futurity and liberation.

2 Intertextuality and a “Distinctly Revolutionary” Futurity

The strange, understudied career of this black utopia is both a cause and a result of the lack of biographical information about its author, who remains a mystery man to this day.⁴ The perceived need for anonymity that may have motivated Holmes's use of a pseudonym has been more than satisfied. Even the scholars who devote relatively more extended attention to his work have not presented any biographical information about him.⁵ His novel is regularly mentioned in literary histories and bibliographies of African American literature, but only a date of birth is indicated (1874).⁶ Neither his name nor his authorial pseudonym appear in newspapers in the decade before or after the publication of his novel, and no review of *Ethiopia* is currently available. The biographical information about Charles Henry Holmes that I have been able to locate appears in *Who's Who in the General Conference 1924* (1924), compiled by Richard R. Wright Jr., sociologist, editor, and Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and editor of its influential periodical, *The Christian Recorder*. The entry about Holmes reads:

Holmes, Rev. Charles Henry, was born in Richmond, Va., reared in Texas. He began in the ministry at an early age, was ordained deacon by Bishop Abraham Grant, in Texas, Dec. 9th, 1891, ordained elder by Bishop M.B. Salters in 1900 at Tyler, Texas. He transferred to the Indian Territory 1903, no. Oklahoma. His work is known throughout the State. He knows how to succeed and never to fail. His record to remodel, build churches, parsonages, pay indebtedness on churches when it seemed to be impossible is praiseworthy. He served as a successful pastor in the N.E. Conference and

⁴ The phrase “mystery man” riffs on Mary Helen Washington's description of Nella Larsen as the “Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance” (Washington 1980). As in Larsen's case, further research may unearth more information about Holmes.

⁵ See, for instance, Gloster 1965 or Poikane-Daumke 2006.

⁶ Holmes's date of birth is indicated in the *The National Union Catalog* 1973, 53. Among the volumes that include references to *Ethiopia*, see Whiteman 1955; Bone 1965; Gloster 1965; Rush, Myers, Arata 1975; Bryant 1997; Van Deburg 2004; Sundquist 1993. The corpus of the History of Black Writing at Kansas University also contains *Ethiopia* (<https://hbw.ku.edu/>). The title has led a few authors to include Holmes's novel in articles and bibliographies on Ethiopia. See Schuyler 1962 and Metaferia 2009.

pastored some of the leading charges of this conference. He was transferred to the Central Oklahoma conference in 1915 and has pastored all the leading stations of this conference. His present appointment is in Chickasha Station, Chickasha Okla., 109 E. Minnesota Ave. He was elected delegate to the ensuing General Conference to convene in May 1924 in Louisville, Ky. (Wright 1924, 97-8)⁷

Holmes's profile as an educated pastor participating at national conventions makes him a plausible candidate as author of *Ethiopia* and may explain his familiarity with current political debates and literary trends, as well as the central thematic focus on martyrdom and separatism that he shares with another, better known, Texas-reared religious figure and literary author, Sutton E. Griggs. Griggs was a Baptist minister and prolific author of speculative fiction whose first novel, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), is an important intertext for *Ethiopia*. That Wright's biographical sketch should not mention *Ethiopia*, a novel published seven years earlier under a pseudonym, seems consistent with the need for anonymity that motivated Holmes's use of a pseudonym in the first place. The less than flattering portrayal of religious figures like Bishop Adolph G. Mangus, the most conservative and reluctant founder of the Union of Ethiopia, as well as the "distinctly revolutionary" (Holmes 1917, 24) project advanced in the novel may account for Holmes's decision not to make his authorship known.

The strange career of *Ethiopia* starts at The Cosmopolitan Press, 440 Fourth Avenue, New York. In the 1910s, The Cosmopolitan Press published a diverse array of volumes of poetry and prose, including speculative works, by male and female authors of various ethnicities.⁸ The year before *Ethiopia*, for instance, the press issued Richard Marvin Chapman's *A Vision of the Future* (1916), a book that outlined in great detail a utopian (in the author's view) plan to "exterminate" what Chapman identifies as the "two chief causes of human misery", that is, "poverty and the perversion of the sexual relation" (Chapman 1916, 7). Chapman proposed "expert observation and authoritative restraint" (Chapman 1916, 9) in the social organization of life "from the cradle to the grave" (Chapman 1916, 117). He envisioned rigid measures, such as the segregation of the sexes in separate institutions after the age of 10.⁹ Despite its "disagreeably-mechanized" program (Mather 1918, 123) and disregard for "enliven[ing]"

⁷ The end of Wright's volume presents various advertisements, including one for *The Crisis*, the monthly magazine edited by W.E.B. DuBois where *Ethiopia* was advertised in 1917.

⁸ The Cosmopolitan Press published well-known authors like Joseph Seamon Cotter (*Negro Tales* 1912) and William Dudley Foulke (*Dorothy Day* 1911).

⁹ See Chapman 1916, 57. Chapman's list of the "great questions" of his time includes "Prohibition, single tax and woman suffrage" (Chapman 1916, 118). He makes very few, but revealing, explicit references to race. He mentions in passing that "The subject of

his “simple fiction” (Chapman 1916, 116-17), Chapman’s volume was reviewed and recognized as belonging to the genre of speculative fiction, unlike Holmes’s *Ethiopia*.¹⁰

Yet, the very paratextual materials of *Ethiopia* introduce the reader into the utopian economy of the novel in ways that are reminiscent of works by other African American authors of speculative fiction at the turn into the twentieth century, such as Griggs, Pauline E. Hopkins, Charles W. Chesnutt, and W.E.B. DuBois. Starting from the epigraphs on the title page, the first, as mentioned, cites Psalms 68,3 and evokes the Ethiopian prophecy of the liberation of African peoples,¹¹ while the second sounds a call to “gird us for the coming fight” against “unholy powers” by quoting John Greenleaf Whittier, the abolitionist poet whose verses feature frequently in classic African American literature, from Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845) to William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) and Martin R. Delany’s *Blake* (1859).

Not unlike Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Chesnutt’s *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), or DuBois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), Holmes frames *Ethiopia* with an ostensibly nonfictional Preface and/or Epilogue.¹² The preface is in the first person and signed “Clayton Adams”. It opens by describing the “Purpose” indicated in the novel’s subtitle as both “humanitarian” and as “the desire to place the members of the much-abused Ethiopian race on the stage of human existence as actors in the powerful drama of life” (Holmes 1917, 5). Holmes then proceeds by reflecting on the specific properties of fiction as a literary form to achieve that purpose. On the one hand, he offers a classic realistic disclaimer, declaring to “have simply reproduced... incidents from actual occurrences” and that the “incidents depicted in the following pages are unmarred by any touch of exaggeration” (1917, 5). On the other, he exceeds the limits of realistic recording by playing openly with the novel’s fictional setting and plot, as he places “Unionland”, “Magnolia”, and the “Decemvirate” in

the segregation of the races will be an economic question to be considered at the proper time. It is not a detail that need be considered now” (Chapman 1916, 51).

10 A review in *The Christian Register*, the weekly magazine of The American Unitarian Association, described Chapman’s book as “more or less of an echo of Edward Bellamy’s work along similar lines which provoked much discussion a score of years ago” (“Miscellaneous” 1917). A longer article on utopias in the St. Louis *Reedy’s Mirror* includes a scathing critique of *A Vision of the Future* (Mather 1918).

11 On Ethiopianism, see Gruesser 2000; Kay 2011; Moses 1978; Nurhussein 2019; Sundquist 1993.

12 The use of paratextual materials is a characterizing trope of utopian fiction since its inception. In American speculative fiction it was most famously popularized by Edward Bellamy in his bestselling *Looking Backward* (1888). By then, the use of paratextual materials was already an established practice in African American speculative fiction. See, for instance, Harper’s “Conclusion” in *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869).

quotation marks.¹³ At the same time, against his “more serious critics” he asserts the right to imagine situations and scientific “experiments” that “are quite within the region of possibility” (6).

Holmes explicitly mobilizes the imaginative freedom that characterizes fiction in order to “set down... plans”, so that,

by bringing certain alarming conditions to the attention of the world, the enlightened members of each of the races will do their best to ameliorate them by diffusing more freely the light of education and culture. (Holmes 1917, 6)

The last paragraph of the Preface moves even more decidedly into the realm of futurity by acknowledging that “one can only speculate on the growing policy of segregation” (7) and weaponizing such speculation through a closing intertextual reference to the Declaration of Independence that, as in the ending of *Imperium in Imperio*, amounts to a threat:

the fact remains that no intelligent, awakened people may long be deprived of the fullest and most complete enjoyment of life, liberty, and unalloyed happiness. (7)

As will be discussed later in this essay, the affirmative threat of the Preface mutates into a series of defiant questions in the brief, unsigned Epilogue where Holmes adopts a collective “we” to exhort readers to realize the liberational plans outlined in the novel.

But what exactly are the “plans” Holmes outlines in *Ethiopia*? And how do they relate to the titular Ethiopia? Holmes announces the central plan in the very first chapters by playing in original ways with a classic narrative device of utopian fiction: the dream. In a series of short chapters that succeed in building narrative suspense, the novel brings together the five soon-to-be founding fathers of the “Union of Ethiopia” (Holmes 1917, 22): Ephraim Johnston, “a colored barber” (11); Allan Dune, Johnston’s mysterious and initially unemployed lodger, who is nicknamed “The Mystic” and described as “black in color” (13); Adolph G. Mangus, a “portly mulatto of commanding presence” and Bishop of an unspecified religious denomination (13); Jacob Whiteside, a “son of Africa” who works as a railway porter and is an old-time friend of Johnston’s (14); and Chester A. Grant, “one of the most noted lawyers of his race” (14).¹⁴ They have all had recurring and inexplicable dreams involving capitalized letters of the alphabet, the

¹³ The names of the characters, on the contrary, never appear in quotation marks.

¹⁴ Half way through the novel, the five founders expand into a Decemvirate. Like the original five founders, the new leaders are men from different walks of life (e.g., a

number 5, “a cheering multitude of people of the darker race” (20), and an unfamiliar “banner” with inscribed letters of gold.¹⁵ These dreams draw them to meet at Johnston’s barbershop in the northern metropolis “Cargo City”, where they are able to decipher their visions by sharing them with each other.¹⁶ When united, the letters on the banner they dreamed form the word “ETHIOPIA”. The banner and the cheering multitude point to the founding of the new nation.¹⁷

The first step of Holmes’s blueprint for black futurity is “creating a greater spirit of unity” across class, color, region, education, age, religion, and political creed “among people of the black race” (Holmes 1917, 26). This “greater mutual reliance” is the basis for a precise and “revolutionary” political project that “amounts practically to a complete exodus and the establishment of a nation of our own” (24) within the United States. The practical steps to achieve such a goal are to found a bank, to take a census of the black population in the United States, to start a publication “to be read by all their race” (22), to invest in “propaganda” for the Union of Ethiopia, and, as the reader learns in the second half of the novel, to prepare for armed “mutual defence” (74, 79). The title reference to Ethiopia, which was emphasized in the first edition that carried on the hardcover only the shortened title *Ethiopia*, soon emerges as a domestic call for the unity of all African American “Ethiops” in the United States.

Even though the thin disguise of the invented, allegorical place names is revealed in the Preface and “Unionland” clearly indicates the United States, their defamiliarizing effect is still operative in the utopian economy of the novel and adds to the futuristic atmosphere of *Ethiopia*. So does also the peculiar timelessness of the novel, that avoids all references to contemporaneous events, including World War I (that the US entered in April 1917, three months before Holmes copyrighted *Ethiopia*), or the related scramble for Africa, that, for instance, DuBois discussed in the essay “The African Roots of War” in the May 1915 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The war Holmes is interested in is that against African Americans in the United States, and while the utopian plan of the novel is not transnational it

farmer and a preacher). Holmes, like Griggs, insists on the intelligence of ordinary, not necessarily educated, men (see Holmes 1917, 26).

15 A 5 May 2021 unsigned post on Balanta.org focuses on the recurrence of the number 5 in *Ethiopia* and credits Holmes with having prophesied the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (“May 5th” 2021).

16 According to Gloster (1965, 96), “Cargo City” is Chicago.

17 The enthusiasm over the collective interpretation of the dream is “increased” by hearing the notes of “Dixie” being played in a street nearby (Holmes 1917, 21). Holmes lays claim to the South from the very beginning of the novel.

is definitely separatist.¹⁸ Having “won the sanction and approval of the government of ‘Unionland’” (Holmes 1917, 119), the Union of Ethiopia plans to buy land in “Magnolia” (the South), near “Savna” (Savannah), and the author’s counterfactual imagination presents the U.S. government as ready to negotiate the purchase.

The alternate worldmaking parts of the novel dominate the sections taking place in the North and follow the prompt establishment, popular support, and flow of donations that greet the founding of the Union of Ethiopia. These sections focus on the success of the separatist project and limit the critique of segregation in the North to the actions of a few white characters: Mrs. Bleecker, who is a native of the South and uncritical of its ways; her husband Mr. Morris Bleecker, who is a millionaire northern banker who does not share his wife’s prejudices but nevertheless acquiesces, not wanting to antagonize her; and the rabidly prejudiced and murderous villain Donad Bleecker, who is Morris Bleecker’s nephew and the owner of a plantation near “Savna”. Holmes’s portrayal of the North’s (and the national government’s) failure to oppose vocally the lawless racist forces of the Jim Crow regime in the South takes strikingly literal form in the character of Harold Bleecker, Mr. and Mrs. Bleecker’s 18-year-old son. Harold has become a paralytic and mute. Highly intelligent and educated, Harold enters “heart and soul” (Holmes 1917, 56) into Allan Dune and Elsa Mangus’s projects to establish Southern chapters of the Union of Ethiopia. In the process, he recovers “the power of speech” (30), but his isolation in the prejudiced South and his physical weakness make him ineffective as an ally of the heroic freedom fighters.

That Holmes’s incisive but contained critique of the North is instrumental to keeping open the possibility of imagining the popular success of the Union of Ethiopia becomes clear, by contrast, from the more systematic descriptions of the dystopian workings of segregation in the South. The largest part of the novel is set in “Magnolia”, where the Union of Ethiopia has to operate secretly (Holmes 1917, 50). What drives the speculative economy of these southern sections is the contrast between the realistic portrayal of the violent, exploitative, lawless regime of racial segregation and the miraculous survival of the hero, Allan Dune, a larger-than-life African American everyman. As in the case of other exceptional heroes like Douglass’s Madison Washington, Delany’s Henry Blake, or Griggs’s Belton Piedmont, Allan Dune is an *exemplum* of black power that operates in plain sight of, and yet is unperceived by, prejudiced white America.

18 A dialogue between Bishop Mingus and Allan Dune clarifies that separatism is a means for a people to be “respected nationally, regardless of its color”, and “individually” (Holmes 1917, 36).

Among the founders of the Union of Ethiopia, Allan Dune stands out as at once the “philosophic” (Holmes 1917, 27) and charismatic leader, as well as the only one with no specific occupation or social standing. After establishing the Union of Ethiopia, this superhero in disguise supports himself by accepting a position as personal assistant to invalid Harold Bleecker. In this capacity Allan Dune travels to the South, to the Bleeckers’s summer mansion in “Savna”. His journey soon turns into a dystopian descent into an unfamiliar, lawless, violent, and alien land where the hero’s life is immediately threatened and where he must learn how to survive. Holmes’s depiction of this world turned upside down features classic tropes in African American fiction: the compulsory and traumatic move to a Jim Crow car (38); witnessing the violent exploitation of the convict-lease system and the cold-blooded murder of an inmate (42-3); risking to be lynched for thwarting a wanton white attempt to murder a black child (45-6); seeing that an “act of chivalry” is publicly and maliciously misrepresented as “the work of a desperado” by law enforcement officers and the biased press (48).

Allan Dune’s local guide on this journey in a land deprived of justice, truth, and honour is beautiful and accomplished Elsa Mangus, the daughter of Bishop Mangus, one of the founders of the Union of Ethiopia. Twenty-year-old Elsa Mangus has been educated in the North, where she graduated and also “completed a course in vocal and instrumental music” (Holmes 1917, 34), but she was raised in the South, knows its ways, and is now returning to her home in “Savna”. She becomes Allan Dune’s interpreter of the South and partner in his secret efforts to establish chapters of the Union of Ethiopia. Even though Holmes portrays Elsa Mangus as an exceptional heroine and a true “helpmeet and spur... to greater effort” (63) for Allan Dune, he does so in ways that reveal his masculinist politics and recall the exalted, but secondary and ultimately relational role of women in fiction by Douglass, Delany, Griggs, and DuBois.

Elsa Mangus is praised for her “keenness of thought” (51) and recognized by Allan himself as his superior in activist organizing (64), but she is also described, however affectionately, as a child and little to the end.¹⁹ Her accomplishments are at the service of Allan Dune.²⁰

19 In his last moments before being lynched, Allan Dune remembers Elsa as “pure, gentle, harmless little Elsa” (Holmes 1917, 127). Nevertheless, Elsa is unique by contrast with the other female characters across the racial spectrum, who are either well-meaning but ineffective (see Mrs. Stevens, Mrs. Bleecker, and the sheriff’s wife), helpless pawns in the hands of lynchers (see Gertie Sticklely), or an anonymous mass. The secretaries who work at the headquarters of the Union of Ethiopia are described as “a half-dozen sets of nimble, dusky fingers of the female variety” (Holmes 1917, 105).

20 Elsa’s musical education and talent resonate intertextually. See, for instance, Hopkins’s Dianthe Lusk in *Of One Blood* (1902-03). Elsa’s musical gift and name evoke and revise also Thomas Dixon’s Elsie Stoneman in *The Clansman* (1905).

Her excellence qualifies her as a worthy admirer of the hero and in turn her immediate regard for him serves to confirm Allan Dune's own exceptionality. Elsa Mangus is a wonder woman who, like Delany's Henry Blake with wild beasts, possesses the "power unseen" to stare down a racist white mob (84), and yet she is praised most forcefully for her voluntary selflessness and protective loyalty towards the men she loves, that is, her father and Allan Dune (see Holmes 1917, 38-9). Indeed, while worrying for the safety of Allan Dune Elsa Mangus acquires the dubious narrative distinction of becoming the first martyr to the cause of the Union of Ethiopia (Holmes 1917, 83).

The lynching of Elsa Mangus epitomizes the sharp dualism between black and white lives in the segregated South. She is the innocent victim who is slaughtered unjustly after escaping, with Dune's help, the attempted rape by two drunken whites. Holmes does not describe in detail her lynching, preferring instead "to draw a veil over [that] sad and terrible scene" (84). He evokes the dramatic violence of Elsa Mangus's lynching and of the anti-black riot in "Savanna" through the cumulative force of a variety of other innocent victims and a long, detailed, impressive list of the various human types that join the lynching mob (77-8). Holmes focuses on the perspective and thought-life of African American characters, foregrounding their astonished sense of living in a world that defies all human logic and thereby defamiliarizing the everyday realities of Jim Crow. He returns to the speculative trope of the dream in the description of Elsa Mangus's father's dazed walk through the destroyed property and mangled bodies of the black community after the riot. Holmes presents the "savage orgy" of destruction sanctioned by the laws of Jim Crow as a veritable time travel to "medieval days" (86).²¹ Like Bellamy's Julian West after his nightmare of returning to the past, Bishop Mangus awakens from what in his case was not simply a dream as a fully converted citizen of the utopian future. After hearing of his daughter's murder, Bishop Mangus cries out: "Now [...] you may count me as a full-fledged member of the Union of Ethiopia" (89).

At the same time, to portray the "sensational" and "continuous succession of horrors" (Holmes 1917, 90) that characterize Jim Crow segregation, Holmes introduces another witness to "present conditions exactly as they exist" (48). Harold Bleecker, the young invalid, is an in-between white figure that keeps open the possibility of interracial cooperation and white conversion to racial equality. Although he has become paralysed and cannot speak, he learns to see beyond the veil of racism. In his portrayal of Harold Bleecker, Holmes follows in the narrative steps of Brown, Douglass, and Delany by

²¹ Like Chesnutt in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), Holmes portrays the South as trapped in a dystopian time loop where slavery continues under different guises. See Holmes 1917, 96.

recuperating another classic trope of African American speculative fiction: eavesdropping. As Allan takes Harold with him in his daily visits to Elsa Mangus, the mute invalid eavesdrops on their conversations and is guided by them into the utopian project of racial equality of the Union of Ethiopia. His conversion to racial equality makes him a potentially “powerful ally” (50) who is ready to risk his life for his friends, though he is powerless to prevent their deaths by lynching, a fact that ultimately confirms the novel’s emphasis on separatism and African American unity.

Together with Elsa Mangus, Harold Bleecker’s admiration offers one more vantage point to appreciate the larger-than-life stature of the hero, Allan Dune, the “Ethiop” everyman whose appearance reveals “nothing remarkable” (Holmes 1917, 13), but who hides within himself unsuspected powers as “a born leader of men” (16). Reductively described as a “servant” (39) by whites, Dune is a “prophetic” leader and a freedom fighter of “unseen power” (28). He uses both physical force and a psychological “perspicacity [that] amounted almost to divination” (27-8) to survive a series of dangers that run the gamut of Jim Crow racialized violence.²² After his arrival in “Savna”, Dune is shot at, but not killed, and he successfully escapes both from a constable who hunts him with bloodhounds, as well as from a convict-lease camp.²³ His family history, centring on his father’s escape from slavery and the “unquenchable spirit of independence” (27) he passed on to his son, celebrates a tradition of resistance that Dune mobilizes to new uses in the present.²⁴ Holmes’s hero does not use his (super)powers only for self-preservation in the Jim Crow South. He also saves the Union of Ethiopia by thwarting the plot of the main racist villain and his accomplice, an evil chemist, who plan to use a radium machine to steal from the bank the millions raised by the Union of Ethiopia to purchase land for the new nation.²⁵ Most importantly Allan Dune emerges as a powerful Christ figure able to heal

22 See the episode with Elsa’s attackers (Holmes 1917, 41) and with Bill, the old Black “slave-driver” (97).

23 Allan Dune’s list of escapes from death rivals Belton Piedmont’s in Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*.

24 Allan Dune’s memories of the stories he heard from his father, a fugitive slave, enable him to escape from the sheriff’s bloodhounds (Holmes 1917, 90)

25 *Ethiopia* belongs to the “period from 1904 to 1933” that Joshua Glenn has termed “sci-fi’s radium age” (Glenn 2012, 204). Radium plays a significant role in the plot of Holmes’s novel. It is also worth noting that in Oklahoma, where Holmes lived, mineral waters were “imaginatively dubbed “radium water” to capitalize on the contemporary allure of radioactivity”. In Claremore, a town in northeastern part of the state, the area containing the first bathhouses was nicknamed ‘Radium Town’” (Malley 2010).

the sick and reanimate the white body.²⁶ Under his ministrations, invalid Harold Bleecker recovers his speech and mobility.

As in the case of Griggs's Belton Piedmont, this series of escapes and extraordinary feats are intertwined with, and in fact support, the indictment emerging from the realistic representation of the virulence of segregation. Holmes's precise depiction, from the point of view of the oppressed, of the parallel world of Jim Crow injustice, peonage, convict-lease, and lynchings, as well as of the "helpless" (Holmes 1917, 125) submission to injustice (in the case of a few benevolent but ineffective whites) or of the unquestioned sense of white supremacist entitlement (on the part of a cross-class group of segregationists) have a defamiliarizing effect that is even greater than Allan Dune's superpowers and effectively leads to a critical estrangement from prevailing narratives of American democracy. In other words, the novel's utopian economy is at work in the hero's narrative survival against the most dangerous odds, but the modes of his survival are not stranger or more unbelievable than the real-life societal context that makes them necessary.

It is only when the heroic everyman's ontological capacity to survive is established beyond all doubts that Allan Dune meets his end, an end that confirms his exceptionality. His death is not due to an inevitable doom. On the contrary, Holmes presents it as the self-aware "martyrdom" of a man "of great nature" (Holmes 1917, 127), as a superior form of selfless witnessing (to recover the etymological sense of the word "martyr"), and as a way of opposing truth to blind power. As announced early on in the novel, "When injustice is rampant there is always a call to martyrdom" (25), and Allan Dune answers the call. He has a "premonition" (118) that his mission to "Savna" as the "special envoy" (118) to negotiate the purchase of land for the new African American nation may be dangerous for him, but he goes nevertheless to pursue the higher collective good of the Union of Ethiopia.²⁷ As in Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, the hero succumbs not because defeated in battle, but because of a cowardly trick, in this case the false testimony of a white woman who is instigated by her fiancé, villain Donald Bleecker, to pretend to have been sexually attacked by Dune. By transforming the ensuing senseless lynching into purposeful martyrdom, Holmes thwarts the finality of death by inserting the victim into a broader time frame and a collective perspective.

26 The trope of the black Christ continues well into the twentieth century. See, for instance, DuBois's "Christ in Texas" (1920) or Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931).

27 DuBois's 1911 utopian novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, ends with a nonfictional address to the reader entitled "L'envoi". Holmes's own Epilogue confirms Allan Dune's role as an envoy even after his death.

Even as he depicts how the violent vagaries of segregation create a context where every African American man and woman is under a sentence of death, Holmes mobilizes the speculative economy of the novel to dialogize this tragic reality into an assurance of black futurity. Both his chosen mode of representing Allan Dune's lynching and the novel's Epilogue are, in this sense, revealing. The lynching scene avoids the detailed and horrifying descriptions that characterize, for instance, Griggs's representation of Bud and Foresta's lynching in *The Hindered Hand* (1905). Not unlike DuBois in "Of the Coming of John" (1903), Holmes focuses, instead, on the "flood of thoughts" (Holmes 1917, 125) that sweep over Allan Dune while he is being chained to the iron post where he will be burned. In his last stream of thoughts and memories, the African American everyman reviews his life within the broader scope of his people's history: from the "ancient glory of his race" in Africa (Holmes 1917, 126) to the slave trade, the Civil War and emancipation, the continued oppression of his people, the success of the Union of Ethiopia, the hope that his martyrdom may help his people, and the loving memory of Elsa. The striking and prolonged narrative focus on the hero's thought-life even as he is going to be burned at the stake enhances both the condemnation of his cowardly murderers and also, by contrast, his own superior humanity. The speculative economy of *Ethiopia* repurposes the tragic element into a confirmation of the hero's strength and pushes him and the Union of Ethiopia into futurity by memorializing his exemplary, ultimate commitment to freedom and resistance to the last. The surge of "wild, tempestuous rage" Allan Dune feels remembering Elsa (Holmes 1917, 127) makes him temporarily able to tear "himself loose from his tormentors, throwing a dozen men from their feet", and his superhuman silence under torture makes the lynching crowd feel "that it had been cheated of half the performance" (128).

Four lines after Allan Dune's silent death, the novel ends quite abruptly. The author's "report[ing] of facts" (Holmes 1917, 48) is over and no fictional embellishment is offered. However, the narrative dynamics that propel Elsa Mangus, Allan Dune, and the Union of Ethiopia into the future are supported by the Epilogue, where they are reinforced by being made explicit. The author uses memorialization to spur his audience to agitate against Jim Crow. Shifting seamlessly from realism to reality, Holmes asks metanarrative questions in the Epilogue that invade the extra-textual life of his readers. He concludes the novel on the goals of courage, unity, mutual support, and self-determination that constitute the founding principles of the alternative polity advanced in the novel. The project is worth working and waiting for because, as the author has posited in the Preface, it will not take long to be realized (Holmes 1917, 7). In fact, while the last line of the Epilogue claims readiness to "Patiently [...] await the answer" (129), the author's ostensible submission to the "temporal

violence” (Fleming 2022, 6) of deferred justice is belied by the urgency of the preceding questions that enter the present-day reality of the readers and challenge them to mobilize:

We can only close our narrative with a question: Shall the Decemvirate complete the negotiations inaugurated by Allan Dune and accede to the demands of their insistent contributors, or shall they, because of lack of virility and originality, retrace their steps?

And another: Shall a new civilization spring up over the graves of Elsa Mangus and rise from the ashes of the funeral pyre of Allan Dune?

Patiently we await the answer. (Holmes 1917, 129)

The realistic evocation of the counterfactual economy of the novel dialogizes the protagonists’s tragic deaths into a means and a promise of black futurity. Exorcising the danger that the constant threat of death may become a source of paralysing “racial despair” (Tate 1992, 18), the memory of the protagonists’s murders is weaponized into an injunction to share their commitment to the black community and to freedom.

Ethiopia displays the oppositional uses of the speculative fiction tradition in African American literature as a means to defamiliarize racialized injustice and explode its supposed inevitability. On a literary historical level, Holmes’s sustained intertextual dialogue with earlier texts in that tradition establishes *Ethiopia* as an important chapter in the reconstruction of its genealogy and expands the periodization of African American utopian fiction well into the twentieth century.²⁸ The examined continuities within the tradition also enable a significant twist in the interpretation of the title. The titular reference to Ethiopia no longer emerges as misleading or mainly “spiritual”, but as “distinctly revolutionary” (Holmes 1917, 24). *Ethiopia, the Land of Promise* effectively renames the United States as the land of the American “Ethiop”, who “paid for this land with their sweat and blood [...] when, for centuries, they answered to the master’s lash” (111).²⁹ Holmes presents the birth of an independent African Ameri-

28 See also Sarah L. Fleming’s *Hope’s Highway* (1918) and DuBois’s *Dark Princess* (1928).

29 These are the words of Jacob Whiteside, one of the founding fathers of the Union of Ethiopia. He argues forcefully for reparations: “To demand from us money for this land is practising usury with a vengeance. If individuals are to be held responsible for their misdeeds, why not nations?” The plot of the novel acknowledges that “the cession could not be obtained” (Holmes 1917, 111) and negotiations for the purchase continue, but the argument in favour of reparations is not otherwise disputed and therefore enters into the utopian economy of the novel.

can nation in the U.S. South as “retributive justice” (111), appropriating at the same time the national myth of the “land of promise” and its foundational claim to a bright futurity.

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