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Black Land

IMPERIAL ETHIOPIANISM AND AFRICAN AMERICA



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CHAPTER FOUR

Imperial Embellishment

Why gazeth thou?

See thou not that I am of Etheopean [sic] lineage?

—HARRY DEAN, UNTITLED POEM

ALTHOUGH ISAAC BROWN and Joseph Emanuel Blayechettai, presumably motivated by relatively modest personal gain, lacked the ambition to actualize the power of imperium, two other men—Harry Foster Dean and William Henry Ellis—did strive in earnest to found Ethiopian empires of their own. Like the numerous Ethiopian royal imposters who emerged early in the twentieth century, Dean and Ellis depended upon illusory and mercurial self-definition to fuel their imperial dreams. However, while the Ethiopianist imposters constructed imperial selves who were exiled royal ambassadors, the personal stories of imperial Ethiopianism created by Dean and Ellis were only the first steps toward claiming genuine empires in Africa. Their narratives—their yarns—weave tales of men who believed that inventive self-presentation was the key to becoming a self-made emperor.

Harry Foster Dean, author (with Sterling North) of *The Pedro Gorino: The Adventures of a Negro Sea-Captain in Africa and on the Seven Seas in His Attempts to Found an Ethiopian Empire* (1929), begins his maritime adventure with the grandiose aspiration to single-handedly found a black empire in Africa, one that would extend from South Africa and include contemporary Lesotho and Mozambique—with no mention of Abyssinia. “To Dean,” according to North, “all of Africa was ‘Ethiopia,’ and every black man an ‘Ethiopian,’” and Dean made no secret of his plan to reclaim it.¹ His power was considered such a threat that one of the major British participants in the Scramble for Africa allegedly called him “the most

dangerous ‘negro’ in the world.”² However, as with Brown’s and Blayechetai’s stories, the suspicion of fabrication taints Dean’s text, particularly when it comes to his links to imperial power.

The autobiographical *Pedro Gorino* follows Dean’s Ethiopianist journey toward the restoration of an empire in Africa. His special fate, authorizing him to do so as he sees it, is preordained by a familial inheritance: he counts Paul Cuffee among his ancestors, and boasts that he can trace his lineage directly to Africa on both sides of his family. In his youth, he leaves the comfort of a black middle-class household in Philadelphia in order to join the crew of his uncle’s ship and circumnavigate the globe. It is on this trip that he first articulates his fantasy of a maritime solution to Ethiopia’s diminished status. Upon hearing a story from his uncle about a Dutch sea captain’s deception of an African king in order to kidnap the community’s boys and girls, thus sparking the transatlantic slave trade with his quick escape by sea, the young Dean decides he would “some day build a fleet for the Ethiopian race and thus help them to free themselves from bondage” (56). Years later, he buys his own ship—his beloved *Pedro Gorino*—with an eye to “instigate a movement to rehabilitate Africa and found such an Ethiopian Empire as the world has never seen” (67). He comes close to succeeding on several occasions but is thwarted in the end by the clandestine efforts of African colonial governments that sabotage his project. Dean concludes his story in Madeira, dejected, having lost his ship and all of the wealth he had amassed.

John Cullen Gruesser refutes as spurious Dean’s claim to be the descendent of Cuffee, an assertion that I would argue is strengthened by the fact that Dean wrote an article years before writing *The Pedro Gorino* in which he recounts the story of McKinnon Paige (spelled here “McKennon Page”) and Said Kafu, and the role of Paul Cuffee in African emigration, without once mentioning any connection to his ancestry.³ Even Dean’s contemporaries, including W. E. B. Du Bois, expressed skepticism about various aspects of his account. Just as Du Bois wrote of Garvey that “dream, fact, fancy, wish, were all so blurred in his thinking that neither he himself nor his hearers could clearly or easily extricate them,” so, too, does he believe of Dean that “perhaps his dream goes in some respects beyond the facts.”⁴ *Time* magazine wondered if the book, like *Trader Horn*, was “another dubious ‘autobiography.’”⁵ Prolific writer and mariner Charles J. Finger claimed that he knew *The Pedro Gorino* was a “false adventure book” when he read “some silly statement about how a ship had tried to turn the corner at the Horn three times (it had to be the magic three).”⁶ The little scholarship that has been written about Dean’s autobiography tends to revolve around

its authenticity and the degree to which Dean embellishes his stories. The word “embellish” emerges again and again in discussions of *The Pedro Gorino*, and it is as if the literal embellishments adopted by the imposters discussed in the previous chapter—in the form of decorative costumes or bodily markings signaling their African nobility—now figuratively adorn Dean’s tale to facilitate his passing. The narration itself becomes costume. As the *Time* reviewer writes, *The Pedro Gorino* appears to be decorated with a “dark embroidery.”⁷ Arthur A. Schomburg, in the same vein, calls the narrative “a piece of lace.”⁸

“Some Dark Incantation”

It is unsurprising that readers have doubted Dean’s claims. In fact, Dean anticipates that there will be challenges to the truth of his unbelievable story. Twice, he embeds letters in *The Pedro Gorino* (one from John Cuffee to his father, Paul, and the other from Dean to a friend named Alfred) in what appear to be attempts to authenticate his account preemptively (12, 177). In addition, more than a few readers have pointed out that the transparent title of the British edition of his book, *Umbala*, means “it is true.” The title comes from one of Dean’s anecdotes:

One man at the hut of this chief said nothing but “Umbala.” Every time the chief spoke this man uttered his single word until it grew to an enormous and terrible significance. It seemed like some dark incantation. At my first opportunity I asked Emtinso the meaning of the word. He said that it meant, “It is true.” It seems that it was a rather general custom among the kings and chiefs to hire these hypnotic artists who continue to say, “It is true, it is true,” until the natives believe every word their rulers tell them. (162)

Rather than underscoring the truth of his book, as George Shepperson and others have argued, the title—viewed through this anecdote—appears to reveal that truth can be willed into existence. It is only natural that we will now read Dean’s own story as if it is accompanied by the same insistent, persuasive assertion of truth in the face of seeming falsehood. In other words, it is almost as if he wants to throw doubt on his story as one that becomes true only through “dark incantation,” an incantation that Dean’s narration renders with “an enormous and terrible significance.” Just before the introduction of the word “Umbala,” Dean recalls another storytelling incident punctuated by another performative declaration of truth: “At the conclusion of this story most of the audience shouted, ‘Icoona,’ meaning

‘It is the truth,’ or ‘I understand’” (149). What distinguishes this story from the chief’s is the challenge faced by the storyteller. “Icoona” is not chanted by “hypnotic artists,” and there is a listener in the crowd who counters the agreeing members of the audience with “‘Amaguthly,’ meaning ‘I doubt it,’ or ‘Go on with you’” (149). Dean understands “Amaguthly” as an invitation to dialogue—that it was “merely a matter of form,” a code indicating that the listener “had a story to tell which he considered infinitely more entertaining” (149). Not only does Dean introduce this element of dissension into the text, but he also gestures, self-reflexively and knowingly, toward the entertainment value and the mythic improbability of his own story.

One of the most unbelievable episodes in Dean’s account involves a near-death experience that follows his mysterious ejection from his own ship while sleeping by a group of treacherous Englishmen to whom he had rented it. When he somehow survives and returns to Knysna, no one recognizes him and, he says, “One and all discredited my story,” anticipating his future readers’ distrust of the book as a whole (107). Adding to the irony is the fact that he ends the chapter, titled tellingly “The Phantasy at Knysna,” with a remark acknowledging that the very first readers of his story assumed it was an untruth: “All that ever came of the affair was a short, semi-humorous article in one of the local papers that took it all as the fabrication of an old salt which might entertain their not-too-serious readers” (109).

Presumably this newspaper is neither the *South African Spectator* nor *Izwi Labantu*, newspapers edited, respectively, by Dean’s friends F. Z. S. Peregrino and Allan Kirkland Soga. The connections he pursued with Peregrino and Soga indicate that Dean knew the importance of print journalism for legitimizing his pan-Africanist project. As Shepperson writes, Peregrino “set up webs of business and political connections which were useful to Harry Dean.”⁹ In tracing those mutually beneficial networks in his book, Dean “unveils to his readers an embodied Africa and modern African literati engaged in periodical culture and translation.”¹⁰ Dean would put Soga in touch with Pauline E. Hopkins, who published Soga’s letter to the editor, in which he called for Africans and African Americans to “co-operate by extending hands across the sea,” in the *Colored American Magazine*.¹¹ (Hopkins would later turn to Soga as “the corner stone of [her] ‘international policy.’”)¹² And, in planning a “suitable reception” for his fellow African American countryman Bishop Coppin, Dean first contacted Peregrino. But his connections with African journalists were not the only ones he cultivated. In a remote Boer village, Dean runs into an old friend who happens to write for a London newspaper. He accompanies him on his assignment as a war correspondent and witnesses a war

between the Swazis and the Zulus after which the exhausted victorious army is slaughtered by the Boers (231). Later, after returning to the United States and only a few years before writing *The Pedro Gorino*, Dean worked as a subscription agent for the *Favorite Magazine*, edited and published by Fenton Johnson. A certificate authorizing Dean to “transact business” on behalf of the magazine during the course of a lecture tour linked Dean’s cause with the periodical’s more general aim of “fighting to make the world safe for the Negro.”¹³

Dean had an abiding faith in the transnational potential of periodicals, particularly those conceived in the service of racial solidarity. In fact, he even attempted to start his own magazine. A 1920 FBI file on Dean documents his plans to start a magazine based out of San Diego called *Habasher’s Promised Land*. The author of the file, advising that Dean “be kept under surveillance as to radicalism and agitation among negroes,” writes that he “claims that ‘Habashero’ and not ‘Negro’ is the true name of persons of African descent” and is likely “one of the usual negro fakers ‘African Princes.’”¹⁴ Despite the skepticism evinced by this FBI report, Dean views the textual support supplied by print media as a means to establish and ground himself in the reality of his imperial dream, similar to the manner in which he uses the documentation of his embedded correspondence.

But it is not only his dream that needs grounding; he needs also to assure himself of his own reality and the reliability of his senses. He finds himself susceptible to “mirages [that] bewilder the unaccustomed eye” (150). Upon regaining consciousness on the beach after being thrown overboard from his ship, he perceives the woman who helps nurse him back to health through a misty veil: he says, “through my dreamy senses she seemed some dusky goddess” (106). She and her fellow villagers were, to Dean, “less real than any [people] I had ever known” (106). Even after recovering and returning to town, he says, “I no longer could distinguish the real from the unreal nor the truth from the fabric and weave of my fevered mind. My waking hours were filled with dreams, and at night my dreams echoed my waking hours” (108). This blurring of the boundaries between day and night is intensified by the even more profound loss of Dean’s sense of time in general, as he succumbs to the familiar stereotype of an Africa frozen in time. He thinks that his protracted recuperation in the Africando village has lasted the entire summer, but only two weeks have passed.

Having passed into this dream-like atmosphere, Dean himself becomes “less real”: “now I was more like an image of death than a living human being” (107). He is, quite literally, no longer himself. Recalling “stories of men who had come back to earth in other forms,” Dean wonders, “Was

I really so different from what I had been?" (108). Not "who" I had been but "what"—even his quiddity is in question with this transformation. Fittingly, just before being rescued, Dean remembers the following lines from *The Tempest*, a textual recollection he finds "infinitely soothing":

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange . . . (104)

Dean's transformation—his "sea-change / Into something rich and strange"—renders him almost inhuman. His restoration to health is essentially a resurrection from the dead, one prefiguring the anticipated Ethiopianist resurrection of his African empire; he recalls that, as he lay washed up on the beach, his "legs seemed rigid and frozen and my arms lay stiffly at my side," as if rigor mortis has already set in (105). If the Africando woman who heals Dean appears to him as a "dusky goddess," it is as if her godliness is transmitted to Dean himself.

Furthermore, this Africando woman is hardly the only figure in *The Pedro Gorino* whose godliness attaches to Dean. Of Segow Faku, King of the Pondos, Dean writes in eroticized awe:

I perceived such a picture of majesty as one could not easily forget. Twenty feet before me on a huge cowskin, squatted like the Buddha, was Segow Faku, King of the Pondos. His face was handsome, his skin shining black. His body was enormous and beautifully muscled. He was almost naked, his bright robe thrown to one side. He wore only a breech-clout, a single necklace of teeth, and a bracelet of ivory on one arm. An ostrich plume adorned his hair. (164)

The comparison to Buddha is not simply incidental. Just before meeting the king, Dean confesses, during a conversation with Bishop Coppin, that he is not a Christian but rather "inclined more toward Buddhism" (143). Rather than casting Segow Faku as a religious figure that would be exotic and alien to him, he views him as a representation of divinity according to his own belief system.

Segow Faku returns Dean's admiration; welcoming him to the village, he presents Dean ceremoniously with a chicken. Just as the godliness of the Africando woman adheres to Dean, Segow Faku's act not only is "as decorous as the bestowal of knighthood," it bestows Dean with a

supernatural quality. The villagers, having never seen such a thing, view Dean “from that moment forth [as] something superhuman” (165). Two chapters later, he delivers a persuasive speech that succeeds in preventing a war between the Pondos and the Pondo Mesis, thereby accomplishing a “superhuman feat” (182). On a large-scale mission to kill a lion tormenting the Pondo Mesis, Dean, improbably, is the one who delivers the fatal shot (193). The lion, described as an “old monarch,” is dethroned by Dean (192), and, like Reuel in *Of One Blood*, he has a power over the lion that the Africans do not. Here, Dean appears to have absorbed a superstition regarding “the supposed respect shown to the royal blood by lions” referenced by Marc Bloch, who cites Friar Francis’s remarks to the doge of Venice: if Philip of Valois “would expose his person to hungry lions and could escape unscathed from their claws,” Edward III would recognize him as the king of France because “lions never harm a true king.”¹⁵

In beginning with his genealogy—linking himself to Paul Cuffee and, through him, to Said Kafu—Dean believes himself to be just as regal and legendary as the African kings he meets. Despite assertions by the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and other periodicals that Dean descends from a long line of kings, and North’s claim that Dean introduced himself to him as “a prince in my own right back in Africa,” Dean himself admits that he “could make no claim to royal blood” (xviii, 249). However, he celebrates the innate regality of his ancestors the Cuffees and Deans, with both maternal and paternal lines leading him directly back to Africa. As sailors and seafaring merchants, his ancestors are figuratively royal, as he claims that “maritime people are aristocrats wherever they go” (7). Recalling a childhood visit to his aunt in New Orleans, he says, “I lived the life of a young prince” (29). Twice in his youth, while sailing with his uncle, Dean met kings whom his uncle could count as intimate friends: King Kalakaua of Hawaii and the King of the Herreros in Saldanha Bay (35, 52). As a child, he is trained to believe that he is in his element when among royalty and to imagine that he is capable of leading an empire himself. “Even at that early age,” Dean writes, “I was dreaming of an Ethiopian Empire” (56). When Dean’s uncle begins to educate him in astronavigation, it is fitting that “the stars that stirred [his] imagination most were those in Cepheus, Cepheus, King of Ethiopia” (34). Later, he even credits this mythical celestial king of Ethiopia with orienting his ship: “Finally one night we got sight of Cepheus and got our bearings” (128). It is no surprise then that, in his eulogy for Dean, North calls him “the stuff of which Negro emperors are made.”¹⁶

But Dean differentiates himself from the godlike monarchs he meets in Africa by positioning himself in the shifting role of mediator, one who can settle differences from a superordinate position and is able to see the “big picture.” In other words, he sees himself as the proverbial “King of Kings,” a title assumed by Ethiopian emperors to indicate their sovereignty over regional Ethiopian “kings.” Over the course of his journeys, he finds himself more than once in the position to unite feuding African kingdoms, bringing him closer to his dream. He eliminates the long-standing feud between the Pundos and Pondo Mesis by emphasizing the “same blood” running through their veins (and, by extension, his own) (183). Later, when a group of African kings visits Cape Town to meet with the Prince of Wales, Dean wonders, “Why not utilize the opportunity and bring them together in one great meeting?” Dean sees himself as the catalyst necessary for black union, even as he admits—contradicting his earlier speech to the Pundos—that these are “feuds which ran back to the very dawn of time” (251). His self-aggrandizement renders him nearly supernatural; the success of his speech leads him to claim (somewhat modestly using the passive voice) that “war had been averted by a miracle” (184). He acquires “an enormous and terrible significance,” much like “Umbala” itself.

However, despite Dean’s emphasis on consanguinity and solidarity, he believes himself to be different from Africans. As Gruesser points out, citing a passage about a foolish “native Somali” who would take three cents of shell money over a thousand sovereigns, Dean often “engages in the exceptionalism and paternalism that so many earlier black American Ethiopianists exhibited toward the continent’s inhabitants.”¹⁷ Even his comparisons that depict Africans in a good light are tinged with condescension, as when he compares South African huts favorably to the cabins in which African Americans live in the South (161). When he meets the Prince of Wales, he says, in a remark intended to surprise the reader, “for all his braids and fine demeanor, I thought him no more royal or aristocratic than Segow Faku, his shining black body adorned with nothing but a breech-clout, an ostrich feather, and a necklace of ivory” (248). Although Dean advertised his lectures as an attempt to “refute the psuedo [*sic*]-scientists, so-called anthropologists, who view the African life through their standards and ideals,” he is frequently guilty of the same.¹⁸ When Bishop Coppin leads a group of African kings in singing a hymn of his own composition, “Ethiopia Stretch Out Thy Hands,” it begins soberly but eventually “the harmony grew wilder and more wild, the rhythm more and more barbaric. They drummed upon the table, they sang weird minor

strains" (252). Dean's reaction suggests his estrangement from the scene, but his imperial presence is necessary to contain it.

In his persuasive speech to the Pondos, Dean reminds them that the elderly men in the tribe knew a time before the disaffiliation of the Pondos and Pondo Mesis. Viewing intraracial tension as the culmination of the gradual effects of deracination, Dean's visions of empire rest upon an originary argument that is essentially Ethiopianist. His "dreaming" is restorative:

Once more Mashonaland was Ophor, and gleaming black bodies brought gold from the mines. The ruins of Zimbabwe were no longer ruins, but stately masonry. . . . And those dark descendants of the Phoenicians, still worshiping the crane and the ram, reattained the genius of their ancestors, sailing their ships to every country, bearing the wealth of Africa. As in the ancient days, precious stones and metals poured from Sheba northward through all Arabia, and westward down the wide rivers of the jungle. (155)

Everything in Dean's future-Africa is determined by ancient Africa. At times, Dean is vague about the greatness he hopes to restore, but here he makes it clear that "gold from the mines" and "precious stones and metals" are the throughline holding this future-Africa together. Dean's career as a pan-Africanist is undergirded by a quest for wealth, by commerce. When he visits the De Beers offices, he is shown a tray covered with diamonds that he says "was wealth enough to found the Ethiopian Empire of which I had dreamed so long" (226). After acquiring a fortune in ostrich feathers, he realizes that "within the year I could buy Lorenço Marques" (255). Dean's first attempt to purchase this territory (currently the city of Maputo in Mozambique) from the Portuguese rested upon his appeal to wealthy and well-known African Americans for funding, an appeal that ends up entirely unsuccessful. He shames them in an apostrophe ("Why did you not respond, men of my race?"), arguing that they have "forgotten their motherland as completely as if their forbears had not spent their lives in her jungles" (124, 123).

Dean even goes so far as to imagine an antediluvian, Pangea-like empire, uniting various peoples of color. Observing that Soga's father, Teo Soga, has a Japanese-sounding name, Dean cites a story told to him by the son: "before the cataclysm South Africa, Madagascar, Sumatra, Java, and even Korea and Japan were all connected by land and formed a great, illustrious, and powerful empire. The people were highly cultured, and the rulers rich and wise. When the great flood came over the land it left

only the remote provinces” (93–94). Shepperson and Gerald Horne read this anecdote, respectively, as evidence of Dean’s interest in Asia and of his belief in a link between Africans and Asians—and it is both of those things—but even more noteworthy, I think, is Dean’s desire to believe in an originary *empire*, and his unique ability and responsibility for uncovering and stimulating its root.

Vagrancy and the Flow of Ethiopian Empire

In his disheveled state after his near-drowning, Dean notes with surprise that he is mistaken by his friends for “some old beach comber or beggar” (107). However, throughout his book he links his imperial ambition, ironically, to homelessness. The beginnings of his Ethiopian Empire can be traced to the multiethnic, mostly black crew of his ship—a model of black internationalism—linked only by a necessarily nomadic and shifting space, a virtual space only summoned into existence through ideality. As Gruesser points out, the *Pedro Gorino* is a perfect illustration of the ships that symbolize Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, those “micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity.”¹⁹ Dean writes of his crew, “We were dark brown Vikings on an African coast ready for wind and rough weather, yet to the prosaic men with whom we did our business we were nothing but a tramp ship on the Indian Ocean” (90–91). An ocean tramp, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a cargo vessel, esp. a steamship, which does not trade regularly between fixed ports, but takes cargoes wherever obtainable and for any port.” Certainly, this is the sense of the term Dean intends, but the implication of vagrancy is unavoidable. Sterling North’s preface even introduces Dean (who was elderly and destitute at the time when the book was written) as a “sea tramp,” and his quotation marks around the word suggest that this is Dean’s own description of himself (xvii). He seems to be evoking what Michelle Ann Stephens calls the “classic image of the black mariner as a drifter.”²⁰

After identifying the *Pedro Gorino* as a “tramp ship,” Dean mentions a group of Africans who were traveling as passengers on the ship. He calls them disdainfully an “unsophisticated lot” who “tried to gorge themselves at every meal” until he trains them to be sailors (91). Dean’s attitudes toward Africans throughout the book, despite his stated intentions to unify all black people, betray a belief that empire, ideally, will be led by New World Africans—ones who would, to paraphrase Du Bois, Americanize Africa. Even the appellation “dark brown Vikings” (leaving aside the fact that Vikings are usually depicted as an “unsophisticated lot”

Chapter Four: Imperial Embellishment

Note to epigraph: Untitled poem, Captain Harry Dean Papers, Box 1, Folder 1A, DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago.

1. "Pays Tribute to African Explorer."
2. Dean, *Pedro Gorino*, 119. All subsequent quotations from *The Pedro Gorino* will be cited parenthetically in the text.
3. Dean, "Liberia Asks America to Develop Commerce." Gruesser cites "an anonymous essay in the New Bedford Public Library's Paul Cuffe Collection titled 'Uncle John's Burying Place' that probably dates from the 1970s [in which] Dean is described as 'a man who claims descent, and I think must have looked into the Cuffe papers and then let his truly inspired imagination flow freely'" (*Confluences*, 149n12).
4. Qtd. in Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, 3; Du Bois, review of *Pedro Gorino*.
5. "Trader Dean."
6. Finger, "Literature of Adventure," 777.
7. "Trader Dean."
8. Schomburg, review of *Pedro Gorino*, 224.
9. Shepperson, introduction, xviii.
10. Collis, "Anxious Records," 68.
11. "Editorial and Publishers' Announcements," 467.
12. Hopkins, "Letter to William Monroe Trotter, April 16, 1905," in 244.
13. According to another letter from Johnson, however, Dean apparently ran afoul of the company for spending funds he collected; Johnson warned Dean that he was "in a precarious predicament" and scolded, "Be cautious in dealing with your fellow men." Fenton Johnson to Harry Dean, 24 March 1920, Captain Harry Dean Papers, Box 3, Folder 76, DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago.
14. "Negro Activities: Harry Dean, and 'Habasher's Promised Land,' Projected Negro Magazine," Captain Harry Dean Papers, Box 3, Folder 76, DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago.
15. Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, 148.
16. "Pays Tribute to African Explorer."
17. Gruesser, *Black on Black*, 74.
18. "Famous African Explorer Will Lecture Here."
19. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 12.
20. Stephens, *Black Empire*, 108.
21. Collis argues that "in Kid's uttering, the term evokes a shared experience of oppression. Despite his assertion that he is not of the same class as 'Cape Town niggus,' his difference is one of place; he comes from Texas, not Cape Town. They are all 'niggus,' what marks him out is that being from Texas he is unwilling to accept unfair treatment because of his racial identity" ("Anxious Records," 80).
22. Gruesser, *Black on Black*, 75.
23. Collis, "Anxious Records," 73-74.
24. Shepperson, introduction, xiii.