
Continuities of Racial Fascism: Louis Till and Black Marxism in the *Pisan Cantos*

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Abstract: In Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, Pound mourns the unjust execution of Louis Till, Emmett Till's father. This essay argues that the unusually sympathetic representation of Till in the poem was made possible by Pound's engagement with the ideas of activists for black liberation like Nancy Cunard and Langston Hughes; hence Pound, an avowed fascist, ultimately voices a critique of the "racial fascism" of the United States typical of discourses of black anti-imperialism. The essay concludes with exploring the antinomical racial logic of the *Pisan Cantos*, for which black political radicalism—the "Black Leninism" of Langston Hughes in particular—is revealed to be a constitutive, but repressed, ideological interlocutor.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, Louis Till, Marxism, Langston Hughes, fascism, 20th-century American poetry, African American

CLC: I712 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2021)01-0080-14

Over the past few years, the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till has again recaptured national attention in the United States, a symbol of the grimly continuous recurrence of systematic violence against black populations in America. Less widely known is the fact that Till's father, Louis Till, was himself the victim of an unsubstantiated rape accusation and execution in 1945, as a soldier in the Italian Campaign. Stranger still, seventy years before any other sympathetic account was written, Louis Till was eulogized in Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. The circumstances under which the *Pisan Cantos* were written are themselves infamous: Pound, who between 1941 and 1943 had given a series of profascist radio broadcasts throughout the war, was arrested in Italy in 1945 as a traitor and fascist sympathizer. Pound was held at the U.S. Army Disciplinary Training Center in Pisa, the first few weeks of which he spent in a welded cage, exposed to the elements. During Pound's time in the cage, Louis Till was also being held at the DTC, already tried and awaiting execution; Pound and Till spoke to each other from their nearby cages. At the DTC, where a disproportionate 25 percent of the inmates were black, prisoners were subjected to "bitter cold, withering heat, never-ending labor, humiliation, beatings" by a white officer corps (Wideman 233). After Till's execution, as recorded in the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound would recall certain remarks of Till's and weep: "the ewe, he [Till] said had such a pretty look in her eyes [...] wept in the rainditch at evening" (74.179, 185). Pound suggests Till's innocence with an

analogy to the sacrificial ram slaughtered by Jason for its golden fleece: “Till was hung yesterday / for murder and rape with trimmings [...] thought he was Zeus ram or another one” (74.171–73). Under the searchlights of the DTC’s four guardtowers, which Pound analogized to the malevolent, one-eyed gaze of Polyphemus, both Till and Pound, like Odysseus, are threatened with becoming “a man on whom the sun has gone down” (71.178), “OY TIS,” “Nobody.”

The result is an elegiac, antifascist strand that runs throughout a staunchly fascist poet’s most staunchly fascist poem. This essay will attempt to untangle this seemingly paradoxical situation not by recourse to psychological hypotheses, redemption narratives, and so on, but rather by emphasizing historical and ideological continuities where usually there have been supposed to be absolute ruptures or antinomies. One such continuity, the continuity between bourgeois capitalist imperialism and fascism, was a common theme in the early 30s for theorists of both the black radical and anti-imperialist Marxist traditions; and many of this period’s most significant writers on the subject understood themselves as belonging to both traditions to some degree, as did for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. Through Pound’s long-sustained relationships with communists and activists for black liberation like Nancy Cunard and Hughes, relationships that extended from before Pound’s fascist period to after the war, Pound was exposed to these ideas quite explicitly. As documented in Pound’s correspondence with Hughes and in Pound’s contributions to Cunard’s monumental 1934 *Negro Anthology*, Pound not only read extensively but approved of and retained many features of these critical frameworks, even as his ideological commitment to fascism rigidified in the later 30s. As Aimé Césaire’s 1950 essay “Discourse on Colonialism” theorized, fascism can be understood as a “boomerang effect” (36-42), whereby the long-practiced techniques and attitudes of racialized domination developed through capitalist imperialism are turned inward on the metropole during extreme crises of anticapitalist mobilization. Following Césaire’s formulation, this essay reads Pound’s identification of the racial fascism of the United States neither as mere projection or opportunism on Pound’s part, nor as exculpatory of Pound, but as a kind of rupture-moment, a moment of elegiac self-reflexivity of an internationally manifold fascism, whose unbroken continuity not only across battle-lines in 1945, but with regimes today, remains largely unelaborated.

To begin it will prove useful to briefly indicate some of the continuities that persisted between American capital and fascist regimes before and after World War II, the dynamics of the historiographical erasure of these continuities—more accurately, their historiographical repression—and the distorting effect of this repression on the interpretive history of Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*. As Cedric Robinson notes in “Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness,” “With respect to the support of or opposition to Fascism in America, much of our received knowledge, our official memory, is erroneous, the gap between actuality and reconstruction sometimes approaching the dimensions of a vast chasm” (Robinson and Gilmore 87). He details some exemplary instances of the extended prewar flirtation of American capital with Mussolini’s regime: J. P. Morgan’s loans of over a hundred million dollars to the Fascist government in 1926 (88); *Fortune* magazine’s 1934 issue devoted exclusively to analyzing the Fascist state, analogizing its enlightened market-managing impulses with those of Roosevelt’s administration, and praising the regime’s reawakening of the “ancient virtues” in the Italian masses (88); the “favorable editorials” that “could be read in publications such as *Barron’s*, *Journal of Commerce* and *Commercial Bulletin*, *Commerce and Finance*, *Nation’s Business* ... and

the reputable *Wall Street Journal*” (Diggins 146; qtd. in Robinson and Gilmore 89). Furthermore, the continuity and transfer of attitudes, techniques, politico-economic structures, and even specific personnel between the defeated fascist regimes and the U.S. global empire extended into the postwar context as well. Some examples of this postwar continuity, varying in type, directness, and scope: the open preferencing of former Nazis over displaced Jews in postwar immigration law such as the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, which was enacted to very little public outcry (Flory 286); the extension into the American postwar period of 1930s Jim Crow “forms of de jure and de facto second-class citizenship for blacks, Filipinos, Chinese, and others,” forms that themselves gave explicit inspiration and legal precedent to Nazi race law (Whitman 12-13); and, later, strategies of racialized domination and terror undertaken by various arms of the U.S. state to suppress black radicalism throughout the second half of the 20th century, which earned the American state the explicit “fascist” designation in the analyses of many significant black radicals of the period (Jackson 118-119).

Analytical recognition of this continuity was vehemently repressed in the American postwar context; a specifically determinate political analysis of fascism, and in turn a specifically determinate analysis of the content of Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, simply could not be considered. In the immediate postwar context, fascism, and Pound as a fascist sympathizer, became symbols of a flat, contentless metaphysical evil. The following reviews of the *Pisan Cantos* from 1949–1951, collected in *A Casebook on Ezra Pound* (1959), exemplify this tendency, as when Nathaniel Weyl’s 1950 article “Treason” accuses Pound of aligning with “forces of nihilism” (Weyl 6). In a 1951 article for *Commentary*, Peter Viereck argued one could not “separate art from politics” in Pound’s case because “Nazi antisemitism is not, except ephemerally and superficially, politics at all but a uniquely obscene anti-ethics, a metaphysics of satanism” (98). Early postwar criticism of the *Pisan Cantos*, unwilling or unable to theoretically accommodate the persistent political continuity between the capitalist democracies and the fascist states, and therefore unwilling or unable to theoretically accommodate the copresence of what appear to be contradictory “fascist” and “antifascist” tendencies within the poem itself, remained locked in a hermeneutical antinomy between an approving New Critical formalism, apolitical by an explicit and theoretically dishonest refusal to process “content,” and a disapproving faux-politics of disavowal, apolitical by a refusal to determine Pound’s politics as politics, inflating them instead into an absolutely other “nihilism” or “satanism.”

Against this self-imposed critical blindness, the task fell largely, as Robinson again helpfully recounts, to black radical theorists before and after the war to articulate the continuity between the structures of racial domination that upheld and uphold bourgeois-democratic capitalist empires and the similar techniques of racial domination that fascism proper turned on European populations. Rather than posing fascism as a somehow “anti-ethical,” absolutely other “satanism” beyond politics, Robinson warns against precisely this postwar

historical manufacture of fascism as a negation of the Western Geist ... taken to signify the “damned” historical identity which the West almost assumed but ultimately rejected. . . . From the perspective of many non-Western peoples, however, the occurrence of fascism—that is militarism, imperialism, racist authoritarianism, choreographed mob violence, millenarian crypto-Christian mysticism, and a nostalgic nationalism—was no more an historical aberration than colonialism, the slave trade, and slavery. (Robinson and Gilmore, “Fascism and Black Radical Theorists” 152)

Césaire's characterization was similar: "At bottom, what he [the white bourgeois man] cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures" (36). In the 30s, Du Bois, James, and Padmore all similarly stressed the continuity of the bourgeois democracies with fascism. While these ideas were very remote from the early, mostly American and New Critical reception of Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, I would stress that Pound himself, despite his fascist commitments, did engage with them, and that absent an adequate accounting of this influence, the racial imaginaries of the *Pisan Cantos* will remain partially illegible, as will the poem in general and Pound's strangely elegiac sections for Louis Till in particular.

For the purposes of this essay, Pound's figurations of American racial domination in the *Pisan Cantos* will be traced to his engagement with two figures: Nancy Cunard and Langston Hughes. Nancy Cunard was an heiress, an artist, briefly Pound's lover in the mid 20s, and in the early 30s became an activist for communism and for black liberation. In 1934 Cunard published her monumental *Negro Anthology*, compiling over 800 pages of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction by mostly African American writers, whose purpose, as Cunard writes in her foreword to the anthology, was "the recording of the struggles and achievements, the persecutions, and the revolts" of black populations across the globe (iii). The anthology contained pieces by black writers such as Hughes, Padmore, Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as white writers including Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, Cunard herself, and Pound, who submitted two entries. Like many other anti-imperialist intellectuals during this period, Cunard and Hughes identified the Communist Party as the natural organ for their activism. This was largely due to the unique, so-called "third period" policies pursued by the Comintern following its Sixth Congress in 1928: in America, labor agitation among black workers, a constituency long neglected by the CPUSA, was emphasized, and the "Black Belt" thesis of self-determination was proposed, which held that African Americans constituted an oppressed nation within the United States, a kind of internal colony deserving of its own state. Cunard's foreword to the *Negro Anthology* confidently proclaims that only "the Communist world-order is the solution to the race problem" (iii); embossed in red across the brown felt of the anthology's back cover is a detailed map of the proposed territorial claims of the "Black Belt."

When after the war Cunard expressed her shock at Pound's unapologetic allegiance to fascism, her sense that Pound's politics were in some sense contradictory, she recalled one interaction in particular: Pound's response

to an appeal I circulated in the early thirties asking for funds to aid the defense council of the Scottsboro boys. . . . At the end of my circular, I wrote: "If you are against the lynching and terrorisation of the most oppressed race in the world, if you have any innate sense of justice, sign this protest and contribute towards the defense funds." [...] Among [the many responses] came one from Ezra and Dorothy Pound. At the bottom Ezra had appended this note: "I not only protest, but if this sort of judicial sanction of murder and frame-up continues, I should be disposed to advocate direct action. We have had enough criminals in high office already. A state even a state sanely founded can not indefinitely continue if it condones and sanctions legal murder of innocent men. (*These were the Hours* 128-129)

Pound's engagement with the Scottsboro case was even more extensive than Cunard suggests. Hughes had also sent Pound a letter, requesting auctionable material to raise funds for the Scottsboro case; Pound sent back material that was sold at the auction, but is now lost. Along with his original request, Hughes had sent Pound his play *Scottsboro Limited*. In it, Hughes's strident communist emphasis demonstrates the ways in which the CPUSA and the international Communist party, which for so long had been ineffective at or indifferent to addressing specifically African American concerns, won enormous prestige among black radicals with its activism for the Scottsboro case, by rapidly garnering international attention and lending legal support. *Scottsboro Limited* concludes with a chorus of voices chanting "Rise, workers, and fight," and with a stage direction whose commitment is unambiguous: "Here the 'Internationale' may be sung and the red flag raised above the heads of the black and white workers together" (Hughes and Duffy 49). Pound received the play and wrote back to Hughes: "Thanks very much for 'Scottsboro Limited.' [...] No govt. can go on forever if it allows the worst men in it to govern and if it lends itself repeatedly to flagrant injustice. There is no doubt in my mind that the extreme Southern states are governed by the worst there is in them [...] All of which you are welcome to quote if you think it will do any good" (qtd. in Roessel 219).

Although Pound and Hughes did not spell out or debate the specifics of their ideological positions to each other, Pound's and Hughes's respective political commitments from 1931 to 1935, and the sympathies to black liberation struggles these commitments entailed in the public imagination (but perhaps not so neatly in actuality, in Pound's case), were unambiguous and well-known. Privately, Pound already was dating his letters to Hughes according to the fascist calendar, while Hughes postmarked his from the "1st Dom Soviet," where he was traveling and projected to assist in directing a Soviet propaganda film. Publicly, the contradiction took even starker forms: the September 1931 issue of *New Masses* featured both Hughes's poem "Union" ("All the whole oppressed / Poor world, / White and black, / Must put their hands with mine"; web) and a full-page open letter addressed specifically to Pound (a known *New Masses* reader and erstwhile contributor) from editor-in-chief Michael Gold, whose conclusion starkly illustrates the kind of racial politics Italian fascism already signified to American radicals:

Governor Fuller of Massachusetts is on your side, and the Ku Klux Klan is changing from nightsheets to blackshirts. You may yet return triumphantly, Ezra, to a Fascist America, and lead a squad that will mystically, rhetorically but effectively bump off your old friends, the artists and writers of the *New Masses*. Always ready, but hoping to see you in hell first, *The New Masses*. (web)

Nonetheless, in his letters to Hughes, Pound offers a number of unexpected expressions of political sympathy with black liberation struggles. The strangest of these is in Pound's last prewar letter to Hughes, written in 1935: here Pound's style veered close to that of his later fascist radio broadcasts, with characteristic erratic ravings about monetary conspiracy punctuated with bursts of capitalized phrases (Hughes never responded). However, even in this letter, which seems so stylistically reminiscent of Pound's properly "fascist" writing, Pound begins by informing Hughes that he has just postmarked a letter protesting the imprisonment of Jacques Roumain, a Haitian Communist poet who had been sentenced to three years in prison for his agitation in opposition to American occupation

(Roessel 228-229). Even much later, in Pound's radio broadcasts for the fascists during the war, when his racism was at its most brazen and vicious, he nonetheless began one broadcast on 15 June 1942 with a critique of American lynching. Over Radio Rome shortwave, Pound commented on photographs of black men in the American south "suspended from trees, without apparently due trial by law," and argued that "today the survival of lynch law appears, at least from Europe, to be a sheer manifestation of COWARDICE. It is an expression of course of brutality. [...] What I am trying to work out in my head is WHY American violence always takes such a monotonous form" (*Ezra Pound Speaking* 171).

In light of such statements, I would argue that, after Pound's correspondence with Hughes and Cunard ended in the mid 30s, Pound's thinking about the structure of American racial domination retained from these engagements, not ideological commitments or even systematic critiques *per se*, but an understanding of the dynamics at play in racialized incarceration and lynching in the U.S., which Pound more or less consciously was able to recognize as continuous with the racial domination at the DTC and the execution of Louis Till in particular. In short, these engagements allowed Pound to recognize the "monotonous form" that "American violence always takes," as he phrased it in his radio broadcast. Hence, largely via Hughes and Cunard, critical frameworks characteristic of the so-called "third period" anti-imperialist type, which articulate and criticize the continuity between racial domination in fascism and in the bourgeois democratic empires, strangely reappear in this poem by an avowed fascist: the DTC cages disproportionately filled with black prisoners appear in the *Pisan Cantos* "like a slave ship," the passing guard a "slaver as seen between decks" (74.394, 407). Pound opens Canto LXXX recording his fellow inmates' criticisms of the arbitrary severity of their punishment: "'Ain' committed no federal crime, / jes a slaight misdemeanor' / Thus Mr A. Little or perhaps Mr Nelson, or Washington / reflecting on the vagaries of our rising *θέμις*" (80.1-4). Pound's offhand comment that the American judicial apparatus, as it regards black populations, functions not in accordance with modern protected legal rights but in accordance with the "vagaries" of a *θέμις*—a term that can cover anything from unwritten customs to rights of tradition to codified law—calls to mind precisely the Jim Crow South's innovatively muddled "forms of de jure and de facto second-class citizenship," which, as Whitman shows, served as a legal prototype for the second-class status of Jews in Nazi Germany (12-13).

As I noted earlier, as far as I can tell, Pound's *Pisan Cantos* was the first and only written account for roughly seventy years to speculate that the execution of Louis Till had been a miscarriage of justice. The second-ever account to do so seems to be John Edgar Wideman's excellent book, *Writing to Save a Life*, published in 2016. It is a striking oversight, then, that Pound scholarship itself contributed to this lacuna in the historical record. Reception of the *Pisan Cantos*, when it has commented on Till's presence in the poem at all, has by and large uncritically accepted the military verdict on Till's guilt, and in turn has interpreted Pound as uncritically accepting Till's guilt. As a result, the importance of Till's execution in the poem has been underestimated, and the lines that explicitly refer to Till have been misinterpreted.

Till's execution is first mentioned in the *Pisan Cantos* in the 170th line of the first canto of the series, and functions as a central motif in the series' thematic overture:

Pisa, in the 23rd year of the effort in sight of the tower
and Till was hung yesterday

for murder and rape with trimmings plus Cholkis
plus mythology, thought he was Zeus ram or another one (74.170-173)

Even without the context I've just outlined, it is not difficult to discern that Pound is implying Till's innocence by analogizing his execution with that of a sacrificial ram; surprisingly, though, seemingly none of the numerous previous interpretations or commentaries on the *Pisan Cantos* have marked this. Till is charged with "murder and rape with trimmings." Pound's phrase "with trimmings" can be read on two levels, both of which imply sacrifice: first, a mythological level, referring to the "trimmings" of meat offered to the gods in ancient Greek animal sacrifice (like that of the golden-fleeced "Zeus ram" of "Cholkis," to which Pound refers in the following line). Second, Pound's phrase "murder and rape with trimmings" as in the colloquial "with all the trimmings," that is, "with all the usual formal accompaniments," implies more specifically that Till's execution fulfills all the criteria of a kind of formalized ritual, the characteristic "monotonous form" of American racial domination. Indeed, Till's execution did seem to follow all the usual procedures requisite for a Scottsboro-style judicial "frame-up" (to quote Pound's Scottsboro protest letter): a hastily assigned rape charge, a speedy trial indifferent to contrary evidence, coached witnesses, and so on. We know these details of Till's trial today through Wideman's reporting of the contents of Till's military case file, but Pound himself would have come to this conclusion through his conversations with Till, who as I mentioned before was kept in a nearby cage at DTC. Hugh Kenner even seems to imply in *The Pound Era*, in a unique and unfortunately unsourced offhand comment, that Pound and Till were brought into the DTC together, handcuffed to each other in the same jeep: Pound "came there in the jeep, handcuffed to a man accused of rape and murder" (463).

The ritualized element of Till's execution, the sense in which the whole procedure seems symbolically overdetermined, is manifest in Pound's repetitious compounding of mythological levels: "plus Cholkis / plus mythology." Moreover, the selection of Till in particular is figured here as basically accidental; Till is the incidental object of this regular sacrificial impulse of racialized terror: "thought he was Zeus ram or another one."¹ Pound reports one of the few recorded remarks of Till's, that "the ewe, he said, had such a pretty look in her eyes" (74:179). As with the case of Till's nickname, also recorded exclusively by Pound ("Saint Louis Till"; 77.269), if there is a sense of irony or incongruity in Pound's representation here it is not, as one companion to the *Cantos* glosses it, the "incongruity of such sentiment from one hung for murder and rape," as if the incongruity Pound implies is between the fact of Louis Till's criminality and the somehow inappropriate sensitivity of his language and demeanor. Rather the suggested incongruity is in Till's unusually perseverant humanity and tenderness under dehumanizing conditions, immediately prior to his execution no less. The basic, tragic incongruity, the injustice, for which Pound "wept in the rainditch at evening," is quite evidently that between the inhumanity visited upon Till by his executioners and the humanity Till demonstrates even in his relationship with an ewe passing outside the DTC.

However, it should not be overlooked that, just as was Pound's habit in his letters to Hughes, Pound dates Till's entrance into the poem as an event on the fascist calendar. As Pound identifies Till with a growing array of mythological figures, the appropriation and instrumentalization of Till's unjust execution for Pound's unabating fascist project becomes clearer: first, the triple figures of "a man on whom the sun has gone down," an ideogram signifying negation ("not; no"), and "OY TIS" (Greek,

“Nobody”). Here the fateful captivity of Pound and Till in the DTC restages the captivity Polyphemus imposed on Odysseus, whom Pound since Canto I had posed as the archetypical ill-starred self-negating exile, the “man on whom the sun has gone down”; Pound’s grimly negative revision, however, is that the “becoming-Nobody” that would free him and Till from captivity would not be an Odyssean trick of names or a cunning escape; rather it would be execution itself, “becoming-nobody” by a negation of embodied life. That the escape from the Polyphemus-DTC as “Nobody” cannot be undertaken alive must obviously be true for Till, whose execution occurs in the poem’s past tense; but the same holds for Pound, who by all accounts fully expected to be executed as well. Till, Pound, and Mussolini thus become increasingly inter-identified in the elegiac mode of the *Pisan Cantos*, all represented as crucified figures whose righteousness is confirmed and immortalized precisely by what Pound construes as the injustice of their bodily negation: those “black that die in captivity” (74.242)—here both the black American prisoners and the black panther caged in Rome whose vitality Pound identified with himself, Mussolini, and Italian fascism in general—become “undying, luminous, translucent,” by the same formula the dying Christ spoke on the cross: “Est consummatum, ite” (74.245), “It is finished, go.” This follows a broader theme of the poem: just as Christianity did not perish but became consummated and solidified by the crucifixion, Pound as a fascist consoles himself with the belief that fascism as an actuality, as a historical regime that identified under the name “fascism” and followed the single historical figure of Mussolini, whose project Pound understood as bringing the order of heaven to earth, “to build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars” (74.11), this historically particular fascism will survive its own death precisely by its negation as actuality, living on as idea, as virtuality, as potentiality.

Pound illustrates this dynamic by recourse to the Soninke legend of the city of Wagadu, recorded by German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, whose work was a fixation of Pound’s even in his letters with Hughes. In the legend, Wagadu is a mythical city that is built, destroyed, and rebuilt multiple times throughout history, going by many names and often existing only as an idea, persisting “no matter whether she be built of stone, wood and earth or lives but as a shadow in the mind and longing of her children,” until Wagadu’s fourth, permanent founding on earth, in which “she will live so forcefully in the minds of men that she will never be lost again” (qtd. in Davenport 55). In precisely this same way, Pound, Till, and Mussolini are figured here as “men on whom the sun has gone down,” diamonds torn from their settings but indestructible, like the heavenly city of fascism itself, all of which must temporarily disappear as actual to live on immortally as an idea until the day of this idea’s fullest, permanent realization: as Pound puts it,

nor shall diamond die in the avalanche
 be it torn from its setting
 first must destroy himself ere others destroy him.
 4 times was the city rebuilt, Hooo Fasa
 Gassir, Hooo Fasa dell’Italia tradita [of Italy betrayed]
 now in the mind indestructible (74.194-199)

Later in the same canto, Pound continues more explicitly:

I believe in the resurrection of Italy quia impossibile est [because it is impossible]
4 times to the song of Gassir
now in the mind indestructible (74.601-603)

So far this essay has emphasized the political and ideological continuities that made possible the unusually sympathetic representation of Louis Till in Pound's poem. Indeed, on one level, there is a truth to Pound's formulation, that fascism has outlived its supposed death; this is of course, a main theme of this essay, the continuity of distinctly fascist political techniques of American imperial and racial domination into the postwar period and into our period, one feature of which—the continuous employment of distinctly fascist techniques of domestic racial domination—is symbolized by the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till ten years after his father's execution. However, these passages above demonstrate the necessity of the complementary critical task of reemphasizing the *Pisan Cantos*' inner discontinuity, the offensive dissonance of the harmonizing elegiac note Pound attempts at the close of World War II, the way in which the voices and discourses of black anti-imperialism that Pound attempts to capture in his poem themselves frustrate and contradict his attempt to appropriate them for the ends of fascism.

Insofar as Pound found it possible in the early 30s to plausibly express sympathy or identify his political project with that of communist anti-imperialism, it was in a shared critique of the racial domination practiced by the bourgeois democracies like the U.S., England, and France. Pound was of course no anti-imperialist; his criticism was restricted essentially to a charge of hypocrisy, that bourgeois democracies' criticism of fascist colonial aspirations was illegitimate insofar as the bourgeois democracies also participated in imperialism. For Pound, the bourgeois democracies' domination of the colonies was not a premise from which to justify the necessity of opposition to all capitalist imperialism more broadly, but rather would later become a justification for what he figured as Italy's "real," supposedly less "usurious" (i.e., Jewish) imperialism: "DO the Nigerian farmers get anything but trouble out of having their government run from London, by the pimps, narks, and lackey of the Jewish owners of gold mines? [...] You do nothing in your colonies to compare with the COLONIZATION, real colonization as Italians understand it" (*Ezra Pound Speaking* 57). Needless to say, such conclusions would be anathema to anticolonial Marxists like Padmore, who, despite his strong emphasis upon the continuity between "bourgeois" and "fascist" imperial techniques, immediately diagnosed fascism as an intensified form of imperial domination: "Blacks who have experienced the 'blessings' of capitalist civilization introduced into other parts of Africa, know that Italian Fascists are even more brutal and oppressive than 'democratic' imperialists, and as such, would reduce the Ethiopian masses to the worst forms of slavery" (387). Pound's purely negative, selectively anti-imperial stance of course could only be maintained for so long. The contradictions that had to be repressed in Pound's engagements with Hughes and Cunard were inevitably and blatantly made concrete in the Italian colonial conquest of Ethiopia, which resulted in both Hughes and Cunard simultaneously breaking off their engagement with Pound. That the Italian conquest of Ethiopia was exceptionally unthinkable for Pound's increasingly untenable and already perplexingly contradictory political position is evidenced in the tortured racial logic of his explanation to Cunard, who wrote that she "received a letter from him in the middle of the Ethiopian War telling me he hoped I realized that 'the Abyssinians are BLACK JEWS'" (*These were the Hours* 129).

Moishe Postone elaborates in “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism” an under-appreciated dimension of Marx’s notion of the fetish—and a dimension, argues Postone, indispensable to any adequate theory of fascism—is not only the more strictly economic theorization of capitalism’s inherent tendency to produce and reproduce social relations of domination, but also an epistemological theorization of capitalism’s inherent tendency to produce in consciousness a falsely antinomical picture of these social relations, most characteristically as an antinomy between the “abstract” and the “concrete.” One of the many strengths of Postone’s theory is that it can account for why so many ideological tendencies that purport to be “revolutionary,” “radical,” or anti-bourgeois, especially but not only those that are nominally fascist, ultimately fail to negate capitalism, or worse ultimately endorse and enact its most violent tendencies toward domination: beware, argues Postone, all of those

forms of romanticism and revolt which, in terms of their own self-understandings are anti-bourgeois but which in fact hypostatize the concrete and thereby remain bound within the antinomy of capitalist social relations. Forms of anti-capitalist thought which remain bound within the immediacy of this antinomy tend to perceive capitalism, and that which is specific to that social formation, only in terms of the manifestations of the abstract dimension of the antinomy. (109-110)

To construct representatives of the “abstract” in order to negate them, over and against valorized representatives of the “concrete,” is for Postone merely to succumb to an epistemological dilemma immanent to capitalism, not to negate capitalism as such, which determines the “abstract” and “concrete” alike. Postone’s theory offers for Pound critics a great degree of insight into the unified dynamics of Pound’s radical dedication to the “concrete” and the noncontradiction—indeed, the necessary co-constitution—of his virulent antisemitism and his insistence on his connection to the supposed authenticity of black dialect (as so thoroughly documented in Michael North’s *Dialect of Modernism*).

The antinomical racial logic of the *Pisan Cantos* is of exactly this type, opposing the “concrete” essentialisms supposedly characteristic of the black prisoners to various “abstractions” implicitly or explicitly attributed to Jews. Taking pity on Pound, one prisoner risks punishment to secretly construct a writing table for Pound. Tellingly, even as Pound thanks him, Pound cannot help but transfigure the black prisoner’s face into an African mask from Frobenius’s Frankfurt collection: “What counts is the cultural level, / thank Benin for this table ex packing box / ‘doan yu tell no one I made it’ / from a mask fine as any in Frankfurt” (81.66-69). Pound also offers in the *Pisan Cantos* a new figure in opposition to his longtime hobbyhorse, the supposed “usura” of Jews, the charity of the black prisoners: “the greatest is charity / to be found among those who have not observed / regulations” (74.322-324). Tellingly, although the black prisoners negate the “abstract” or “unnatural” usura, they are narrated as doing so in accordance with a kind of natural attunement to an Aristotelian antichrematistic morality or to an uncorrupted Confucian peasant-knowledge that “fraternal affection is the root of humaneness” (74.440). The masks of Frobenius enter here precisely to flatten what might appear as a distinctly African American solidarity among those incarcerated by a white officer class, into an essentialized, premodern African generosity. The black soldiers are autochthonous, “men rose out of χθόνος” (77.49), unlike the supposedly nationless Jew; their ribald songs indicate their

uncorrupted heterosexuality—one prisoner sings a snippet, “[My girl’s got great big tits] Just like Jack Dempsey’s mitts” (77.164)—unlike the unnatural “buggering bank” (77.126). The black prisoners are characterized as simple and uneducated, and as being kept that way by the DTC—“easier to teach them to roar like gorillas” (74.700)—which allows for Pound to attribute the black soldiers’ actions to being misled by greater (Jewish) forces as opposed to being self-directedly antifascist; whereas “a jew will receive information” (74.628), and send “the goyim [...] to saleable slaughter” (74.510-511). This corresponds to what Postone notes as the exceptional way modern anti-Semitism attributes to Jews, as representatives of “abstraction” rather than “capitalism” or “communism” as such, a “systematic character” of impossibly coordinated nefarious political activity, illustrated “by a Nazi poster which depicts Germany—represented as a strong, honest worker—threatened in the West by a fat, plutocratic John Bull and in the East by a brutal, barbaric Bolshevik Commissar. Yet, these two hostile forces are mere puppets. Peering over the edge of the globe with the puppet strings firmly in his hands is the Jew” (106-107). Pound is at pains to emphasize that the black soldiers lack any such capacity for political systematicity, for self-directed, undeluded political action; the black soldiers are “Knecht gegen Knecht [slave fighting slave] / to the sound of bumm drum, to eat remnants / for a usurer’s holiday to change the / price of a currency” (76.330-333).

A primary function of this antinomical racial logic in the *Pisan Cantos*, then, is to deny the possibility of black political radicalism, that black proletarians might constitute a self-conscious class “for itself.” That the poem’s antinomical racial logic is so paralyzingly overdetermined and overdetermining should suggest how urgently the poem senses, and how strenuously the poem attempts to repress, the proximity and strength of an ideological counterposition, represented to Pound most significantly by what Jonathan Flatley has called, and what we have sketched above, the “Black Leninism” of Langston Hughes.² Indeed, Flatley’s essay, demonstrating Hughes’s communist approaches to the problematics of black political representation, serves in many ways as an excellent counterpoint to this essay, which can only conclude noting Pound’s fascist aporias in navigating similar problematics. Certainly, Hughes, as Roessel outlines, “came to have a symbolic significance for Pound in a way that Pound never did for Hughes” (238). Again, the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, conspicuously absent from Pound’s letters to Hughes and from the *Pisan Cantos* as a whole, is the unthinkable term for Pound here, constellating the undeniable imperialism of Italian fascism, the possibility of “Africa” not as a false representative of the ahistorical “concrete” but as a site of struggle in the political present, and also, as Robinson documents, the fact of black American workers engaging in precisely the kind of self-conscious, bottom-up political activism and antifascist struggle that is impossible for Pound’s antinomic racial imaginary (“Intersections of Capitalism” 103-106). Though Pound is at pains to exclude this antifascism from his representations of the soldiers and prisoners in the *Pisan Cantos*, a few unmistakable remarks to this effect do slip through, such as those of one guard passing Pound’s cage, who curses the American generals as part and parcel of a broader fascism: “all them g.d. m.f. [god-damn motherfucking] generals c.s. [cocksuckers] all of ‘em fascists” (74.400).

That Pound’s elegiac identification with Till is invested not only with the political awareness of American racial domination that Pound received largely from Hughes, but invested also with anxieties about Hughes’s “Black Leninist” approach to black political representation, is indicated in the seemingly random appearance of the phrase “tovarish blessed without aim,” in the line immediately preceding the climactic elegiac moment in which Pound describes how he “wept in the rainditch at

evening” following Till’s execution (74.185). “Tovarish [Russian, comrades] blessed without aim” recurs from the much earlier Canto XXVII, in which Pound characterizes the Russian Revolution as “folly,” arguing that the impulse of the revolutionary masses or “tovarish,” while evidently capable of enough political consciousness to unseat tyrants, certainly could “neither build nor reap” (27.102):

These are the labours of tovarisch,
That tovarisch wrecked the house of the tyrants,
And rose, and talked folly on folly,
And walked forth and lay in the earth
And the Xarites bent over tovarisch.
And that tovarisch cursed and blessed without aim (27.89-95)

The implication, which fits quite comfortably with Pound’s fascist version of Confucianism, is that only a society built on hierarchical domination can function effectively enough to act collectively toward desirable *teloi* or “aims,” to build or reap; Pound reduces the masses again to representatives of the “concrete,” the “simple,” incapable of “abstract” or systematic political agency, “cursed and blessed without aim” (27.95). Why exactly Pound needs to reemphasize this repudiation of communism in mourning Till is unclear. It is possible that Till himself expressed to Pound a politicized antifascist stance; it would not be unusual for Till, a Chicago worker, to have been exposed to the type of black proletarian antifascism that, as Robinson recounts it, swept the whole Black Belt, Chicago in particular, in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Robinson and Gilmore, “Intersections of Capitalism” 103-106); or perhaps other prisoners expressed such a sentiment. But of course this is speculation; what is interesting here is that Pound’s solidarity-in-suffering with Till here in this passage, situated as it is in an epiphanic setting of the transformative “glory of sunset” when “one day were clouds banked on Taishan,” identifies Pound himself with the “blessedness without aim” of the concrete “tovarish.” Fredric Jameson in *Fables of Aggression* observes how Wyndham Lewis’s similarly totalizing conspiratorial protofascist worldview—with the manipulating, diabolic intellectuals on one side and the foolish, manipulated mass of victims on the other—ultimately writes Lewis’s own subject position out of possibility; the protofascist bourgeois writer of the Lewis, Pound, or Eliot type, gradually comes to feel increasingly like a social monad with no politically representative, agentive class corresponding to it, particularly after the defeat of the fascist regimes characterized by mass mobilization (114-120). Hence the unreality and silence, the political illegibility of the ideogram, the oddly unrelating “as if”’s of the following passage:

the voiceless with bumm drum and banners,
and the ideogram of the guard roosts[. . .]
and a white ox on the road toward Pisa
as if facing the tower,
dark sheep in the drill field and on wet days were clouds
in the mountain as if under the guard roosts. (74.106-107, 122-125)

Whereas Hughes’s “Black Leninism” could discover in a positive solidarity a possibility for political

representation that mediated the lowest to the highest, binding the human project together, Pound's antinomical conspiracism, deprived of the supernatural, *telos*-bestowing heroic figure of Mussolini, ultimately produces a picture of the world populated only by illegible ideograms politically mute to each other. (Even if Pound never really let go of the anti-Semitic figure of all-powerful Jewish conspiracy—he would alternate between bleak shame and spasms of recalcitrance in the postwar years—already in the *Pisan Cantos* this conspiracism is beginning to operate with less political vigor and more as a vestigial impulse.) The strange “as if” that hangs between these silently monadical entities—voiceless soldiers, guard roosts, white ox, dark sheep, drill field—indicates not a possible picture or system of mediation or interrelation between them, but the impossibility of such relations.

Notes

1. As Barrett Watten pointed out to me in the process of writing this essay, the paired figures of the “Zeus ram” and the “ewe” can also be taken, on yet another symbolic level, to suggest a sexual relationship; one might speculate that here Pound is alluding to Till's sexual interest in a lover or perhaps even in the alleged victim. If this is the case, unfortunately, as far as I can tell, Pound does not furnish additional details that would confirm this reading or give a clearer picture of anything that can be positively said about any actual relationship of Till's. My position on what can positively be said about the Till case follows what I take to be Wideman's basic position, that while the trial of Till undoubtedly displayed alarming and thoroughly discrediting irregularities—and hence my reading agrees with Wideman's that one can confidently describe the trial as continuous with the judicial regime of the Jim Crow South—nevertheless no clear, positive picture of Till's relationship or nonrelationship to the alleged victims can be wrung from the hostile and extremely minimal historical archive. In any case, I think the possible allusion to a sexual interest of Till's has to be taken as additional to, not mutually exclusive with, the more basic reading, that Till really did see a nearby ewe and make the quoted comment—just as Pound himself admires the scene of “dark sheep” outside the DTC two pages earlier (74.124).
2. Pound's relationship to the idea and figure of Lenin more generally has been recently explored in Mark Steven's *Red Modernism*. Pound's engagement with Hughes's “Black Leninism” can be seen as both a complication of and complement to this account.

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