

Tracing Morocco: Postcolonialism and Spanish Civil War Literature

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Abstract: During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Spanish Republic’s refusal to relinquish its colonial control allowed General Franco to exploit Moroccan antipathy and poverty, convincing many Moroccans to join his forces. North American supporters of the Popular Front often depicted the connections between the civil war, European fascism, and American racism. But for some supporters—and particularly for the hundred or so African Americans who fought in Spain on the side of the Republic—the war’s stakes were further tied to colonial relationships between Europe, Africa, and the New World. This essay examines literary depictions of these complicated colonial entanglements in the works of Langston Hughes and John A. Williams, contextualizing their writing alongside fictional and biographical representations of Moroccan and African American participation. This essay argues that Williams’ and Hughes’ writings reveal the war’s colonial origins and postcolonial implications, insisting on the intersections of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality in the transnational fight against fascism. In so doing, these writings present the war as yet another global conflict in which members of the African diaspora often faced greater dangers than their comrades in arms.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War, postcolonialism, African diaspora, Langston Hughes, John A. Williams

“An oppressed colonial people of color being used by fascism to make a colony of Spain.”

Langston Hughes (“Negroes in Spain” 97)

I. Introduction: Spain, the United States, and the World

Upon arriving in Barcelona to volunteer with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, the eponymous protagonist of John A. Williams' novel *Captain Blackman* senses in the gaze of the Spaniards around him their acknowledgement of a sort of miracle. He imagines them gratefully wondering, "[f]rom what place had this huge black man, this moro, this negro, come to aid us?" (154). In this attempt to see himself through Barcelonan eyes, Captain Abraham Blackman adopts the slippery Spanish terminology around nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion. He identifies himself as both "negro"—Spanish for "black man" along with its American English signification—as well as "moro," the Spanish term, so often pejorative, referring to Muslim and Jewish Moroccans, North Africans, Arabs, and many other outsiders, usually non-European and especially of a darker complexion. In adopting such a loaded term, associated in the war's context with General Franco's Moroccan mercenaries, Captain Blackman highlights the difficult racial, religious, and colonial politics underpinning the Spanish conflict of 1936–1939. Williams' 1972 novel imagines an African American soldier who, wounded in Vietnam, hallucinates that he is a participant in each American war plus two more: the Spanish Civil War and a future anticolonial revolution. *Captain Blackman* constructs a history of American war-making that highlights black soldiers' consistently crucial roles. Williams' inclusion of the Spanish Civil War stresses the conflict's significance to American and global history. While the war has frequently been characterized as the first act of the Second World War, its inclusion in *Captain Blackman* also links the African Americans who volunteered in Spain to the war's myriad colonial subtexts.

Captain Blackman's retrospective view underscores questions of colonization, race, and identity common to Spanish Civil War writing by several earlier North American authors. Perhaps best known among these is Langston Hughes, whose journalism and poetry from Spain highlight the ironies of the participation of so-called "Moros" on the fascist side and of African Americans on the Loyalist side. For these authors, Spain's historical and ongoing racism and colonial subjugation both in the New World and in North Africa provided an uncomfortable

backdrop for otherwise triumphal narratives of international solidarity. This essay highlights how Hughes, Williams, and others portray the collision between North American antifascist activism in the Spanish Civil War and Spain's own history of colonial racism—the ways in which race and internationalism inescapably underpin any literary depiction of the war.

In order to do so, this essay first explains the longstanding colonial connections between the United States, Spain, and Morocco. This historical context provides the background to my readings first of texts by Hughes and other writers who directly participated in the Spanish Civil War and then of Williams' retrospective incorporation of the war into a history of African American soldiering. Read together, the depictions and erasures of African diasporic contact across political lines reveal the underlying contradictions and tenuous logics used to construct categories of racial, national, and religious difference—categories used as rallying cries on both sides of the battle line. Especially when placed alongside narratives by white and white ethnic writers, Williams' retrospection and Hughes' war poetry portray the war not only in political terms—as a struggle to end European fascism, establish a new kind of radical society, and maintain a nascent democracy—but also in historical ones, as a continuation of the global and historical struggles that gave rise to modernity itself: colonization and the slave trade.

II. Spain's National and International Wars

Despite its name, the Spanish Civil War was far from a localized national crisis. When Francisco Franco's coup led to the Spanish Civil War's outbreak in 1936, Spain's colonial holdings in Africa were all that remained of *el imperio en el que nunca se pone el sol*—the empire on which the sun never set. Spain's colonial history, particularly its then recent colonization efforts in North Africa, contributed to and confused the country's civil war, which occurred against the backdrop of a decade-long global economic crisis and the escalation of European fascism. At the same time, a series of workers' revolutions across the country challenged the newfound democracy's equilibrium. Despite widespread governmental pledges of non-intervention—Spain's government was supported

only by the Soviet Union and Mexico—thousands of volunteers from around the world traveled to Spain to support different leftist factions. While most American volunteers identified as communists and fought with the communist International Brigades, volunteers also joined other members of the Popular Front coalition, including the anarchist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labor) and the Trotskyist *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification).¹ The attempted collaboration between leftist factions in the Popular Front and individuals from around the world remains a historical touchstone of transnational solidarity and personal sacrifice in the name of antifascist political action, notwithstanding the sometimes fatal in-fighting and suppression amongst these Popular Front members, the war's disastrous conclusion in 1939 with General Franco's victory, and the subsequent eruption of World War II.

The transnational collaborations the Spanish Civil War occasioned were inextricably linked to Spain's colonial history. Ironically, many of the thousands of international volunteers came from Spain's former colonies, traveling from Mexico and Cuba to the former center of empire. The Mexican government accepted Spanish Republican refugees and exiles. Spain's own former colonial subjects were joined by members of other marginalized groups who identified with the antifascist cause and understood the stakes of the struggle. Many of the volunteers were Jewish and traveled to Spain from North America, Britain, Eastern Europe, and Mandatory Palestine, desperate to curtail the spread of fascism.² Some of the volunteers were women, eager to fight alongside men: they drove ambulances and participated in the war effort on both the battlefield and the homefront.³ Battalions were organized by language, so volunteers with a shared colonial history often fought side by side. For instance, despite their ostensibly national titles, the American Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion included soldiers of Canadian, American, Irish, and Cuban nationalities.⁴ Moreover, a small but significant segment of the American volunteers—approximately one hundred—were African Americans. Many African American volunteers in Spain had first tried to volunteer in Ethiopia after fascist Italy's 1935 invasion, but Emperor Haile Selassie rejected

international support in an attempt to keep the conflict localized. These volunteers in Spain were among the first American citizens to fight in desegregated battalions and included Oliver Law, the first African American commander of an integrated military force. Together, these participants' diverse motivations show the connections between global struggles, and the writers who depicted the war reflect these diverse motivations and perspectives. African American literature about the Civil War links Spain's colonial history and current civil war to Ethiopia's 1935 resistance against Mussolini's invasion and, in the US, to Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynch law.⁵

Many volunteers readily perceived the network of oppression in Spain, Ethiopia, and the US. However, Spain's southern neighbor, Morocco, also became a fraught location within this network, reflecting its confusingly overlapping history of colonization by a succession of European powers. For all the International Brigades supporters' triumphal rhetoric of transnational collaboration, international alliances were not exclusive to the Republican side. Franco enlisted African colonial subjects as soldiers and relied on the support of fascist Italy, Portugal, and Nazi Germany. The Spanish Republic's refusal to decolonize sustained the oppressive conditions that allowed Franco to galvanize Moroccan support.⁶

The roots of Spanish control of Morocco—and Spain's imperial history in the New World—far predated Franco's 1936 coup. The Spanish-American War of 1898—frequently referred to in Spain as “the Great Disaster”—destroyed monarchist Spain's empire. The country began the twentieth century with bloody independence struggles in Cuba and the Philippines. These losses of land and power precipitated Spain's desire to colonize elsewhere. Supported by the work of *africanistas*, military personnel who led Spain's colonial enterprise, and the race scientists who provided ideological support for their efforts, Spain looked to Morocco. The Rif Wars of 1909–1910 and 1920–1926 eventually led to Spain's expansion in North Africa, with Franco as a key leader in these brutal wars.

In 1931, Spain abandoned monarchy for democracy. The democratically elected Republican-Socialist government of the Second Spanish Republic decreased the political power of the nobility and clergy as well

as the size of the military. The government introduced new rights for its citizens, including education and enfranchisement. Despite the many progressive, democratizing reforms, the government refused to address its colonial presence in Africa, overlooking repeated attempts on the part of Moroccan leaders to negotiate independence, a warning of future turmoil to come. The Spanish Republican government reasoned that maintaining its African colonies would appease Britain and France by not stirring up anticolonial sentiments in Spanish Morocco that could spread to British and French colonies across the African continent.

Meanwhile, exiled in the Canary Islands, Franco harnessed Moroccan poverty and antipathy toward Spain to support his fascist cause—a cause that already relied on what historian Paul Preston calls “a transference of racial prejudice” (21), in which the Spanish Left was characterized as “an inferior race, horrible examples of racial degeneration[,] . . . sub-human and abnormal” (22). Despite Franco’s instrumental role in Morocco’s colonization by Spain in the first place, propaganda inspired support primarily from Arab and Berber Muslims by representing his current insurgency as a “reconquest” of Spain. For some, this must have offered a powerful narrative: a long-exiled Muslim population rescues Spain from so-called “Orientals,” “Reds,” “Jews,” and “heathens.”⁷ Of course, such representations also relied upon a strategic blindness to Spain’s own Jewish roots, to say nothing of Franco’s leading role in subjugating the same people he now needed to support his coup. Franco promised independence in exchange for Moroccan mercenary support for his assault. And many (but by no means all) Moroccans were prepared to fight in what was called “the Army of Africa” alongside the Fascists in the hopes of decolonization or simply from financial desperation. With arms, planes, and troops supplied by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy and Portugal, Franco relied heavily on Moroccan soldiers as shock troops on the ground.⁸

The Republic fell in 1939, after it ordered the withdrawal of international troops in the hopes of embarrassing Franco into a similar de-escalation. The maneuver failed: Franco captured Madrid and declared himself *Caudillo*. Thousands of international volunteers were sent to displaced person camps in France; some were allowed to return to their

home countries, but others found themselves once again stateless as war spread across Europe. Despite the multinational force that enabled the fascist victory, the so-called Nationalists downplayed the importance of German, Italian, Portuguese, and Moroccan participation to the coup, wanting to maintain the image of a local, civil war. Franco did not fulfil his promise to grant Morocco its independence until 1956. Even today, the Spanish government maintains administrative control over Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands.

The dictator's debt to Moroccan troops—and before his coup, his military success in colonizing Morocco—translated into a psychological, even mythological narrative of Spain's origins and future. Franco commented to the journalist Manuel Aznar in 1938, "My years in Africa live with me with indescribable force. There was born the possibility of rescuing a great Spain. There was found the idea which today redeems us. Without Africa, I can scarcely explain myself to myself, nor can I explain myself properly to my comrades in arms" (qtd. in Rein 197).

Franco's own narrative of his and Spain's redemption through Africa relies on a long history of racism and colonization: the Spanish "us" rescued by and remade "great" through Africa remains distinct from an African "them." Racial difference is again mobilized to spur reflection about white nationalist alienation in the context of waning colonial power. Franco's confession suggests the interrelations of personal and national identity defined against a black Other; he is incomprehensible to himself and to his "comrades in arms" without reference to Africa. The continent of Africa becomes a place of spiritual renewal that inspires the future dictator to liberate Spain from a godless, cosmopolitan modernity.

III. Writing Race and Spain

Franco's reliance on Moroccan troops and his mythologizing of Spain's debt to Morocco is one way in which race explicitly, inextricably became a battleground in the Spanish Civil War. Leftist writers' invocations of race and nationality were another. As Michael Ugarte notes, "the presence of the black other on both sides of the conflict made for inconsistency on both sides of the ideological divide" (109). International

volunteers' responses to the Moroccan soldiers among Franco's ranks alternated between racism and colonial sympathy.⁹ Much journalism and reportage was sympathetic. Journalistic coverage of Franco's mistreatment of Moroccan soldiers appeared in the North American leftist and black press, in articles by black and white authors including Hughes, Nancy Cunard, Joseph North, Richard Wright, and Thyra Edwards.¹⁰ Other midcentury texts by black authors argue for Morocco as the root of all that is culturally productive about Spain: travelogues like the Jamaican-American author Claude McKay's *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and the African American author Wright's *Pagan Spain* (1957) avoid explicit references to the war or the countries' ongoing colonial connection, but their positioning of Morocco as the root of Spanish—even European—culture suggests not only sympathy for Moroccan citizens but immense respect for the country.¹¹

Even if—despite these first-hand reports of Morocco's influence on Spain and of the presence of Moroccans in Spain—some North American volunteers and writers remained oblivious to Spain's deep entanglement with North Africa, few could have remained unaware of the role of the “Moro” or “Moor” in the Spanish cultural imaginary. Notwithstanding the broad historical application of these terms, the most common image of the enemy among International Brigades volunteers was a dark-skinned Moroccan Muslim. This representation was promulgated in part by Spanish Republican propaganda, where stereotypical representations of Africans harnessed deeply embedded, internationally recognizable tropes of racism to villainize these soldiers and collapse regional and racial distinctions into a general idea of a black-skinned fascist.¹²

Yet the Spanish and international Left took great pride in its progressive attitudes toward transnational harmony and racial integration. These attitudes dominate much of the literature by white and white ethnic North American writers, too, in which characters often comment on racial equality amongst the International Brigades. At the same time, such texts often depict the colonial soldiers as updated versions of the archetypal “villains in Spanish fairy stories” that Hugh Thomas ascribes to the role of the “Moors” in the Spanish imaginary (360). This is not

to say that writers and volunteers were unaware of Spain's continued colonial domination in Morocco or were uncritical of antifascist propaganda—however, even as left-leaning writers explicitly engage race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality, some of their more well-known depictions of Moroccans are minimal and negative.

Despite the often marginal role Morocco and Moroccans play in these texts, the relationship between Spain and its North African colony remains relevant to studying Spanish Civil War literature precisely because of how Moroccan characters so often represent the faceless mob that terrorizes international and Spanish characters. Moroccan characters might be vague and illusory placeholders, scapegoats, terrifying warriors, and occasionally objects of pity. Moroccans are “the terrible Moors” (Sinclair 76) who “tortured their prisoners with the most hideous cruelty” (80) and committed “wholesale slaughter of workers, peasants, intellectuals, Protestants” (80). As Upton Sinclair represents them, they “were all Mohammedans, and from the front end of the rifle they were the same; terrible fighters, whose joy in life was to kill Spaniards, and die for the glory of Allah, and go to a heaven full of houris” (84). “If they send Moors to hunt us out,” writes Ernest Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, “they will find us” (15). In “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain,” Josephine Herbst writes that “[y]ou always kept a bullet for yourself if it was the Moors. That was better than to let them get you and cut you up alive” (145). Even Hugh Garner’s more sympathetic portrayal of a Moroccan soldier was removed from later editions of his collection of Spanish Civil War short stories. Garner was a former International Brigades volunteer whose long career as a writer of fiction and autobiography runs the gamut from staunchly antiracist to harshly discriminatory. The original conclusion to his 1938 short story “The Stretcher Bearers” describes a group of Spanish Republican soldiers who torture and then kill a Moroccan prisoner of war: “A small group of Spaniards were taunting a wounded Moor, whom they were slinging across the back of a mule. They were shouting, ‘Moro! Moro!’ and the Moor was crying, wiping the tears on his sleeve from beneath a dirty bandage around his head” (*Best Stories* 272 n. 167.3). However, any mention of the Moroccan POW or the narrator’s sympathy was excised from the

short story upon its reprinting in 1963 (without any other substantive changes), and the story has not been reprinted in full since.¹³

These representations of Moroccans and “Moors” also contrast with the sympathetic portrayals of both African American soldiers and Spanish people—two groups who were also Other to the white North American volunteers and writers. In their flat depictions of Moroccan soldiers, many Euro-American writers also obscure the motivations and experiences of black participants on both sides and the greater promises that a Republican Spain—or a fascist one—represented for oppressed minorities in their own home countries. For instance, though it ostensibly celebrates interracial solidarity, former volunteer Ted Allan’s novel *This Time a Better Earth* (1939) explicitly distances the lone African American character from any diasporic history or affiliations that extend beyond his nationality. The character—named Doug, and possibly based on real-life volunteer Doug Roach—distinguishes himself from the African soldiers on the fascist side, explaining, “I am not a Moor. I am an American negro and I am an anti-fascist. And we don’t spout the theories of white and black fighting side by side, we live them” (Allan 29). The novel quickly dispenses with references to the Fascists’ engagement with Morocco in favor of elucidating the American context of antiracist struggles. The character is then “symbolically blinded” in battle, suggesting, according to Caren Irr, the colorblindness of the international volunteers (160). The stark distinction that texts like Allan’s draw between African Americans and Moroccans, or “Moors,” also flattens racial, ethnic, religious, and class differences within Morocco and Spain. If becoming a North American subject requires leaving one’s race behind—and becoming ostensibly blind to other volunteers’ racial identities too—it does not necessitate a similar colorblindness toward those who oppose the Popular Front. Furthermore, such simplistic understandings of race and universal whiteness (composed, in the case of Allan, by a Canadian Jewish author passing as a gentile and writing, in part, to leverage Jewish immigrants into mainstream whiteness) pits national affiliation against race, religion, and ethnicity, suggesting the complex calculus of African American soldiers’ relationship to Spanish colonization and leftist activism.

IV. Hughes Writing Morocco

Hughes explicitly worked to understand and communicate the nuances of black participation in the Spanish Civil War through his journalism, poetry, and memoir. Hughes went to Spain to cover the Civil War for the black press, with reports for the Baltimore *Afro-American* designed to inspire American support. In depicting Spain, Hughes wrote extensively about the “Moors” and other people of African descent he encountered there and about how race and colonialism complicated the Spanish Civil War. Hughes’ political leanings at the time were, according to Anthony Dawahare, “left of the CP on issues of race and nationality” in that he rejected the nationalism of the Communist Party’s Black Nation Thesis (which posited giving African American southerners self-determination) in favor of a more international perspective—one he saw in the Spanish cause (95).

For Hughes, the antifascist movement in Spain simultaneously enacted antiracist activism; conversely, he saw racism as an inextricable component of fascism. His texts remain a rare and important consideration of the connections between African American volunteers and Moroccan soldiers. In looking to Hughes’ writing, many critics have usefully contextualized his Spanish Civil War poetry in relation to his Spanish Civil War journalism (Thurston, Girón Echevarría), his contact with and writing about the Hispanic world (Enjuto Rangel, May, Mullen, Scaramella, Soto), his poetic intersections with Federico García Lorca (Edwards, Soto), his anti-imperialist internationalism (Dawahare), his and other African American authors’ writing about Spain (Kennedy, Nelson, Wald), and his writing about leftist causes more broadly (Maxwell, Shulman, Smethurst). Together, these critical examinations provide vital insights into Hughes’ ongoing engagement with global issues of race, class, nationality, and politics. I argue that examining Hughes’ writings about Morocco and Spain in the context of other North American literary depictions and erasures of Morocco reveals the postcolonial implications of Spain’s civil war—not only in terms of Hughes’ position as a far-left, anticolonial black American writer but also with respect to other North American leftists’ attempts to reckon with the intersec-

tions of colonialism, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality in the transnational fight against fascism.

Hughes' 1937 poem "Letter from Spain" (often titled "Dear Brother at Home") encapsulates these fraught intersections and underscores his journalistic purpose. The poem is addressed to a "Brother at home" in Alabama, and recounts the speaker's experience capturing and conversing with a wounded Moroccan POW. The speaker's optimism about an African anticolonial solidarity is tempered by the POW's death at the poem's conclusion. Hughes composed the poem while visiting the volunteers in Spain and meeting wounded Moroccan POWs; he explains that he wrote the poem to articulate "the irony of the colonial Moors" and to "try to express the feelings of some of the Negro fighting men" (*I Wonder* 353). This irony is writ large across Hughes' writing, which foregrounds interactions between members of the African diaspora. As he states, his obligation in reporting from Spain was

[t]o write for the colored press. I knew that Spain once belonged to the Moors, a colored people ranging from light dark to dark white. Now the Moors have come again to Spain with the fascist armies as cannon fodder for Franco. But, on the loyalist side there are many colored people of various nationalities in the International Brigades. I want to write about both Moors and colored people. ("Hughes Finds Moors" 106)

Likewise, in this 1937 article, Hughes describes the diverse communities of people of color on both sides of the conflict and further explains the importance of focusing on this diversity:

What I sought to find out in Spain was what effect, if any, this bringing of dark troops to Europe had had on the Spanish people in regard to their racial feelings. Had prejudice and hatred been created in a land that did not know it before? What had been the treatment of Moorish prisoners by the loyalists? Are they segregated and ill-treated? Are there any Moors on the government side? (109)

Hughes' attempts to answer these questions form the basis for much of his journalism, as well as his poetry and the memoir *I Wonder as I*

Wander (drawn, in part, from this journalism).¹⁴ He emphatically represents Republican Spain as devoid of racism, explaining in his memoir, “I could not find that the enemy’s use of these colored troops had brought about any increased feeling of color consciousness on the part of the people of Spain. I was well received everywhere I went, and the Negroes in the International Brigades reported a similar reception” (*I Wonder* 351). This statement seems to be a response to his earlier questions, if perhaps an incomplete one.¹⁵ Hughes attributes this acceptance to Spain’s longstanding Muslim citizenry and cultural influence as well as postcolonial migration: “Distinct traces of Moorish blood from the days of the Mohammedan conquest remain in the Iberian Peninsula. . . . There were, too, quite a number of colored Portuguese living in Spain. And in both Valencia and Madrid I saw pure-blooded Negroes from the colonies in Africa, as well as many Cubans who had migrated to Spain” (351). Even in its blanket characterization of Spanish racial acceptance, Hughes’ memoir points to a nuanced, transnational understanding of race and nationality.

I contend that Hughes’ writing on Moroccan participation, specifically when read alongside other North American writers’ depictions, highlights the increased personal dangers and global political stakes that the war held for black participants. In looking to Morocco and “the deluded and driven Moors of North Africa” (“Negroes in Spain” 97), Hughes exposes the complexities of what seemed for many to be a clear-cut conflict over fascism. Hughes’ representations of Moroccans (and, as Michael Thurston argues, their implied link to the earlier conflict in Ethiopia) call attention to local Spanish and Moroccan as well as transnational and anticolonial contexts across Africa.¹⁶ These poetic and journalistic depictions of blackness and colonial subordination in Spanish and Moroccan contexts constitute a recursive, multifaceted view of Spain’s relationship to the African diaspora.

Placing Hughes’ portrayals of Moroccan participation in conversation with other writers’ representations of Morocco highlights the colonial situation: specifically, reading Hughes’ poem “Letter from Spain” in this broader context suggests that it is, in fact, a poetic recounting of potentially real events. Arnold Rampersad dismisses the text as “a maudlin

dialect poem” (351), but there is subtlety and nuance in the work, not to mention an unsettling commentary on current and future conditions for people of color in Spain. The poem’s speaker is the same “Johnny” of “Dear Folks at Home” (called “Postcard from Spain” in the 1995 *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*) and “Love Letter from Spain” (not included in the collection), as well as countless war and protest anthems. “Letter from Spain” recalls Hughes’ article “Negroes in Spain,” in which he describes a visit to a hospital where he spoke with Moroccan soldiers and—as in the poem—repeatedly notes their shared skin color and distinct languages. Yet, in the monolingual poem, Johnny’s question to the prisoner, “Boy, what you been doin’ here / Fightin’ against the free?” (201), and his attempt at friendship, “Listen, Moorish prisoner, hell! / Here, shake hands with me!” (202), remain in English, untranslated for the reader. But, in the context of the poem, an unnamed interlocutor relays the Moroccan soldier’s response to both the speaker and the reader. In the translated account of the prisoner:

They nabbed him in his land

And made him join the fascist army
And come across to Spain.
And he said he had a feelin’
He’d never get back home again.

He said he had a feelin’
This whole thing wasn’t right.
He said he didn’t know
The folks he had to fight. (201)

Repeating the line “he said he had a feelin’” underscores the prisoner’s humanity, giving him intuition and history. The dying soldier’s admission that “[t]his whole thing wasn’t right” also suggests his uneasiness and perhaps regret over fighting with Franco’s forces. His experience in Spain disconnects him from his family and home in Morocco, revoking the possibility of an easy return. His feeling that “[h]e’d never get back home again” signals both the prisoner’s impending death and the dis-

ruption of his sense of “home” as an undisputed place of seamless identity. The speaker shares this sense of distance from a homeland, realizing how much he has in common with the Moroccan soldier, as subjugated individuals fighting a war not their own—although they are doing so for very different reasons. As Cecilia Enjuto Rangel suggests, “[t]he difference between the African American soldier and the Moroccan mercenary is one of ideological conviction” (167): while the Moroccan was forced to fight on the front lines, Johnny chose his participation in the Spanish cause, volunteering to fight because he understands his participation as linked to his own experiences in the US. Hughes’ speaker bears witness to the demise of a foe with whom he shares a diasporic kinship. As such, the poem problematizes easy wartime narratives of a uniformly evil, dehumanized enemy.

Of the individuals depicted in Hughes’ Spanish Civil War poems, the Moroccan soldier stands apart. Not only is the nameless POW more extensively characterized but he is also unique within these poems as the only individuated representative of Franco’s forces. Hughes’ other references to Franco’s soldiers tend to be implicit, as the unnamed agents of bombings and violence to which the poems respond. Hughes’ poetry asks that we not see the conflict as a simple binary relationship between the Loyalists and the Fascists. Moreover, by downplaying the presence of Franco’s forces in Spain, Hughes foregrounds the fraught relationship between the Fascists and their colonized soldiers and between those soldiers and other people of African descent.

The prisoner’s claims—that he had no choice but to fight with Franco, that he understands that the war is unjust—corroborate the International Brigades’ discourse that Moroccan soldiers would abandon the Army of Africa if given the chance. The poem’s speaker, Johnny, listens to a translator explain this extensive justification for the soldier’s participation in Franco’s army, yet that same understanding is unavailable in the reverse: the nameless soldier cannot understand Johnny or express sympathy for his position. Their interaction inspires Johnny to envision Africa’s “foundations shakin” (Hughes, “Letter from Spain” 201) and to predict that a Republican Spain may free the colonies, leading to the end of England and Europe’s colonial holdings in Africa. The

speaker acknowledges the continent's foundational role in European modernity and suggests that the foundations of both African and European civilization are shifting. As Brent Hayes Edwards suggests, the speaker "reads the Moor's confusion and homesickness to be auspicious, the burgeoning of an anti-colonial consciousness" ("Langston Hughes" 694). Additionally, by casting the prisoner's participation in the war as the result of a kidnapping ("nabbed . . . in his land"), Hughes aligns Moroccan enlistment in Franco's army with the transatlantic slave trade. In its original publication in the American *Volunteer for Liberty* and its gesture toward English and Italian colonization, the poem indicts the US and Europe's continuing dependence on African colonialism, the labor of black workers, and the lives of black soldiers as sources of both political and economic capital.¹⁷

Johnny suggests that a shared African heritage might eventually transcend Spain's civil war, as his repeated observation of the two men's common skin color—noting that the POW is "as dark as [him]" (Hughes, "Letter from Spain" 201, 202)—motivates him to offer the prisoner a handshake. Johnny's optimistic attempts to envision Morocco's future, informed by his own experiences in the International Brigades, imagine a spreading egalitarian community. Hughes' speaker articulates a developing sense of diasporic kinship by insisting on the inherent connections between Africans and people of African descent. Yet this growing understanding is undercut by the prisoner's loss of understanding and of life. Their conversation is rendered only into English as they communicate via a translator.¹⁸ While Johnny "looked across to Africa / And seed foundations shakin'" (201), enthusing over this inspiring vision, the prisoner's health worsens until eventually he can understand neither the speaker's words nor his gesture of solidarity.

Johnny's optimism for the future of Spain and Africa suggests something of Hughes' "irony of the colonial Moors"—and of the African American volunteers. It may be that Johnny, too, "[doesn't] know / The folks he had to fight" (201)—the subjugated Moroccans who lack the same choice he had when he decided to enlist. Furthermore, despite Johnny's justifiable pride in his work with the International Brigades, Hughes also reminds us of the individual costs of war in the form of

the POW's double kidnapping: it is Johnny, after all, who captured this wounded soldier, after the soldier was first "nabbed . . . in his [own] land." The letter's first line, "We captured a wounded Moor today" unequivocally interpolates the speaker into the soldier's capture and yet sidesteps responsibility for the man's wounds. Put another way, while Johnny acknowledges having taken part in imprisoning a Moroccan soldier, he does not implicate himself in the soldier's fatal injury. Johnny's support for the Spanish Republic does not diminish, but the poem underscores the uneven human costs of the war the Republic must fight.

Johnny's letter describes a failure to forge solidarity, an anecdotal retelling of his personal confrontation with fascism and racism. In personalizing such a confrontation, Johnny's physical resemblance to the Moroccan soldier ignites his desire for solidarity. But their shared phenotype—their similarity in skin tone—may also heighten the risk that Johnny could be misidentified as a Moroccan soldier. Read alongside other writers' fictional and non-fictional representations of Moroccan participation, the incident depicted in "Letter from Spain" echoes certain anecdotes of Moroccan POWs mistreated and African American volunteers misidentified. The initial published version of Garner's short story, "The Stretcher Bearers," that I reference above concludes with the abuse and murder of a wounded Moroccan soldier by Spanish Republican soldiers. The story was written in 1938, a year after Hughes' poem, published in full in 1952, and subsequently republished with the incident excised. This incident is at odds with the dominant journalistic representation of Spanish and international attitudes toward "Franco's Moors." For instance, Wright's article for the *Daily Worker*, "American Negroes in Key Posts of Spain's Loyalist Forces," includes an extended interview with Louise Thompson, the African American secretary of the English Division of the International Workers Order, about her visit to Spain. Thompson states that the Spanish people understand how the Fascists have "misled" the Moroccan, German, and Italian soldiers fighting for them: "So high has become the political consciousness of the civil population that when Italian, German, or Moorish prisoners are brought into towns they are greeted by, 'Long Live the Italian Peoples!' or 'Long Live the German Peoples!' or 'Long Live the Moorish

Peoples!” (121).¹⁹ In contrast to Thompson’s glowing report of Spanish and Republican tolerance, Garner, whose story also seems to have been based on first-hand experience, remembers the treatment of Moroccan soldiers differently. In his 1973 memoir, *One Damn Thing after Another*, he recalls watching “[s]ome of the rear-echelon Loyalist Spaniards . . . taunting the wounded enemy prisoner, shouting ‘Moro! Moro!’ and denouncing him for fighting for the Fascists as if he’d had any choice. . . . I heard the single revolver shot as they killed him. . . . [T]he captured Moor . . . had made me suddenly sick for all mankind” (50). Both Thompson’s and Garner’s accounts may be true. What I seek to highlight by bringing them together with Hughes’ poem are the stakes of Hughes’ speaker’s interaction with the prisoner. Hughes’ speaker, Johnny, and his interpreter spend long minutes trying to converse with the wounded Moroccan—a display of sympathy not unlike Thompson’s account. Yet in Garner’s depictions, a parallel group of soldiers instead torture and murder the prisoner.

Other fictional incidents also have real-world parallels and dangerous intimations: Allan’s novel *This Time a Better Earth*, discussed above, describes an African American soldier who must explain that he is American but not African. Despite Allan’s casual dismissal of bigotry among volunteers and soldiers, similar yet far more worrisome anecdotes appear repeatedly in first-hand accounts from African American volunteers. In the *Afro-American*, Hughes himself recounts how Walter Cobb was mistaken for a Moroccan soldier by Spanish Republicans while driving a captured Fascist truck. Luckily, Cobb’s language skills allowed him to identify himself. Hughes includes not only Cobb’s first-hand account of the incident but also Cobb’s observation that people of color “attrac[t] no attention” in Spain’s urban areas and only “friendly” curiosity in more rural areas (“Walter Cobb” 140).²⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley also cites Eluard Luchell McDaniel’s experience of being shot at by fellow soldiers who mistook him for a “Moor” (32). Both Cobb and McDaniel’s experiences suggest the very real dangers of volunteering while black. Both men lived to tell their stories, thanks, it seems, to their ability to explain themselves in several languages. Hughes’ speaker and his Moroccan interlocutor are able to verbally communicate only

with the help of a translator, up to the point when the injured soldier becomes mute. In all these cases, the Republic's supporters were predisposed to perceive a person of color as a Moroccan soldier rather than an African American volunteer, unless he could prove or explain otherwise. Read within this broader context, Hughes' Moroccan soldier's situation suggests that anyone who had been wounded, if he were "as dark as [Johnny]," could find himself misidentified. Johnny isn't immune to this risky assumption either: had he encountered the "wounded Moor" a few minutes later, he might have been forced to wonder, forever, whether the POW was literally a "[b]rother [from] home."

V. Conclusion: Spain's Postcolonial War in Williams' Fiction

Hughes' writings about Spain celebrate the racial integration of the battalions and commemorate the postcolonial potential that Spain—and Morocco—ultimately lost when Franco won. Together with other writers' portrayals of Moroccan soldiers, "Letter from Spain" reveals the complex affiliations and filiations that ran across both sides of the conflict. Comparing African American experiences to fascist imperialism in Africa and across Europe was, for some, a way to frame Spain's war within a mid-century chronicle of transnational violence, oppression, and colonization.

I return to the novel with which I began this essay to suggest the continued relevance of this transnational framing. Writing decades after the Spanish Civil War's tragic conclusion, Williams further transforms the conflict's disappointments into incitement for a future anticolonial revolution. Williams' politics evolved from what Matthew Calihman characterizes as a "half-hearted" (147) early involvement in radical politics to, in *Captain Blackman*, a nostalgia for the Popular Front's vision of cultural pluralism that inspired his transnational expansion of black nationalism.²¹ In *Captain Blackman*, Abraham Blackman is politicized, at least in part, by the failures of the Spanish Civil War: his depleted faith in the Spanish cause leads to a growing sense of global black consciousness. Not only does Blackman see himself as a "moro," but the novel's narrator refers to the African American soldiers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as the "Moorish Phalanx": "a small black blot among

all the International Brigades gathered on the Ebro" (167). And, significantly, this same terminology is applied to black soldiers on the opposing side, as the "Moorish Phalanx" encounters "numerous Moors on the Rebel side" (167). Captain Blackman's proximity to Moroccan soldiers allows him to see himself in them—just as Hughes' poetic speaker sees himself in the dying Moroccan POW ("Workers, see yourselves as Spain!" Hughes implores in "Song of Spain" [195]). Through this shared descriptor—"Moor"—Blackman takes on the racial and religious ambiguities that float around a term that variously includes Jews, Muslims, and Moroccans of all races. His first name, Abraham, further links him not only to the American Abraham Lincoln Brigade (and its presidential namesake) but also to the patriarch of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

But Blackman's ironic double-adoption of the title "Moor" reflects a growing cynicism toward transnationalism that increases as the casualties mount: with the death of (real life) Lincoln commander Oliver Law, Blackman reflects, "it was going to be black man grieving for black man, Southerner for Southerner, Jew for Jew, Hispanic for Hispanic" (163). I see this grieving—characterized by sometimes overlapping categories of region, race, ethnicity, and religion—as parallel to the distinct personal bond that Hughes' speaker articulates in "Letter from Spain" toward the wounded Moroccan POW. Calihman argues compellingly for this moment in Williams' text as a harbinger of the nationalist, "narrow racial politics" that result after Blackman mourns the failures of the Popular Front's coalition (157). Further, Williams highlights what so many other works of Spanish Civil War fiction do not: that on both sides of the conflict, members of the African diaspora would mourn for each other while Spaniards and former Spanish colonials might mutually mourn one another as well. Yet this mourning does not extend beyond these groups. African Americans might grieve Moroccan deaths, but why shouldn't all volunteers grieve this loss of life? Williams gestures to a post-Popular Front transnationalism while suggesting that it is in death and violence that ethnic, racial, religious, and national boundaries are strengthened, even rebuilt.

Williams' postwar, anticolonial reflections demonstrate how historical comparisons can both clarify and confuse activism. Leftist North

American literature about the Spanish Civil War justifiably reveres the international community that cohered in support of the Spanish revolution and the Republic. However, this reverence does not always acknowledge the Spanish Republic's lingering imperialism. Like the interwar black internationalism of Paris—a location that seemed relatively free of racism, if one were willing to overlook France's violent colonial control in Africa—Republican Spain was publicly represented as a model of progressive social organization. Parisian internationalism remained, in Edwards' words, "characterized by unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations" (*Practice* 5). Nearly a decade later, in Madrid and Barcelona, Addis Ababa, Rabat and Tétouan, these colonial implications were still often occluded by a strategic antifascist message.

Spain seems to have been a crucible for international leftist attitudes toward difference. In representing the war's transnationalism, foreign writers frequently use the conflict as a proxy by playing out debates over immigration and desegregation at a geographic remove. I do not mean to imply that literature about the Spanish Civil War is not about the Spanish Civil War. Rather, I contend that the writers who represent the war bring their own local concerns to it too, with a cosmopolitan concern for the parallels and distinctions between individual experiences of oppression. While I focus here on literary representations of Moroccans and "Moors" in the Spanish Civil War, these representations are frequently linked to portrayals of minority, even tokenized, characters—African American and Jewish characters among them, in writing by Garner, Allan, Muriel Rukeyser, and others. Such literary connections between marginalized characters are not uncommon for literature of this era, as white ethnic characters and individuals gradually attained North American white privilege. However, the relationship between different diasporic communities in Spanish Civil War literature suggests a continuing ambivalence over both given and chosen categories of difference and identity. Hughes, Allan, and others describe Republican Spain's racial and religious tolerance. And yet, as Williams' subsequent novel reminds us, race and religion were integral to the conditions that brought so many diasporic Jewish and Muslim soldiers to Spain to fight

on opposing sides in a Catholic, colonial war—a war about land, class and race, democracy, communism and fascism, and modernity and tradition. These individuals' hopes of gaining national acceptance and independence played out in a country with a long history of religious discrimination—an originary location of displacement.

Recent years have seen much debate over what, exactly, the war was about. For international volunteers supporting the Popular Front, certainly, their commitment was most frequently made in the name of antifascism and social revolution; they also wanted to stave off another world war. For many volunteers, fighting in Spain also provided a way out of difficult situations: out of Jim Crow segregation, prejudice, and racial violence; out of the Canadian government's work camps where single, unemployed men labored for pennies a day; out of an unwelcoming, xenophobic New World for recent immigrants to North America who had come fleeing discrimination and violence in Europe; and out of sexist, repressive environments for the women who worked as nurses, drove ambulances, ran orphanages, and reported from the war's front lines. These individual motivations for enlisting may not tell us much about what the powers at war were fighting over, but they do suggest the war's significance to its foreign participants.

And yet it is also impossible for us to reconstruct what C. L. R. James termed "the fever and the fret" of this moment (xi). Morocco's struggle for independence was perhaps far from the central issue of the Spanish Civil War for most of those involved in the conflict, and yet the Moroccan question—the colonial question—echoes in so much North American writing about the war. For American and Canadian authors, Spanish egalitarianism could not be represented without reference to North American racism. Yet this familiarity with North American racism would likely have made the overt racism of much anti-Franco visual propaganda clear, even if these authors only rarely wrote about it. There is also the possibility that writers misread or overlooked unfamiliar forms of discrimination: how many authors were fluent enough in Spain's languages to understand the nuances of discriminatory vernacular?²² Looking to representations of "Moors" by Hughes and his contemporaries highlights how the Spanish conflict provided writers with

a new lens on North American intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. As the texts I have discussed also suggest, even as African Americans were celebrated amongst the volunteers as brothers in arms, the same solidarity was unevenly available to people of color on the opposing side. Individuals who understood that Spain's war was civil in name only could not always extend this perspicacity to understand what drew Moroccan soldiers to its battlefields.

What Hughes termed the "irony of the colonial Moors" was, in some ways, the ultimate irony of the African American soldiers, too: sometimes misperceived as the fascist enemy and destined to serve—as the Moroccan soldiers had in Spain—in the most dangerous positions on the front lines of World War II, the Korean conflict, and the Vietnam War. Williams' *Captain Blackman* depicts not only the large-scale atrocities of World War II and the Vietnam War but also the racism and anti-Semitism directed at African American and Jewish American soldiers within their own battalions as they fought for the US. Even as Hughes and others publicly represented Spain as both an embattled site of resistance and an egalitarian haven, issues of racial and religious discrimination endured in Spain, Eastern Europe, and North America. In Hughes' and Williams' vital representations, the Spanish Civil War becomes a crucial juncture in African American history: a war against fascism and an encounter with a postcolonial site of personal and political affiliation.

Acknowledgements

For their feedback on earlier versions of this article, I am deeply grateful to Meriem Pagès, Michael J. New, and my colleagues in Keene State's Humanities Faculty Research Group.

Notes

1 For more on American participation in various factions, see Hochschild xix.

2 See Penslar 200–07.

3 Actual numbers of female volunteers are difficult to come by. Fyrth conservatively estimates that at least 170 female medical workers from English-speaking countries volunteered, but this number does not include other nationals or "journalists, observers and delegates" (29 n. 1).

- 4 Some histories of the Spanish Civil War suggest that only Americans served in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but it was not nearly so homogeneous. Thomas notes that “Irishmen were tactfully divided between the Abraham Lincoln and the British Battalions” (574), while even after the creation of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion to commemorate the many Canadians who were then serving in the American Battalion, “less than a third of the [Canadian] Battalion were Canadians, the remainder being American” (701 n. 4). Furthermore, many of the one thousand Cuban volunteers who fought in Spain were living in exile in the US when the war broke out and served in the Lincoln Brigade too (Fernández and Faber).
- 5 Such triangulation is reflected in literary works such as Kea’s memoir “A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain” and Hunter’s short story “700 Calendar Days.” Naison points out that Popular Front politics in Harlem extended beyond the Spain-Ethiopia intersection to align “the cause of Ethiopia with that of China and Loyalist Spain . . . [and] the persecution of Jews in Germany with that of blacks in the United States” (194). See also Dolinar’s discussion of Hughes’ writing as a prescient articulation of the World War II Double V campaign, which encouraged African Americans to fight fascism in Europe as a way to vanquish domestic racism in a “double victory” (72).
- 6 For more on Morocco’s colonial history, see Balfour, Sueiro Seoane, and Alás-Brun. Franco’s forces were also aided by international volunteers. While I will not examine pro-Franco literatures about Morocco, Keene’s *Fighting for Franco* examines key writings by Anglophone fascist supporters. See especially 254–55.
- 7 For more on this propaganda, see Preston 34–51. Rein suggests that Francoist Spain “tried to appropriate the achievements of the Jewish and Muslim cultures that had flourished in Spain during the Middle Ages until Isabella and Ferdinand took steps to extirpate them from Spanish soil. . . . Franco portrayed himself as a defender of Islam and an enemy of colonialism and European imperialism” (196).
- 8 According to Thomas, among Franco’s supporters, German soldiers in Spain numbered at most ten thousand, Italian soldiers, up to 75,000, and Portuguese, several thousand. Moroccans numbered at least 75,000 (940). There were also North Africans amongst the International Brigades, numbering 700 (Jensen 514). Some Moroccans supported Republican Spain’s continued presence in the colony as protection against French colonization. For insight into the conditions under which the Moroccan troops enlisted and fought, see de Madariaga’s *Los moros que trajo Franco* and “The Intervention of Moroccan Troops in the Spanish Civil War.”
- 9 For more on divergent attitudes towards the Moroccan soldiers, see Høgsbjerg 168–76. Many soldiers on the Republican side also attempted to entice Moroccan soldiers to switch sides, mostly to no avail (see Seidman 103–04).
- 10 For more on Edwards’ writing on the treatment of Moroccan soldiers, see Andrews 104–05. For further discussion of Cunard’s coverage, see Donlon, who contends that such journalistic reports were often in contrast to the dominant

- Republican message: “Republican propaganda often portrayed the ‘Moors’ as barbarian, savage invaders, but Hughes, Cunard, and others viewed them as victims of colonialism exploited by Franco” (33 n. 55).
- 11 Edwards notes that McKay also discusses Spanish colonialism more explicitly in an obscure essay entitled “A Little Lamb to Lead Them: A True Narrative.” See “Taste” 967–69. For more on Wright’s depictions of Spain and Morocco, see Kennedy 107–10.
 - 12 Alás-Brun explains that Republican propaganda “portrayed the much-feared Moroccan troops that fought with Franco as black, or at least with rather dark skin and some exaggerated features usually associated with caricatures of black Africans. . . . By contrast, the image of the heroic Moroccan soldier was systematically whitened in propaganda drawings and paintings created by Franco’s supporters” (167).
 - 13 I have been unable to find any documentation explaining the decision to excise this section. For other examples of literary revisions to remove references to Morocco, see Lindberg’s consideration of W. E. B. Du Bois, Berry’s examination of Wright’s excisions from *Pagan Spain* (xiii), and Høgsbjerg’s analysis of the different editions of C. L. R. James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouvverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.
 - 14 See Jensen 510–14 for answers to some of these questions.
 - 15 See, too, Hughes’ “Negroes in Spain” and “‘Organ Grinder’s Swing’ Heard Above Gunfire in Spain—Hughes.” Wright makes a similar observation in his memoir, although he also comments that he was frequently stared at and that his appearance even prompted a postal worker to cross herself (29), causing him to wonder if he “remind[ed] her of Moors” (9).
 - 16 Thurston connects Hughes’ representation of the Moroccan soldiers’ historic claim to Spain—as former colonizers and rulers—to the more recent invasion of Ethiopia, suggesting that in Hughes’ journalism “The ‘Moors’ are avatars, then, for Haile Selassie’s kingdom, a nation with whom African American readers deeply sympathized and whose defeat at Italy’s hands provoked riots in American cities” (“Bombed” 122).
 - 17 Thurston notes that Hughes’ poetry and his essay “Negroes in Spain” were the only texts to analyze race in the conflict in the *Volunteer for Liberty* (Making 130). “Negroes in Spain” raises important questions around gender, too, in describing how Franco’s troops had Moroccan women doing their washing and cooking.
 - 18 Edwards contends that the encounter implies “that a diaspora is necessarily translated and mediated” (“Langston Hughes” 694). For more on the translation of Hughes’ poetry into Spanish, and his collaborative translations of Lorca from Spanish into English, see Scaramella.
 - 19 In his memoir, Hughes describes how the Popular Front attempted to foster class-based connections (*I Wonder* 353).

- 20 Yates, another African American volunteer, relates Cobb's story in his memoir (127–28).
- 21 Calihman's article provides an insightful overview of Williams' novelistic engagement with the Spanish Civil War.
- 22 Kelley poses related questions about African American participation:
[H]ow did African Americans feel among their white fellow Americans, particularly in a social setting? For that matter, how comfortable were they with white European International brigadists for whom language served as a major barrier? To what extent were they treated as objects (i.e., representatives of a race and examples of an ideal) as opposed to thinking, feeling subjects? (35)

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