

# 2021 ANNUAL PLURALISM LECTURE

May 19, 2021—Brooklyn, New York

“The Moment of Encounter:  
History, Disruptions and Transformations”

*By Maaza Mengiste*

CO-PRESENTED BY:



THE UNIVERSITY  
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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an independent, charitable organization founded by His Highness the Aga Khan and the Government of Canada. The Centre works with policy leaders, educators and community builders around the world to amplify and implement the transformative power of pluralism.

## “The Moment of Encounter: History, Disruptions, and Transformations”

By *Maaza Mengiste*

Author of *The Shadow King*

May 19, 2021—Brooklyn, New York



On May 19th, the Global Centre for Pluralism and the University of British Columbia presented a livestream of the 2021 Annual Pluralism Lecture.

Ethiopian novelist and 2020 Booker Prize finalist, Maaza Mengiste, delivered the 8th Annual Pluralism Lecture, “The Moment of Encounter: History, Disruptions, and Transformations” from New York’s Center for Fiction, followed by a conversation with Nahlah Ayed, host of CBC *Radio’s Ideas*.

In this Lecture Ms. Mengiste talks about her journey into historical research while writing her critically acclaimed novel, *The Shadow King*. She discusses the surprising and revelatory discoveries she made about collective memory and official archives, and what history can teach us about the future.

**I own an old black-and-white photograph of two men  
standing side by side, inches apart from each other.  
One is East African and the other Italian.**

The East African, either Ethiopian or Eritrean, wears frayed trousers so old and worn that large patches of skin gape through the holes. The bottoms are ripped unevenly, narrowing raggedly and stopping at his calves. An oversized jacket sags against his slender frame, the open flaps exposing his bare chest. He has crossed his arms, almost protectively and one hand rests against the bend in his opposite elbow. He is barefoot. And though it is difficult to tell his age, it is clear to see that his once-dark hair is now covered generously with white. He squints into the camera with a lowered chin, his mouth a grim line.

The Italian beside him is fully clothed with a hat perched at an angle on his head. It shields his face from the worst of the sun, and so he is able to gaze forward, undisturbed. He is taller than the man next to him, more powerfully built. His arms rest easily at his side and his sleeves are rolled up. His shirt is nearly tucked into his trousers, and the waistband has been folded over, as if to make do in the absence of a belt. He wears shoes. His left thumb is bandaged. He sports a t-shirt beneath his button-down and his expression, as he stares into the camera, his chin up, is relaxed. Perhaps even satisfied. Though there are two men here, it is him that the photographer has placed neatly in the middle of the frame: He is the central figure, the one that cuts the vertical photograph in half. On the other side of this Italian where the other man is not, is empty space. It is human-sized, large enough to accommodate one more. It is as if a hollow has been carved out, someone else scraped away to leave behind a bleached patch of earth.

I no longer recall where I found this photograph. What I remember instead is the moment of encounter with it, that first jolt of recognition that I was looking at something, even though I could not yet understand what it was. I kept staring at the man with his hands folded across his chest. Why was he standing like that? Was he defiant? Frightened? In pain? What happened to his shirt? Were those scars on his legs recent? Did the Italian standing next to him cause them? I took the photo home with me and continued to stare, noting the white hair, the beard, the sturdy, strong bones of his visible hand. His feet are dusty. He stands firm on the ground, upright. That he is barefoot was typical for that time. What was this picture telling me? What was it that I was not seeing, even after staring at it for so long?

In 1935, Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia to colonize the country. It was not fair that Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and other countries had staked a claim on the African continent without Italy. It was, he stated, Italy's right to have a "place in the sun." Fascism would establish a second Roman Empire on African soil, and it would do so by conquering Ethiopia. One of the first steps towards invasion

and war involved photographs: a visual narrative to establish a definition of Ethiopians as uncivilized, backwards in every sense, and lacking in all imaginative capacities. The photos sent back to Italy through the press portrayed the stark differences between East Africans and Italians. Those pictures highlighted the exotic and unusual, the seemingly unbridgeable gaps that existed between two vastly dissimilar groups of people. By the time the invasion happened and war broke out, it was clear to Italians that Ethiopia needed the benevolent hand of Italy, this would be a civilizing mission.

I knew all of this when I first encountered this photograph. Though I couldn't be certain of the date, I could make an informed guess that this image was made after the October 1935 invasion. War had likely already started, and though Benito Mussolini declared victory in May 1936, I knew this would prove to be premature. The war would simply shift from traditional confrontations to guerrilla warfare. Perhaps this photograph was made in that chaotic period between the declaration of victory and the start of guerrilla war. Perhaps what I was looking at was an image of instability and uncertainty—the Italian's. Perhaps the ground that rises sharply behind the two men hides entire armies of Ethiopians waiting for dark to ambush. Maybe the man standing there squinting into the sun is a captured prisoner. Perhaps he has been injured and the arms folded in front of him actually cradle a painful, awful wound. Maybe when light falls and he is back in the place where he is being held, he will hear a soft whistle and understand that help has come, and he will soon be free.

But I cannot do that. I cannot will a narrative onto this picture that probably did not exist. The urge is strong and while I might be able to excuse myself by pointing to the brutalities of war, and in particular, this war, I have to refuse the instinct to protect and maybe, save, this man. I do not know his name. I do not know what he was doing before he came to be standing in front of the camera. I do not know the relationship between him and the Italian next to him. I am not sure why he is folding his hands over his chest. I have to see what is there without smoothing out the rough edges of history. It is too easy to put myself into the photograph and reach into the past to settle the pieces into some reassuring order. It eases confusion. It leaves me satisfied. It stops the recursive, nagging contemplations that could lead me to other discoveries. Because it is more difficult to reckon with the unwieldiness of history's gaps. It is harder to recognize that the photographs and documents in archives only lead to other questions and new uncertainties. Because, if we cannot fully know the past, what does it imply about how we imagine the future?

It is hard to leave an unsettling image, with all its bristling and charged questions, as it is and see it for what it is offering. It is easier to turn from the disruptive possibility of an unanswerable question. We have been taught, for so long, that an answer must always follow a question. That if we cannot point to a resolution, then we have failed.



But what if, in that space between  
knowing and confusion is an entire landscape  
where something else—beyond answers,  
but equally vital—exists?

What if cradled within each moment of encounter is a force that can lead us towards real transformation? What if, to be disturbed is but one step towards that journey? What if every step forward took us not into the territory of comfort and certainty, but towards new disruptions and greater leaps?

It has taken me a long time to understand what I sensed but could not initially see. It has taken other photographs and other encounters to recognize the ghosts hovering at the edges of that image—those invisible threads that connect us to the past, those things we describe in language that is as indefinite and unclear as what we feel in that first moment of encounter: “I don’t know, I saw this picture and... I’m not sure what to say.”

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

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

I have in my possession a certain album. The first photograph depicts a young Ethiopian woman reclining on a rock, propped on her elbow and squinting into the sun. A valley unfolds in wide, easy sweeps over her bare shoulders. That she is naked from the waist up is an uncomfortable detail, but not unusual. This is Ethiopia and this is 1937, and by now we know the larger history that frames this photograph. Slivers of paper pasted onto the photo offer an Italianized spelling of her name, Balainesc [Belaynesh], and the

town, Scianò [Shano]. At the bottom, in florid handwriting, is the date: 1937. Balainesc is the first photo in an album once owned by an Italian soldier. This photo was taken a year into the Italian occupation of the country. On its own, it carries no real weight. It is exploitative but relatively benign, not as bad as some.

When I first found this album, I opened it, stared at that photo of Balainesc, felt immediate anger and revulsion, then turned the page, and the next, and the next and what stared back was a series of women, mostly Ethiopian, all of them equally exploited, indecently revealed. I was taken aback by the careful arrangement of the album. Many photographs included a label with the woman's name. The cities indicated formed a zigzag across Ethiopia. Most included the dates 1936 or 1937. At times, as if it was unacceptable to leave a picture unmarked, a label simply announced the subject as *donna abissina*, Abyssinian woman. This album was curated: photos organized and meticulously labeled, guided by a patient eye. It was a detailed, carefully crafted story of one man's time in Ethiopia. A way to speak of this great African adventure. It was difficult to look through that album and for some time I was made too uncomfortable by the careful arrangement of it to contemplate what it all meant.

There was one photo, though, that was different from the rest. Towards the end of the album is a picture of a woman named Bogalech from Debre Berhan. Unlike the others, she is fully clothed in her traditional Ethiopian dress. She has a shawl draped across one shoulder and stands with her chin raised, a rifle in her hand. The muzzle is pointed up, as if it is aimed at the sky. Bogalech is not afraid, nor is she demure. She looks determined and resilient, strong. She is a startling vision in an album such as this. And for a while, eager to strip away the awful residue of those other photos, I convinced myself that it was a positive portrayal of an African woman. Taken on its own, it might have symbolized the photographer's leanings towards a more complex understanding of women. This is a woman with a rifle, and I knew that women like her existed. I was, after all, writing a book about those Ethiopian women who fought alongside men during this war. This was my proof. Now I had something.

But I was doing it again. Do you see that? I was reaching into the past to smooth the edges. Because what I could not immediately accept was that in an album otherwise full of exploitative images of women, the photo of a woman with a gun becomes not a sign of female strength, but a mockery of it. Her implied weakness is exposed by all the other pictures that came before her. This woman, Bogalech, is bound by their fate. They are the ghosts that hover behind her and out of frame. When I looked at her, I needed to see them. I needed to see the album. I needed to see the hands that made the album, that pasted the labels, that propped the camera in front of his eye and clicked the shutter to photograph not a woman, but power and manhood. When I looked at her, I needed to see him. Because what her picture was, in essence, was a self-portrait of this photographer.



Look at him. Do you see him? Do you see the man standing between these two, in that space where an entirely new landscape rests? That shadow of a man who has insisted that he, too, appear in the photo? That photographer who makes himself both visible and invisible, rendering this image of two men into a self-portrait? He was impossible to see without those women, without Bogalech, without the discomfort that brought me back, again and again, to that first sighting, that first disruption. There he is—not the answer to a question, but a path towards another kind of journey, one that considers what is there, even with all the unknowns, and what we can learn from it, from him: about power and manhood, about ways of seeing and the uncomfortable terrain between confusion and a kind of transformation that provides new questions and urges greater leaps into other uncharted territory.

What does it mean to now see this photographer in this photograph? What does it mean to recognize the many ways that those in power make images of themselves, no matter what is actually standing in front of us, hands folded across a chest while squinting into the sun?



## Maaza Mengiste

Author and Essayist

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Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Maaza Mengiste is a critically acclaimed novelist and essayist whose work examines the individual lives at stake during migration, war, and exile. Mengiste's debut novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010), was named one of The Guardian's Ten Best Contemporary African Books. Her latest novel, *The Shadow King* (2019), was called "one of the most beautiful novels of the year" by NPR and was a 2020 Booker Prize finalist. The winner of the 2020 Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Mengiste's honours include the Creative Capital Award, a Fulbright Scholarship, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Puterbaugh Festival of International Literature & Culture.

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