

Preface: In a Kingdom of This World

David Scott

In memory of Teshome Gabriel

1

I had imagined arriving in Addis Ababa to the thumping soundtrack of Dennis Brown’s “The Promised Land” or Third World’s “Journey to Addis,” full, in other words, of the rhythms of an enchanted expectation. I am a Jamaican of a certain generation, after all, and Ethiopia was more than a geopolitical entity, less the name of a political state than of a state of mind. But it didn’t happen that way, alas. I was so absorbed in the last part of Maaza Mengiste’s debut novel, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*, that, as I read, all my Jamaican enthusiasm for the imaginary of Ethiopia as the ancient, storied kingdom of His Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, steadily evaporated.¹ Somehow the posture of pilgrimage now seemed wholly inappropriate, an irrelevant conceit. I set aside any idea of making the journey to Shashemene to see what had become of that community of legendary Jamaicans to whom the emperor had given land in the 1960s following his fabled visit to Jamaica (even though that redemptive image of a diminutive Haile Selassie standing beside the emboldened and immensely prideful Rastafarian Mortimer Planno is an unforgettable one). But Mengiste’s novel imposed on me a very different set of considerations and put me in a very different mood. It drew me away from my diasporic reverie and focused my attention instead

¹ Maaza Mengiste, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (New York: Norton, 2010). I am grateful to Vanessa Pérez-Rosario for bringing this novel to my attention.

on the figuration of revolution and catastrophe, a topic that has occupied me for a number of years. How should we write the story—fictive or otherwise—of the third-world 1970s?

Mengiste's novel is set in the early years of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution—the context is that of the devastation of the rural famine, the gathering storm of the student protests, the military's overthrow of the emperor and his subsequent killing (along with threescore members of his inner circle), and the rise of the ruling military council known as the Derg. We witness the unfolding history through the travails of one middle-class family caught up in the enveloping turmoil. Hailu is a well-regarded doctor in a prominent Addis Ababa hospital. Tolerant, humane, rational, he is a man of a quiet and retiring disposition whose settled and familiar world is rapidly coming apart before his very eyes, rent by forces that seem to him unaccountable. Like the old regime, his wife is dying—but he cannot let her go. His two sons are a study in contrasts. Yonas, the elder of the two, is a professor of history, a man of mild political convictions and strong religious faith, who lives in the family home with his wife, Sarah, and their daughter. Dawit, the younger son, is a student at the university and a political radical who is opposed both to the emperor's rule and the military junta. The family's sense of its integrity and solidity is soon severely challenged: Yonas's daughter falls strangely ill, and a distraught Sarah is driven to a self-flagellating self-incrimination aimed at appeasing her unmerciful God; Dawit disappears from his family and joins the militant student underground engaged in dangerous subversive activity; and Hailu is summoned to a notorious prison, where he is interrogated and tortured for having killed one of his patients—humanely, in his view, in order to prevent her from being returned to her torturers, not knowing that, perversely, she is the daughter of the very man torturing him and who is beside himself not only with revolutionary rage but also with grief and despair. The novel obviously claims a relation to historical reality, but I cannot evaluate its fidelity to that relation. I did wonder, though, about the contrast between representations of the emperor and the Derg: where the emperor is pictured as only mildly despotic, an aging patriarch often lost in his own self-regarding and otherworldly ruminations, unable to properly respond to the crisis of the famine, the Derg is pictured as a shockingly ruthless and murderous group of thugs, without a social and political project, whose wanton cruelty is merely excessive. Not surprisingly, the novel has a *reconciliatory* arc. It closes on a healing return where the family that was once broken is now put back together. We feel their relief as we felt their pain. We are pleased when they are restored, redeemed. But we can't help but wonder whether, in the end, this really is all there was to the 1970s.² What is it about the peculiar mixture of hope and loss in the context of its relative generational nearness that seems to so complicate the narrative memory of that past?

² See Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2012), for another fictive engagement with the Ethiopian 1970s.

2

I'd contacted Elizabeth Giorgis of the College of the Performing and Visual Arts at Addis Ababa University and expressed my interest in visiting and meeting students and faculty.³ She readily agreed to facilitate this. Gracious and generous, she moved speedily with her colleague, Surafel Wondimu Abebe, of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, to arrange for me to give a public lecture and hold a seminar with students—and also to see a bit of the city. The seminar turned on two of my books, *Conscripts of Modernity* and *Omens of Adversity*, for what was wanted was a discussion of the tragic and time and action and revolutionary politics.⁴ I never quite know in such circumstances what to say by way of introduction (there is both too much and too little to say), so I spoke extemporaneously about some of the ways, as it seemed to me, the paths of these books through the tragic converged as well as diverged. The questions and the doubts were most instructive to me. One could feel the long shadow of the 1974 revolution as we talked variously about memory and inheritance, and generations and agency, and disappointment and hope. The lecture was on Stuart Hall, who, though not familiar to everyone in the audience, was known enough for us to have a very dynamic conversation around the themes of displacement, conjuncture, diaspora, identity, modernism, and much more. Semeneh Ayalew (whom I'd met some years before, and who was now in the process of completing his PhD) and Surafel also conducted an interview with me on a broad range of topics—from tragic choice to anthropology—putting pressure on my unspoken assumptions and exploring the unexamined implications of what I was trying to say against the background of their own preoccupations. And then, happily, Netsanet Michael (whom I'd also met some years before) sat with me over coffee and talked about her work, including how it intersected with, and diverged from, mine. I am grateful to these new friends not only for the gift of their hospitality but also for conversations that are now a permanent part of who I am.

For me, while these are obviously occasions for presenting my work and my ideas, travel such as this is also a *self-reflective* practice, a way of *learning* through displacement. Kobena Mercer has offered us the provocative image of travel as a visual experience, and I appreciate that, but it is also, for me anyway, a way of simply practicing *listening*.⁵ The *elsewhere* offers a moral and cognitive dialogical setting for listening to others but also for hearing oneself in unpredictable ways. There is a kind of surprise that one can experience when one's thinking comes back refracted through a loop of voices and perspectives that have nothing to do with one's own itineraries and trajectories. And when facilitated by emerging friendships such as these, the simple muted name of this experience is *elation*.

3 Elizabeth Giorgis is the author, most recently, of *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019).

4 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), and *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

5 See Kobena Mercer, *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

3

When I was a graduate student writing my dissertation in the late 1980s, I hung out at the University of California, Los Angeles, and there fell in with a group of students who congregated around an Ethiopian professor named Teshome Gabriel, meeting every evening at a campus coffee shop. Teshome was already something of a legend by then. He taught in the Department of Theater, Film, and Television at UCLA and was the author of a much-celebrated book, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, published in 1982.⁶ He cut a striking figure, always in a jacket over a sweater with a scarf wrapped around his neck (no matter the weather), a half-chewed cigarette between his teeth. Teshome was a very remarkable intellectual, because quite apart from his studied engagement with the aesthetics of third-world cinema (especially African and Latin American cinema), what he did for us graduate students was to create an unbelievably fertile discursive and existential space for unpoliced and exploratory critical conversation. He was a huge *catalyst* for almost random and purposeless discussion. It is not just that he was widely read; it is that he had a capacity for being able, from an inchoate idea, to provoke several possible directions of research and argument that he himself would not necessarily take but that he simply laid on the table for anyone to avail themselves of. You never felt stupid in his presence; you never felt less than a *potentiality*. It was Teshome who inspired us to launch the now-defunct critical journal *Emergences*, somewhere around 1987. In some sense, I suppose, it is he who planted the journal-work idea in my head and who, therefore, was a spur for what would eventually become *Small Axe*.

Part of what I'm saying is that Teshome was not only a critical self; he was also that rarer form of human being, a *listening self*. But Teshome was generous not only with ideas. Almost invariably, on a Friday evening, after spending an hour or two with coffee and discussion, we would pile into his battered Toyota and repair to one of his favorite Ethiopian restaurants, where, interrupted only by the many people who would come over to greet him (including, typically, the owner of the establishment), the conversation would continue, less informally perhaps but still no less fluid. Needless to say, I thought about Teshome a lot in Addis Ababa. I remembered him telling stories of home. I remembered him longing to go home. I remembered when he eventually went home and returned to tell us about his journey. *That*, too, was a kind of elation.

Addis Ababa—New York

April 2019

6 Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982). I gather that a collection of his essays is currently being assembled by Elizabeth Giorgis, to be published by Addis Ababa University Press.