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# Decolonizing the Filmic Mind: An Interview with Haile Gerima

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## DECOLONIZING THE FILMIC MIND

### An Interview with Haile Gerima

by John L. Jackson, Jr.

I received my undergraduate degree from Howard University in the spring of 1993, and I was lucky enough to take one of my final courses, Film Directing, with award-winning filmmaker Haile Gerima. His critically-acclaimed motion picture, *Sankofa*, was released that same semester, which meant that he gave our class a real-world education in the stresses and strains of independent film distribution. Gerima was an inspirational teacher, someone who convinced us that quality filmmaking took more than simply learning how to spool film magazines in black bags or properly using light meters in the photographing of scenes, all skills he also taught us back in those pre-digital days when filmmaking entailed shooting with actual film stock and when editing was unforgivingly linear.

In the fall of 2008, Gerima released his latest feature-film, *Teza*, the epic tale of an Ethiopian expatriate who returns from Germany to a homeland torn asunder by ideological extremism. Gerima's film is a meditation on globalization, political corruption, familial longing, and the inescapable force of racism. *Teza* opens at Lincoln Plaza Cinema in New York City on April 2, 2010.

We sat down, briefly, to chat about his new film and his approach to filmmaking.

**JACKSON:** I want to start in Ethiopia. What I know of your biography, what I remember, is that you came from a very large family in Ethiopia and that you were the son of a playwright. Tell me a few of the ways in which those facts inform your approach to film.

**GERIMA:** I do come from a large family. Ten kids in all. My mother was a teacher, and my father was also. But he did other things, too. For example, he was a playwright, and he really enjoyed writing stage plays. But before that, before the Italian occupation and the time of Mussolini, he was a priest. And as a consequence of the invasion, he became a Guerilla fighter. So, he did a lot. After the war, he became a schoolteacher and then worked for the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia for a bit. But he spent a lot of time writing and staging plays. And primarily, he put on plays that he wrote, epic plays he wrote in Amharic. Of course, that all had an impact on me.

The scenes and settings in *Teza*, for instance, are the landscapes of my childhood. The first film I made in Ethiopia, *Harvest: 3000 Years*, shows you the actual footprints of my youth, of where I grew up with my father and the rest of my family. It's a small town, Gondar, and like most Ethiopian families, we had one foot in town and the other foot in rural, peasant society. And most of my father's brothers and relatives were peasants from the village where I set *Teza*, a place called Menzero, which is also where my family is from.

My father was one of the only people who read and wrote, one of the few people who became a writer, a playwright, and a historian. He was one of the people who wrote a book documenting the Ethiopian-Italian War. And so, I come from that kind of background. But in terms of storytelling, my grandmother was also important, as was my mother. Where I grew up, it was around the fire that you were acculturated into storytelling. It was a familial thing. And when my father became a playwright, it really brought things home to me. I was often involved in one way or another in the plays he wrote, from advertising, carrying the advertisement boards, to playing an extra, being part of the chorus, being in the plays.

**JACKSON:** Have you ever played with the idea of adapting one of his plays for the big screen?

**GERIMA:** Yes. Even when he was alive, we had planned to co-write something on Emperor Tewodros. He was a very popular emperor in the 1800s. And we were going to collaborate on that project. That was just one idea. But we also collaborated in other ways. He was also a songwriter, and I used his songs and his own singing in *Harvest: 3000 Years*. And then, when I did the film *Adwa: An African Victory*, he was there also. I had filmed him talking about the plays he wrote before, during, and after the Italian Occupation. And so, basically, I am always using the resources of my family. I'm always collaborating with them. Even the folkloric aspects of the film *Teza* come from my ancestors. In my case, storytelling is communal. It's a communal legacy. And so, the individual story comes out of a collective chorus, a respect for the past. I am the product of that.

**JACKSON:** And so what brought you to Los Angeles in 1968? Why did you leave Ethiopia?

**GERIMA:** Well, initially, I came to Chicago to study theater. I wanted to go to drama school, and then I realized that learning drama in American theater was completely useless.

**JACKSON:** So, it looks like your father was an influence on your journey, too. But why did you find the study of American theater useless?

**GERIMA:** A Garveyite woman, someone who was a cleaner, a janitor, at the school in Chicago that I attended, the Goodman School of Drama, challenged me, saying, "How can you be from Ethiopia and come to learn theater from the white man when you are in fact the originator of theater and culture?" At that time, I was a completely colonized person. And so, I soon realized that I would only perpetuate my colonized and subjugated mind if I remained in the theater. And so, I went from Chicago to Los Angeles. At first, I was still trying to study theater. And when I was frustrated at UCLA as a theater student, I stumbled into a film department, and I was immediately embraced by the chairman of the department. So, I went to film school. That was that.

**JACKSON:** Say more about the decolonizing difference between film and theater. In your opinion, what makes film open to more political possibility than theater (at least in an American context) affords?

**GERIMA:** Well, in film you have individualized power. The power of the director's vision. There was traditional theater in Ethiopia, and my father was the immediate benefactor of that history and tradition. And so, coming to America was a waste of time. I could have learned theater, potentially revolutionary theater, in Ethiopia. But film gave me the possibility of controlling my own story. When I first started making films, I didn't know the costs of getting involved in film production. I just saw the medium as a powerful way of interjecting individual freedom into the storytelling process. Because oftentimes, the stereotype about cinema, about mainstream cinema, one of the dangers of its tradition, is that it monopolistically imposes itself on people as a kind of complete reality and can sometimes replace a person's original and intuitive knowledge and temperament. It displaces those sensibilities. It makes its own standard the official standard. You are taught to believe that cinematic stories can only be told in certain ways about certain validated subjects. It's a very overwhelming medium. Its capacity to overwhelm is enormous.

And once I realized how colonized I was mentally, I started to think about film as a way to engage our political world. And even though I was not a member of the Black Power Movement, it created a very serious political crisis for those of us who were colonized mentally. It was a period when we redefined who the hell we were. In that process, cinema enabled me to gradually work on myself. It gave me the opportunity to redefine and reaffirm my right to speak, the significance of my accent and narrative temperament, and in so doing, to this day, I'm very grateful that, however imperfect my films are, I continue to be very challenged to bring the folkloric and cultural background of my upbringing in Ethiopia into my cinema—not absolutely, but to an extent. And if people like my films and forgive me for all the problems my stories cause, they might still admire some of the things I have been able to say in my films. And for me, cinema's devastating capacity to colonize can be counter-utilized in a way that projects one's own human story—without apologies.

**JACKSON:** Were your professors and classmates receptive to your filmmaking when you began to think about cinema as a mechanism for offering up politicized counter-narratives?

**GERIMA:** No. You are constantly dismissed as “political” every time you want to do something different, if you don't want to go along with the official program. You are considered a troublemaker, *just* political. Even now, while doing some of the press for the opening of *Teza*, several times some journalists were describing me as a “political filmmaker,” but all films are political, and all filmmakers are political. My particular form of politicization, not wanting to be subjugated by the mainstream cinema to its mandates and assumptions, has by default made me into a political animal. But my interest in the end is in asserting my cultural identity, which is relatively harmless in some ways. It's not a violent thing. It isn't about advocating the violent overthrow of anything. It's just

saying that we all have—our own story, our own way of telling a story. We all don't come out of the Aristotelian paradigm and the Greek and Roman and Spanish aesthetics. We have our own narrative sensibilities, especially those of us who come from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We have our own aesthetics, narrative temperaments that should be appreciated by all human beings. And this has made me be "the impossible guy," the one who a whole lot of people avoid, even trying to prevent my right to distribute my films. They obstruct my right to access economic opportunities to finance my films, even though I have already demonstrated my skill and creative contribution as a filmmaker. In fact, that's why even with *Sankofa*, which is a film thematically about slavery in the Americas, I had to go to Europe and Africa to find the money. I couldn't raise the funds in the United States. And so, this tells you that it's not me, it's the system that describes certain artists and producers as outsiders, as a threat. I shouldn't have been considered a threat, because I'm using a camera. I'm not using a gun. I'm using a camera to find myself. And then, hopefully, to say something about the collective heritage of our culture, at least for the people who identify with what I do.

In some ways, many industry people would love for me to just evaporate, but every fifteen or twenty years, or however long it takes me to find the funds for my next film, I come back with a low-budget feature and insist that I'm still around. And that has been troublesome for a lot of people, I can tell. And not that I did anything to them, but it has a lot to do with other filmmakers feeling subjugated, unable to feel truly liberated. I am a very free person. I'm not intellectually mortgaged. Nobody owns my intellectual property. Nobody tells me how to do a film or how to even organize the credits in my films. Everything, every frame in my movies, is determined by me—not dictated by the power of finance or distributors or producers. The colonial process is the real enemy, as far as I'm concerned. It helps to explain why many black filmmakers feel as though they do not have the right, the opportunity, to tell the kind of stories they want to tell. From the scripts to principal photography to the editing of their films, they are, by and large, told what to do.

**JACKSON:** You don't want to be told what kinds of films to make. That's clear. And that's also one of the reasons why you go to Europe for your financing, right?

**GERIMA:** Definitely. But I want to engage Americas, too. In fact, I wrote the script for *Teza* with the idea of shooting in the United States. It was a story that I conceived here. I had to go to Europe and restage it in Germany, but it was really written for the United States. I'm not trying to romanticize Europe, there is as much racism in Europe as anyplace else, and there are many filmmakers there who are unable to get the kind of support I have received. But I was lucky enough to find some intellectuals over there who were not threatened by my vision. And backing my films didn't cost them that much. I'm a very realistic person. I don't ask for too much. I'm not in search of extravagant financing. I have been developing stories based on my historical reality, and they are always low-budget films. I make sure the production value is good, and I take a whole lot of time to prepare the script, even the shooting. And I make sure I don't waste money. Every bit of financing should push the film, should increase the production value of the film. The money should be on the

screen. And so, in Europe I've been able to create a mutually respectful situation with a few individuals who understand my work and support my vision.

The person who supported me in the making of *Sankofa*, a businessman from Germany, he brought in some folks from Pandora Film, which helped make the entire thing happen. The European Union put some money in the film, too. And so, it takes me a long time, but the money comes together. I don't want to mislead people; sometimes black peoples' tendency is to mystify their own opportunity. For me, my opportunity is not that open to all black people. But many black folks are nomadic; they travel all over the place trying to find the money to do films that are dear to them, and it's a very difficult process. And I don't want to say it's easy, but I've been able, over the years, to gain some individuals' trust, to show them that I can do quality work with the resources I'm provided.

**JACKSON:** By the kind of film festival awards that *Teza* has garnered, it also appears that people are able to watch and appreciate your films overseas.

**GERIMA:** In Europe, from the jump, *Ashes and Embers*, which is about a Vietnam veteran, did well and got the critics' choice in Berlin. In Europe, there is an intellectual climate for films like *BushMama* and *Harvest: 3000*. My films are not perfect, but they are trying to say something different and honest. And this is not a crime in an intellectual environment where people read books to learn something, for people who see movies for their merit instead of for the number of super-star celebrities in them. In America, there's still a long, long way to go before that becomes the viewing model.

**JACKSON:** A lot of filmmakers call themselves "independent," especially if they are relatively on the fringe of Hollywood. But your model of independence seems radically different from that one.

**GERIMA:** Yes. It is very different. First of all, I never got into filmmaking to go after the so-called mainstream audience. But if they come to my films, they're going to hear and see things that they are not used to hearing and seeing on screen. And that goes for financiers, too. In a few cases, I've had some people ask who the hell I thought I was. When you go into a situation clearly defining—to powerful people—how they will/should interface with you and your film, they don't like it. They are used to coming in and taking over intellectual property. And they are used to it because many people submit to this kind of subservient relationship. It is difficult, but filmmakers have to defend their vision, their voice, from such cooptation.

**JACKSON:** When I looked at *Teza*, I was tickled by the fact that you are listed as writer, director, and editor. You have always been invested in editing your own work. Why are you so committed to editing your films? And do you still do that editing on a Steenbeck?

**GERIMA:** I had a co-editor on *Teza*, a sister from New York. But I'll tell you this, even though I edit on Avid now, I still have my Steenbeck. I'm very organic in my approach to the construction of a film. I don't edit on the Avid like a digital editor. I edit on the Avid

like I'm editing on the Steenbeck. And I try to structure ninety percent of the film before I bring in someone from the outside, an editor from the outside, to work on it. Not many people have my approach to cinematic editing. Many people bring a formula from existing mainstream movies and impose it on new films. Some people come to *axe* a movie and some people come to *organize* a movie. And I prefer to base the audio-visual organization of a movie on its own identity and dialectics, not some cookie-cutter Hollywood formula. And so it's very difficult to find editors who are not colonized and especially by the mainstream now that digital editing has brought mindless editors into the mix who are only looking to create a chaotic jumble of sounds and picture instead of thinking about the audiovisual organization of pictures based on mood and rhythms and structure and transitions.

**JACKSON:** You were one of the first people to teach me how to edit on a Steenbeck. I remember sitting in Howard University's School of Communication basement splicing film stock in those small closets we called editing suites. That was over fifteen years ago, and you were already an institution at that institution. How long have you been teaching film at Howard?

**GERIMA:** Over thirty years.

**JACKSON:** In what way has teaching film changed during that time span? In the 1990s, you taught us on a Steenbeck, like I said. And we spliced film, real celluloid. I'm sure all of your students are using Final Cut Pro and other software now. Does that make it easier to teach them how to edit for the moods, rhythms, structures, and transitions that you talk about?

**GERIMA:** It's very difficult to find film students nowadays who really understand a storyteller's responsibility. What they privilege has almost nothing to do with stories; they fetishize moving and fighting and shooting and jumping. Storytelling is completely degraded now. The chaotic nature of digital cinema is going through different phases, I'm sure. But no matter how fancy the process, the effects, the digital power, audiences are still going to need some stories. A story is always going to be the reason why movies must get made. Audiences will always want good stories.

**JACKSON:** When you make movies, do you have a specific audience in mind?

**GERIMA:** My audience is myself, especially since most people are seduced by mainstream cinema and its expectations. You can't trust all audiences. What does the mainstream cinema give black people? Usually, it's *Barbershop 1*, *Barbershop 2*, *Barbershop 20*, *Barbershop 40*—with little variation. And then *Booty Call 1*, *Booty Call 20*. And so what you have here is the kind of cinema that is addictive but has nothing to do with the enrichment of individuals who pay their money to walk into the theater. And so the audience itself is not your barometer, especially in the twenty-first century where everything has mutated and none of us are normal. None of us are without the virus of colonialism and its impact on who we are. And so, in a time like this, it isn't safe to just go by public opinion. You have



to go on your own frustration, on your own dreams and fantasies, your own alienation and nightmares, and then you see if your voice finds the population that identifies with this state of confusion that you are in.

When I do a movie, I respond to my own hunger first. Even with *Sankofa*, I didn't know people would line up to see it to the extent that they did. I was shocked like everybody else. But, if I didn't make this movie, I would have choked. It would have choked me to death. The story had to come out of me, one way or another.

There was an urgency to it, which sometimes makes it hard to gauge exactly what to say. This is different from just pitching a story idea the usual way everybody pitches story ideas: "There's this guy and he meets a girl, and then he is angry at her because she slept with his friend, and the next thing he did was go out and bought a saw and cut her apart." And every movie now, if you look, is predictable, especially because human beings are telling stories from within the confines of their own colonized states of mind. And they'll tell you it's an original story, but if you look, they are just offering remakes of other movies, even if they don't know it. And so, in my view, it's all a ball of confusion, and I have no targeted anybody that I trust to say: "ok, I'll make this film, because you say so." I don't even make films for my own children. I make films for myself, and if I find friends, great. I know that that is a very expensive way of justifying a filmmaker's expenses. It might seem outlandish or self-indulgent to say this, but I know that the films I've made, from the first one to the last, have always been about what I have to say, first and foremost. It's my dream, my nightmare, and I try to make a film out of it. I have a hunger for that. There are other people who also hunger, but they come into the mix, as far as I'm concerned, after the movie is made, not before, otherwise corruption begins. You find yourself trying to write for the system, trying to write for the people. You write for the workers. You write to embarrass a politician. Then you end up becoming part of that cannibalistic culture that you yourself are dying from. Independence as a filmmaker means trying to keep those things at bay.

**JACKSON:** Is the Haile Gerima of *Teza* the same kind of filmmaker as the one who made *Bush Mama* in 1979? Has your approach to filmmaking changed in any fundamental way in those thirty years?

**GERIMA:** All my films teach me. They all take me to the next film. Every movie is a staircase for me, something to learn from, but all of them possess a rage that has not left me. The films have also brought me wisdom about the qualities of a powerful narrative, and I would say that they've increased my skill as filmmaker. Every movie owns what came before it. *Sankofa* owns every movie I made before it, and *Teza* does the same. I've learned a lot, especially watching those movies with people and hearing feedback. I've learned a great deal. And so, *Teza* comes on the shoulder of all the films I have ever made. And there is no dichotomy or contradiction there. I still have the same passion for the stories, my own stories, but I have become wiser. I have learned a lot from my mistakes in terms of the way I structure or edit my stories, but they all start from the core passion that compels me to make them.

**JACKSON:** How do you approach distribution? Even if filmmakers stay true to their inner voices, they still want other people to see them. Do you feel that you now have a strategy down that works for you in terms of circulating information about your films once they're released?

**GERIMA:** The only strategy is word of mouth. That's what worked with *Sankofa*. The *Washington Post* approached me after the movie opened, but when it was still at the Berlin International Film Festival competing with well-financed films that had budgets like *Malcolm X* and other movies that were far more expensive than *Malcolm X*. No one paid us any attention. There was no press coverage. But when black people, by word of mouth, built audiences, everyone from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *New York Times* took notice. So you can see the power of the word of mouth in the black community. *Sankofa* became a reality because of its power. The film is born and then it has to create its own audiences. Yes, I go to the audience now. I appeal to them like I did when I did *Sankofa*. And the work is even harder now. The monopoly on distribution arms and theater chains means that it takes me a long time to find a theater for my films. *Teza* came out over a year ago. It was a success at the Venice Film Festival in a very big way. It won twenty prizes all over the place, but it still was very difficult to get a theater to open the film in the United States. And the people who get a chance to see it early can be walking advertisements. We let them know that. We ask them to respectfully participate. If they want to share the film, they can't just be passive spectators. They have to be proactive. So, we galvanize people to tell others. That's our strength and strategy. It is also why we opened *Teza* in Washington. Had we opened *Sankofa* anywhere else but here, it wouldn't have gone the way it went. So, we came back to Washington again and opened *Teza*. We did the same thing with *Adwa*, a documentary film. And this is what we're going to do for as long as it works. And if it doesn't work, we don't blame anybody else. We just know we have to work harder.

**JACKSON:** *Teza*, like a lot of your films, feels incredibly ambitious. It's an epic story that spans so many years, so many eras. Were you at all intimidated by the expansiveness of the story when you first completed the screenplay?

**GERIMA:** Not at all. You know, I'll tell you, I thought it was a piece of cake after *Sankofa*, because *Sankofa* is a period piece—and I shot it with less money. I didn't even have the money I was able to put together for *Teza*. And we were shooting on location in Jamaica (for *Sankofa*), a place where I don't have a real base, and Ghana, where we received support from the culture ministry there. Compared to that, *Teza*, I thought, was a piece of cake. But in production, every movie creates a crisis. You have to be ready. If you are, you won't be intimidated. I'm never intimidated. You know why? Because I do so much homework before shooting. Everywhere I put the tripod, I have been there at least a minimum of 150 or 200 times beforehand. I walk the breadth and length of the anatomy of my locations. That's how I can brag and say that I can make low-budget movies efficiently, because I practice, rehearse, and really study my locations before I start shooting. So, that kind of homework makes me successful. But there were still production problems on *Teza*: location issues, individuals within the production who created crises, and those things

were larger, bigger, than what I faced doing *Sankofa*. But still, we overcame everything. And at the end, we had a film.

**JACKSON:** Has the film screened in Ethiopia yet?

**GERIMA:** It has been screening in Ethiopia for about nine months, and the response has been very strong. At the same time, this is a story that's touching a very sensitive area and period for a lot of Ethiopians. And so, although my film is about childhood memory, the placenta, fire and water, as well as politics, the political angle is the only thing people want to talk about. But there are many metaphors in the movie, and they aren't just playing on politics. I would prefer a sober and calm relationship with the public, but the public often brings its own hunger and agenda into the movie theater, imposing it on the film. And people did the same thing with *Sankofa*. They admired it and continue to think that it was an imperfect film, but they had a hunger for the story it was telling, especially since they have a hard time finding more movies like *Sankofa* to put it in perspective. *Teza* cannot be put into perspective in Ethiopia because many Ethiopians have personally experienced the things I'm depicting, which puts a lot of extra weight on the film.

**JACKSON:** You're a filmmaker who doesn't shy away from the political. Do you feel like in this instance you want to make sure it also doesn't get in the way of some of these more existential questions you're trying to ask in *Teza*?

**GERIMA:** I don't calculate when I write. I vomit when I write. I don't sanitize things. If you do that, you'll just censor yourself. And what's the difference between censoring yourself for financial reasons or censoring yourself to appease white people—or because you don't want to offend black folks. You can fall into the trap of turning your work into buffoonery. So to me, whatever comes out, comes out, and I have to take the consequences. I don't calculate. I don't water down my films, and I don't think I sacrifice aesthetics for politics, but cultural expressions don't come out of a vacuum. I want my films to do a lot of things. They work on many levels.

**JACKSON:** Do you already have a sense of what the next film is going to be?

**GERIMA:** I have several scripts. I have another script set in Ethiopia. I have a script set in Zambia. I have a script to shoot in South Africa, *Dream Fantasy*. There was a film I wanted to shoot in Mozambique that never happened. I have a film set in the United States called *Chicken Bone Express*, which I plan to shoot in Washington, DC. But I don't know which film will come next. Some of that depends on the financial issues. What I do is put all my films on the oven and see which one gets hot first.

**JACKSON:** How was FESPACO in Ouagadougou this year? I know *Teza* screened there.

**GERIMA:** I didn't go. My sister took the film. She is the co-producer. I was actually here in our production office in Washington, trying to deal with things over here. We have a base here, my wife and me. We were working on this end.

**JACKSON:** It sounds like filmmaking is still very much a family affair for you.

**GERIMA:** It is. It is. My wife is also a filmmaker. She made *Through the Door of No Return*. She's working on Part 2 of that film now. And my kids are with me selling DVDs and traveling with the films, doing all kinds of work.

**JACKSON:** Do you still get a chance to watch a lot of movies? What's the last movie you saw in the theater?

**GERIMA:** I was on the Jury in Venice a few weeks ago and watched a lot of movies there. Some films are out to celebrate the death of cinema as a medium. There are some innovations, but I have taken my refuge in old movies from all over the world, including the United States. That was a time when stories were organic, even when they had bad results. I watch old movies. New movies are completely different for me. When you go to film school, as I did, and watch so many movies, you realize that so many new films are just remakes and, like I said before, the filmmakers don't even know that their movies are remakes. So, there's a lot of voodoo hoodoo filmmaking going on that I don't identify with. I don't care for it. It doesn't grab me.

**JACKSON:** One of the provocative things about *Teza*, as far as I'm concerned, has to do with its treatment of race and racism. All of your films take on racism quite squarely, so much so that some people might think of you as a kind of "race man," someone who doesn't want us to forget about the structural, institutional, and interpersonal significance of racism. Without giving too much away, you make sure that racism doesn't fall out of the conversation amidst all the other complex issues that *Teza* examines. Is it hard for you to get audiences to see race and to think about it critically? Is it even fair to call that a part of your project?

**GERIMA:** Some people might think that my childhood in Ethiopia overdetermines my work. But I came to America and my immediate confrontation was with African Americans. African Americans, in a sense, realigned me, helping me to find my own political center, my own cultural centeredness, in a way that has been important, too. Ethiopia is still crucial, of course, but African students go abroad and new human relationships emerge, transnational and Diasporic ones. Some of us leave as children and don't think that we are supposed to be held accountable for our own paths to adulthood. Our children will take on the crucible of racism in all parts of the world. They are harassed and badgered for being African descendants. And I experience my stories through the African Diaspora.

When I first came to America, I was doing gardening work. I was not from the royal family. I wasn't even staying in a dorm. I've never known a dorm in my entire school lifetime, in Ethiopia or in America. I cleaned and gardened and washed dishes to go to

school, which means that I am always living amongst Africans everywhere I go. I don't just go to Paris for some festival and not recognize that the street was cleaned by black people, and I don't walk over the "brooming" black man who sweeps the streets of the Champs-Élysées when I'm going wherever I'm going. A piece of me is left with him as I walk into a film celebration or a party or something. For over forty years, I've been amongst African descendants, and I never shied away from that, even though initially I might have been colonized. I didn't always know how to interrelate with them. I didn't know, say, if African Americans were even Africans or not. It took me a while to get it. It can be a bit confusing when you see somebody who walks past you on Michigan Avenue and looks like you or who looks like your sister or your mother. And for me it's not a simple coincidence. Race is a social reality. It was a social reality in Ethiopia, even when I wasn't aware of it.

Some Africans might not see that. Even in Ethiopia, when I go now, race is a big factor in just a simple restaurant transaction. When you check into a hotel in Africa, race is relevant. There's not any part of Africa where white people are not worshipped, not seated first before Africans. In Kenya, in South Africa, Africans worship whiteness indirectly, unconsciously. Even if they are unaware of it, it does happen. But once you are baptized by the African American race dispute, you cannot help but recognize race's reach everywhere. It happens to many Ethiopians who return. They fight at the airport, in hotel rooms, denouncing white privilege. The most reactionary Ethiopian can go to America and return home only to find himself fighting for his right to equality, because fellow Ethiopians might, for example, give the priority of table-seating to a white person. So the colonial process has always been there, but I was blind to it before. Or maybe I thought whites were privileged and born to be in charge, to be given a priority in everything. Now, racism's global logic can't escape my observing eyes.

**JACKSON:** Is this a racial logic that your Howard students also recognize?

**GERIMA:** Oh, my brother. It's gotten more difficult now, because I'm facing a much more downgraded quality of student than when you were here. Students are now less serious. Most don't read. Most don't even respect their grandmothers and fathers. They don't value where they come from. They don't think the stories that they should tell might be right under their noses. They're trying to reincarnate everything they see on television, trying to make that theirs. They are so schizophrenic that they don't even know when the stories don't belong to them, when it was interjected artificially into their system. And so, most of them don't want to put the time into the work, not in the way that my students used to—six, seven, ten years ago. They cannot imagine staying all night for two weeks, four weeks, a whole semester, in an editing room. We had students like that who would be in there through the whole semester—eating there, working there. Now, film is part-time. The hype is more full-time. They want to walk and dress the part of producer. "This is my card," they say. My students have better business cards than I do. I don't even have a business card. That's the last thing I'm thinking about. I'm more worried about realizing my script. And so, you have a different cultural sense of mind in terms of student bodies these days, and it's across the country.

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## CALLALO

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But I don't stop trying to reach them. You can't. Some, you may reach, and then some retroactively will remember. I've had students who even went to prison and wrote me afterwards to say that it had been so important that they were in my class. People have to go through something. They have to go on their own personal journey. And so, you don't give up. You don't know who in the end is going to retroactively storage the information and recall it for survival purposes later one. The historic responsibility of elders is to never give up on kids and to never let go of them. You don't patronize your descendants, but you do confront them equally—with respect. I do that with my students. And I don't do anything differently with my own kids.

**JACKSON:** Is it important for you to be teaching film at an HBCU?

**GERIMA:** Where else would I go, my brother? There's no place else I would be. I have to continue to be around black students, challenging them. I can't go anywhere else. I would go completely mad or become irrelevant if I were to go to a white school, because I can't let go of race. It's my daily reality. In fact, more than the *political*, I think that *cultural* racism is the center of our twenty-first century struggle. And so, yes I do travel to schools; I lecture white students. I'm a novelty in many of those universities. But if I insist on staying and working in those universities every day, I will be stoned to death. I feel more at home at an HBCU. The students are precious, and I still have a lot of work to do there.