

## Haile Gerima: An African Film Master.

by

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I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude in being invited by the Intercollegiate Department of Black Studies (IDBS) here at the Claremont Colleges, or better still, the Africana Studies, to introduce Haile Gerima in today's proceedings. Haile Gerima is privileging us here at the Claremont Colleges by showing us tonight his newest film, *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999), which will be having an official U. S. Premier opening next week-end in Washington, D. C.

Please note I say openly and publicly in an open forum Haile Gerima without any formalities of any kind. Even though Haile Gerima is a very brilliant thinker and has been an outstanding Professor of Film Studies at Howard University for the last twenty-five years or so, I would like to banish formal etiquettes when referring to him tonight. We do not say Professor Karl Marx or Dr. Frantz Fanon or Mr. Richard Wright or Ms. Toni Morrison when we refer to great figures in intellectual and cultural history. We just say Karl Marx, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon in order to get immediately into the heart of the matter or into the nitty-gritty concerning their singular and unique contribution to human thought or to measure their civilizational activity. Their greatness does not require formal appendages for its understanding or appreciation or designation. This is likewise the same concerning Haile Gerima whom I take to be a great artist, a monumental figure, and simply a colossus.

The second reason for dispensing with formalities tonight is that I have known Haile Gerima for approximately thirty years: from our students days at UCLA in the very early 1970s to our present brotherly friendship today. I could easily mention the intellectual vows all of us, African students, African American students, and Third World students made at UCLA concerning African intellectual and cultural legacies of our time. I could also mention the extraordinary things Haile Gerima said to me in 1980 one amazing night as we travelled all-night long by bus from Nairobi to Mombasa in Kenya. I will summarize what he said to me that historic night about his feelings concerning Africa with this quotation from Frantz Fanon's **Toward the African Revolution** : "To put Africa in motion, to cooperate in its organization, in its regrouping, behind revolutionaty principles. To participate in the ordered movement of a continent---this was really the work I had chosen. . . That is the real Africa, the Africa that we had to let loose in the continental furrow, in the

continental direction. The Africa that we had to guide, mobilize, launch on the offensive. This Africa to come.” I would like to postulate that one of the remarkable achievements of Haile Gerima's film work concerning Africa has been three fold: 1) A search for the real Africa; 2) An endeavour to put Africa behind revolutionary principles; 3) An attempt to postulate the Africa to come. This triadic quest is apparent in three films of Gerima made about Africa: the 1976 film *Harvest: 3000 Years* ; the 1993 film *Sankofa* ; and the 1995 film *An Imperfect Journey* . I think the film we are about to see tonight, *Adwa: An African Victory* may follow within this epistemic pattern, since it is centrally about African resistance to European colonialism, domination and imperialism. Let me add, this historical theme of colonialism and imperialism, is one of the things that establishes the deep affinities between Haile Gerima and Frantz Fanon.

But were I to limit and confine myself to only mentioning Haile Gerima's thematic concerns in relation only to Africa, I would be doing a great disservice to a powerful sociological and cultural vision that seeks to make sense of the historical unities between Africa and the African Diaspora. Haile Gerima has interwoven this great theme of the historical unities of the black world in our time with another all-encompassing theme: the nature of the legacies of black modernities in the twentieth-century. Two films come to mind in this context: *After Winter: Sterling Brown* (1983), a film about the great Harlem Renaissance poet, and *Sankofa* , a film which was not only original in its treatment of African spirituality, but also a breakthrough in establishing new patterns of distribution of independent black films in United States. *Sankofa* points to another fundamental theme of Haile Gerima's: the nature of the philosophy of Pan-Africanism as well as the politics of pan-Africanism in our time.

I remember the four books that had tremendous impact on Haile Gerima during our student days at UCLA: Richard Wright's **American Hunger** , Ngugi wa Thiong'o's **Homecoming** , Paul Robeson's **Here I Stand** , and of course Frantz Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth** . It was because of his commitment to Pan-Africanism that Haile Gerima while a student at UCLA became a member of the cultural movement or artistic school known as the Los Angeles School, which included among many others: Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry, Ben Caldwell, and Carroll Parrott-Blue. Not only is the Los Angeles School the first and only African American film movement in the twentieth-century consisting of major film artists, it is also the first artistic movement to consists of black artists from two continents: Africa and the African Diaspora. The Harlem Renaissance, consisting as it did of Caribbean intellectuals and artists as well as their counterparts among African Americans, was a product of the Americas, rather than of the Black Atlantic, as is the case with the Los Angeles School. Concerning the Negritude Movement of Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor and others, it was largely and singularly a literary movement.

One thing astonishing about Haile Gerima is that here is this African from Ethiopia who has profoundly and deeply immersed himself into African American culture. Or more correctly, I should say he is an African who has transformed himself into an African American yet remaining an African at the same time. To grasp this remarkable feat, one has to be acquainted with four other films by Haile Gerima: his first important film *Child of Resistance* (1972), a film about Angela Davis made at the time he was hunted and incarcerated by the FBI and the Nixon administration; *Ashes and Embers* (1984), a film about a black Vietnam veteran; and *Wilmington 10 USA 10,000* (1981), a film about the false imprisonment of some black militants in that city; and lastly *Bush Mama* (1976), a film about a black woman on welfare in Watts struggling for dignity through a search and identification with Africa. Within the Los Angeles School, *Bush Mama* forms a revealing trilogy with Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984): all three films are about the class struggle of the black working class in Los Angeles. Gerima's *Sankofa* forms a different trilogy with Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* (1990): all three films are centrally about the spirituality of black people at the moment of great historical transitions, either through the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, or through the transformation or migration from the Old History of the South to the New History of the North. All these complex relations indicate that the Los Angeles School was indeed a cultural movement or a 'film school'.

I would like to conclude by indicating the following: that despite the Black Atlantic film work of Haile Gerima, his visual culture is governed by the poetics of African oral narrative traditions. Secondly, Haile Gerima's narrative form of his many different films is unalterably influenced by his father's Amharic theatre, which he experienced when he was very young. In other words, Haile Gerima learned from his father the ethics of artistic creativity. This last observation is apparent to me upon reading Haile Gerima's approximately 600-page autobiographical manuscript, which he has presently privileged me to read through. I can only say here that it is an extraordinary document by any measure. On its publication, this autobiography is going to alter our understanding of African cultural politics in the twentieth-century.

The Haile Gerima we are celebrating tonight at the Claremont Colleges is a product of many of these complex visual and cultural formations.

Now I would like to present the great man himself, Haile Gerima.

Thank You.

(Pomona College, November 11, 1999).