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Good Relations between
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© Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9: Postcards
to Asmara*, 2016 photograph.
Courtesy: Aida Muluneh

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Mogadiscio, Lido. © Delegazione EU in Somalia.

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On Aïda Muluneh's *The World is 9*

The Colors of Protest

In the light of the recent waves of protests responding to the tragic murders of George Floyd in the United States and that of Hachalu Hundessa in Ethiopia, we can interpret Aïda Muluneh's photographs as gathering together the past and present as forms of political protest. In *The World is 9* Muluneh develops a form of visual feminism in which personal and communal history intertwine through symbolic staging of dreamlike colours of paint and cloth.

by Claire Raymond

Ethiopian photographer Aïda Muluneh titles her 2016 collection of photographic works *The World is 9*, quoting her grandmother, who states that «The world is 9, it is never complete and it's never perfect» (Muluneh 2016). These words, and the images that Muluneh creates as tribute to and testimony of her grandmother's insight, have come to the forefront of my mind during the Covid-19 pandemic and the protests responding to the tragic murders of George Floyd in the United States and of Hachalu Hundessa in Ethiopia. The world is not - as it may erroneously seem from the perspective of White, colonialist so-called post-feminist theory - a place of justice and equality. Instead, as Muluneh's grandmother perceives, and as Muluneh's work visually articulates, the world is a place of continued struggle for equality, where history is often misspoken and distorted because those defining history are the oppressors of those silenced by this very definition. Muluneh, in *The World is 9* uses her images to symbolically reclaim the voice of feminism that is not White, not European. Precisely, she claims and instates her vision of Ethiopian history, its past, and future. Her photographically based images draw on strong color palettes of bright, vivid yellows, and blues, that estrange and overturn colonialist practices of reading race. The mostly female and always African figures in *The World is 9* wear vivid hues of yellow, blue, and white and black paint. They wear garments of brightest blue, red, and yellow. Often, their faces are painted with dots down the middle, reflecting Xhosa traditions but also suggesting the problematic of the divided self. As Frantz Fanon argues, a divided self emerges in the violent social world of colonization.¹ And yet, Muluneh's *The World is 9* is ultimately less about the divided self and more evocative of the oneiric self, the self that confronts the past and dreams the future. Conversations between past and present are staged in her photographs: between photographs of the 19th century and the contemporary era, between the deep history

of human society in Ethiopia, reaching back to origins, and forward to a contemporary interpretation of that history.

Muluneh's mixed-media photographic images (mixed-media in the sense that Muluneh deploys paint and cloth in the scenes that she then photographs) establish a conversation between history and the contemporary moment. They are haunted images, evoking deathliness, ghostliness, doubles, in vivid image-texts of survival and revival of self. My paper's subtitle, *The Colors of Protest*, emphasizes Muluneh's photographs gathering together past and present as forms of political protest, including her photographs memorializing Dinkeneshe, reclaiming this anthropological subject, and her photographs contesting colonialist regimes of photography through her singular contemporary reframing of the discourse of Ethiopian, female, feminist, and familial identity.

It is the quest of healing identity that fuels the art of *The World is 9*. For the images are palimpsestic, layering contemporary and historical time. In writing on Muluneh's work, M. Neelika Jayawardane rightly emphasizes the artist's layering of styles, influences, and modes.² The influence of seminal photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibe echoes in Muluneh's formal spaces in which nothing is left to chance. But Muluneh's works are also originary dreamscapes, as Jayawardane indicates.

Consider the image titled *Conversation* (Figure 1). Here, a woman stands before the closed gate of a train or public transportation station. Her skin is painted deathly white with dots echoing Xhosa face painting bisecting her face. Her hair is piled high on her head in a Gothic echo of 19th century hairstyles. She drapes herself in a rich red garment. The gate behind her is infused with subtle shades of inaugural, early morning sky blue, for the image stages and is a time and place of inauguration, a way to begin. We are at a crossroads in this image, a place where a conversation must happen to allow the woman and the viewer to move forward in time. One might say that the woman accosts the viewer, demanding a response. For the



Fig. 2
© Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9; The Departure*, 2016 photograph.

sense of impasse is clear: the gate is shut. The softly colorful rainbow effect around the gate does not obscure that desolate sense of certain train or subway stations in early morning light, the sense of modern dislocation from home and from cultural meaning that attends such places. Above all, Muluneh's photographs seek a way to return to full cultural meaning, just as the photographer herself, after a peripatetic childhood and youth, returned to Addis Ababa because for her it is a place of origin.³ But origin is never easy to reach.

As the oneiric journey of the woman in *Conversation* continues, we board the train itself, in the image *The Departure* (Figure 2). Here, as a passenger in a brightly colored train, the woman who stood before the gate departs. Freud argues that dreams of train rides were premonitions of death, but I contend that here the train ride is not to the woman's death but rather a journey between historical times, a journey that knits together these times that have been violently pulled asunder.⁴ She rides between the violent time of modernization, which heralded trains, and the time of homecoming, a time during which the woman, the train's sole passenger, is split in two. In one window, she turns to hail us, waving either goodbye or hello, and in the next more forward facing window we see her profile, regal and unconcerned that we are watching. She is looking into the future, her future. It is a public-private image of transportation toward a necessary destination.

Against Freudian theory of the uncanniness of the *doppelgänger*, here I would suggest the doubled self-motif of the two women - a motif frequently deployed in the images that constitute Muluneh's *The World is 9* - is not a figure for death but of rebirth, a way to make whole the bifurcated self that Frantz Fanon

so eloquently limns as the masked self.⁵ *The Departure*, then, is not a ride to death but a ride home, even as the doubled figure and the white paint against her skin suggest the difficulty of her passage home. Blue shadows deepen the windows, as we are immersed in the water or sky element of inauguration and rebirth. The intimation of sky and rebirth may be an oblique reference to Waaqa, the god of the sky in Indigenous Oromo religion. Blue however is only part of the palette of the work.⁶ The red garment of the traveler, the sharp cupric azure and deep saffron yellow of the train car, pull the train far away from Freudian notions of death and otherness. On the contrary, we see in *The Departure* the peril and pleasure of seeking home when home is a fractured landscape having suffered a violent history. While Ethiopia was only briefly colonized, it is arguable that efforts to resist European violence themselves became violent as the mid-19th century efforts of Emperor Tewodros to modernize the country led to a sharp intensification of militarization.⁷

Violence, then, arises not only from outside aggression but also from governmental acts. This is part of the duality of violence that Muluneh's work addresses. Consider that as I write in summer of 2020, in the United States we have seen mass protests against the lynching of George Floyd suppressed with paramilitary violence, while in Ethiopia protests against the murder of musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa resulted in the deaths of some one-hundred-sixty protestors, with intense crackdowns to control the protests and resistance. Hundessa was himself an activist, and his killing may have been connected with that role. Fragmentation of social worlds, and ethnic groups, creates pressures and dualities within Ethiopia.⁸ Muluneh's mournful dreamscape images, then, are by no means simply a way to fight clichés. On the contrary, they seek understanding of Ethiopian identity outside the context of whatever we might deem to be the European view. It is fair to say her works are not meant primarily for the European view. The primary audience is Ethiopian. Consider *Tizita/Nostalgia*, a work in which we see two women's portraits in identical traditional ornate gold stained frames (Figure 3). One is a

19th century woman, shown in sepia, harkening to Africa's deep history of photography.⁹ This woman appears wealthy and pensive. Her counterpart, the 21st century woman, is painted bright vigorous blue, alluding to inaugural moments of dawn and rebirth. The background, however, of the 21st century woman's portrait is vivid red. There

is rage in the background, rage indeed stretching between 19th century compromises that enabled survival and 21st century backward glances.

Between nostalgia and future dreaming is the evocative title that Muluneh and Jayawardane choose for the paper in which Jayawardane discusses Muluneh's work. The suggestion of liminality is potent in Muluneh's *The World is 9*. Her work attests that we must not stay in the realm of nostalgia or we will never move forward because we will not encounter the truth of the

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She claims and instates her vision of Ethiopian history, its past, and future. Her photographically based images draw on strong color palettes of bright, vivid yellows, and blues, that estrange and overturn colonialist practices of reading race.

failed conditions of history - history is always, as Muluneh's grandmother notes, failed. And yet also we must dream the future because it is always arriving.

Turning to deeper history, I invoke Muluneh's magnificent triptych meditating on the woman whom White anthropologists dubbed "Lucy," an early hominid discovered by American Donald Johanson at Hadar, in Ethiopia. I have written before on these three images, but engage the moment here to query more deeply the ways that Muluneh contests White anthropological naming and gazing and reclaims *Dinkenesh* (in Amharic) for her own heritage.¹⁰

In the triptych *Dinkenesh* (parts 1, 2, and 3) the red garment of the traveler appears, but this time rather than a traveler imbricated with 19th and 20th century cultures, we are brought far deeper into the history of Ethiopia, a place a train won't reach. Even so, *Dinkenesh* is a traveler, for in the series of photographs her fall - this motion in space-time - is the crux of our vision of her life. Whereas anthropologists and paleontologists, almost entirely Western, drove the narrative of the some three million year-old fossil of this woman, Muluneh's photographs reject the colonialist narrative of anthropological discovery of so-called "primitive" beings. Instead Muluneh's work dramatizes a woman's confrontation with her fate.

History is fate after it happens. Muluneh's work returns us to fate, that is, she moves us back through history so that *Dinkenesh* becomes, in the gaze of her camera, not an early hominid but a being with soul and mind, a person, a woman. And this woman is a traveler. We meet her after a grave fall, as she lies on the gray gravel ground in the swirl of her red gown and cape (Figure 4). The look on her face is one of pain, and yet

also a kind of peacefulness attends. Her face looks concentrated, aware of history. It is from this place that history will find her, as here Muluneh reimagines the fall that archeologists hypothesize caused the death, of the one called *Dinkenesh*, some three million years ago. Muluneh imagines her suffering, the pain of the fall, but also her wisdom and transcendence, as

swathed in red cloth (blood and fertility, life and death) she prepares to become what others will know as one of the most famous discoveries of colonialist archeology.

Dinkenesh, as I've said, is a traveler. She not only travels *through* time, arriving in the late 20th century as a "discovery" of White male scientists, reclaimed in the 21st century

by Aida Muluneh, but also she travels through her own mind, as in Muluneh's images we see *Dinkenesh* alive with curiosity about the world, enlivened in the process of seeing and claiming the world. In the next frame, time is reversed. We see *Dinkenesh* climbing the rocky ledge, looking over the precipice. It is her desire to know more, to see more, to look into the landscape, that makes her a human emblem. She embodies, in Muluneh's work, the human longing for knowledge and in particular for knowledge of time - the past and the future, the landscape and the sky's vista. She turns her face from us, the viewers, to see the vista of sky into which she will fall. But in the reverse time of Muluneh's triptych, *Dinkenesh*, here, is spared her fall, or returns from it to continue to explore.

In the third image, as she climbs a tall stone ledge trailing behind her a bridal cape of deepest red, *Dinkenesh* commands the landscape above which she stands, surveying it (Figure 5). Shadows of clouds merge with the shadow cast by the regally standing figure. She is painted white and her copious black hair

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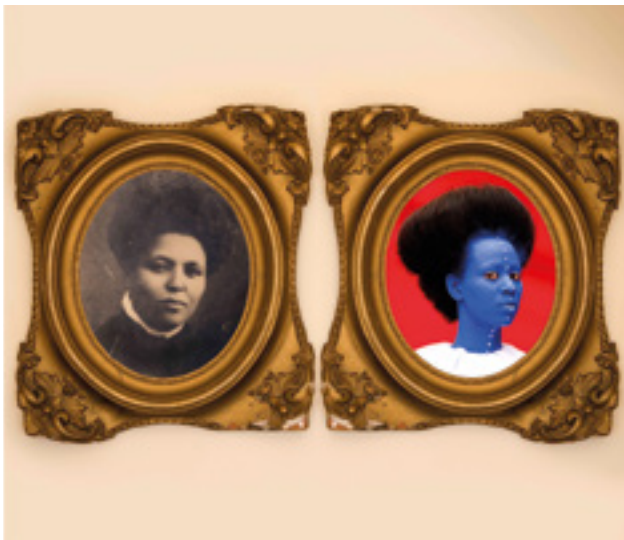


Fig. 3
 © Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9; Tizita/Nostalgia*, 2016 photograph.



Fig. 4
 © Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9; Dinkenesh / Part One*, 2016 photograph.



Fig. 5

© Aida Muluneh, *The World is 9; Dinknesh / Part Three*, 2016 photograph.

sails above her face. The implied movement of cirri (clouds) and woman conjoin with the stark scene, of contrasting blue sky, slate gray stone, red dress, white paint, white clouds, and black hair. The moment is one about to happen, shimmering with anticipation. The woman turns to face us, as we are placed far beneath her, on the low ground below.

In this series, then, Muluneh imagines a process of recovering history, recovering Ethiopian history and female assertion within that history. Ethiopia has a long tradition, since the third century CE, of Orthodox Christianity, a faith that is literally patriarchal, that is, centered around church patriarchs. A pre-colonial Christian faith, it would be beyond the scope of my short paper to immerse the reader into the meaning of the Orthodox faith in a country that even now is influenced by Orthodoxy.¹¹ Here, however, I contemplate the religion's stringently male emphasis. In the Orthodox church, worldwide, there are no female priests, nor formal structure for female voices to be heard. To be clear, Orthodoxy is a religion, by the numbers, primarily European, with Russia, Greece, the nation of Georgia, Bulgaria, Belarus, and others representing significant populations of Orthodoxy. It is a patriarchal faith across all these nations, not just in Ethiopia. Given this context, however, the need to envision female and

feminist agency, female and feminist voice, female and feminist history, as foundational to Ethiopia is urgent. Muluneh meets this urgency with images that sear the imagination, re-envisioning the past through connections with the present, re-envisioning the present by gazing upon the future. The title of an earlier work, *Past/Forward*, articulates this gaze - Muluneh looks at the past through the lens of the

future, drawing together the now with what has been and what may be created if one can re-envision history. These are the stakes of the dreaming gaze she manifests in *The World is 9*, an image world in which African women are time travelers, moving between the past and the future, establishing the possibility of

the present through new and life-giving colors, and symbols, at once melancholy, mournful, and vivid, vibrant, finding the future at the cusp of past losses. This dream of a world that the photographer knows can never be perfect, never whole, is all the more precious because she imparts it with scenes that seem to spring from the harsh clarity and beauty of pre-dawn dreams.

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Muluneh looks at the past through the lens of the future, drawing together the now with what has been and what may be created if one can re-envision history.
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NOTES

- 1 - F. Fanon 1952, p. 77.
- 2 - M. Neelika Jayawardane and Aïda Muluneh 2016, pp. 116-131.
- 3 - E. Iduma 2017, pp. 20-25.
- 4 - S. Freud 1899, p. 162.
- 5 - F. Fanon 1952, p. 198.
- 6 - T. Etefa, 2012, pp. 127-131.
- 7 - A. Jalata 2009, pp. 1-26.
- 8 - K. Milbourne 2014, p. 138.
- 9 - R. Vokes and D. Newbury 2018, pp. 1-10.
- 10 - C. Raymond 2017, pp. 45-57.
- 11 - A. van Wieringen 2019, pp. 3-6.

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The World is 9 di Aïda Muluneh. I colori della protesta

Per la sua serie fotografica *The World is 9* (*Il mondo è 9*), l'artista etiopica Aïda Muluneh ha preso spunto dalle parole della nonna: "Il mondo è 9, non è mai completo e non è mai perfetto". Queste parole, e le immagini create da Muluneh, risuonano di un significato amplificato in un momento storico segnato dalla pandemia Covid-19 e dalle proteste seguite ai tragici assassinii di George Floyd negli Stati Uniti e di Hachalu Hundessa in Etiopia. Il mondo, ben lungi dall'essere caratterizzato da giustizia ed uguaglianza, è un luogo in cui bisogna lottare per i diritti, in cui la storia è spesso distorta perché sono gli oppressori a definirla.

Muluneh usa le sue immagini come forma di protesta politica, per reclamare simbolicamente una voce femminista non bianca, non europea. In particolare, rivendica la sua visione della storia etiopica, del suo passato e del suo futuro. Le sue opere fotografiche, accese da forti e vividi gialli, rossi e blu, coinvolgono lo spettatore in una sorta di *tour de force* onirico che stravolge e ribalta le pratiche colonialiste.

Emblematico in questo senso è il trittico *Dinkenesh*, una riflessione sulla donna che gli antropologi bianchi hanno chiamato "Lucy", l'ominide scoperto da Donald Johanson a Hadar, in Etiopia. Muluneh contesta lo sguardo bianco su questa donna e se ne riappropria, rivendicandone l'eredità culturale. Lo fa recuperando il nome amaro della donna (*Dinkenesh* appunto), e riportandola in vita, mostrandola come una donna, una persona reale con anima e mente, che si confronta al suo destino – anziché ridurla alla narrativa coloniale della scoperta antropologica di un essere "primitivo" vissuto 3 milioni di anni fa. In questa serie, Muluneh ci racconta di una donna viaggiatrice, nel tempo ma anche nella sua stessa mente – la vediamo nell'evolversi delle sue emozioni, curiosa e padrona del mondo a cui si confronta. Attraverso queste immagini, l'artista ci accompagna in un processo di recupero e rivendicazione femminista della storia: la storia dell'Etiopia, e l'affermazione della donna in quella storia.

In tutta la serie *The World is 9* si va prefigurando un mondo immaginario, i cui le donne africane viaggiano nel tempo, si muovono tra passato e futuro, stabilendo così la possibilità del presente – attraverso l'uso di colori rigeneranti e simboli allo stesso tempo melanconici, dolorosi, vividi e vibranti. Questo sogno di un mondo che – Muluneh lo sa bene – non potrà mai essere perfetto, mai intero, è prezioso tanto più perché si rivela attraverso scene che sembrano emergere dalla chiarezza e bellezza dei sogni prima dell'alba.