

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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African Americans and the African world.

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**Who Can Afford to Forget?
Represent Our Resistance
By Dr. Lenore J. Daniels, PhD
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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"SE wo werE fi na wosankofa a yenkyi."
There's nothing wrong with learning from hindsight.

-Sankofa

"Don't look down."

I didn't like the grass around the house I was renting then. It was hard to cut grass on little hilly slopes, and, as a result, the grass around that house didn't look so neat and trim.

"If you are stressed by it, don't look down," she, an older woman neighbor, advised.

When I flew into the Ethiopia, I flew right through a most amazing spread of bright yellow light.

The ride to Alemaya from Addis Ababa takes two days and two nights. We crossed mountains with little vegetation, only broken by long stretches of a road on flat almost bare land, passing herders of sheep and goat and women carrying water. When we reached the mountains, my Ethiopian supervisor said that people are born, live, and die in those mountains without ever standing on level ground.

I need a computer. The U.S. teachers had been told computers would be available along with books. It didn't take long to realize how important it was for me to have brought books with me. But now in Alemaya, Ethiopia, along the border of Somalia, I have no way of working or communicating with others back home.

But look at the sky, beautiful weather and smell the fresh air!

I never had a way of communicating with friends back home from this campus, but I did receive a new Toshiba laptop!

The Ethiopian campus administrators assured me they were working on a solution. I began my classes, met my students. A few were women.

It began with one or two women students.

Can we have a meeting with you?

It was about thirty-five women students. The students selected a convenient evening, and we met in a classroom. Their dorms were horrible, they told me. They didn't have books and computers, even though previous teachers and programs from the West shipped both books and computers to the campus. The male teachers and students ask them for sexual favors. Teachers from the West come and go. So maybe it will be the same, they said out loud. It will be the same. Maybe you will forget us, too.

In order to see the dorms that housed the women students, I had to take a campus vehicle with a campus hired hand to travel down the road to the dorms. The campus operated a massive farm for the study of agriculture. Well behind the campus buildings and faculty housing was an area for the livestock. Students, faculty and the community could purchase milk, butter, and bread from the campus. Some distance away we came to the dorms for students.

I stood outside the truck looking at the women dorms. I saw young women sitting on the window sills and the curtains blew out around them. *Abandoned* public housing buildings? What is this? For male students, the buildings were in slightly better shape, but only enough so male students would recognize their supremacy over the women.

I saw a high level Ethiopian administrator approaching me.

Why are you here?

No comment.

The next minute, I was in the passenger seat of his car, heading back to the campus. He talked about the campus but didn't mention the dorms.

A few days later, I was invited to take a ride with this same administrator to pick up my laptop. We took the drive down the same road, stopping at a huge warehouse. We got out and entered. The administrator spoke Amharic to the man behind the counter. The man disappeared between the shelves. These shelves extended from one end to the other; they were filled with supplies and electronic equipment! The women students told me they had seen boxes of books come into the campus. But the boxes

disappeared. I was sure the boxes of books were here too. The items in this warehouse could have made life better for the students. But - and I looked at the well dressed, suit and tie administrator, but he didn't look at me. The other man returned with the Toshiba.

You have something the others don't have, right?

I looked out the window at the hired men and women in dingy and tattered garbs looking at the administrator and at me as we passed. I saw my grandfather, dead for many years. A janitor - always in his gray-stripped overalls, hauling trash cans from the first to the third floor of the buildings he tended in the neighborhood. And then I saw the women students, waiting for someone not to forget them.

Back at the campus entrance, we passed the gathering of men and women who always hung around the high-fenced gate with hopes of employment or free food. Men in green army uniforms, release the latch on the high gate. The place I returned to was no longer the same place I left earlier that day.

My English department (Ethiopian-Oromo and Indian) held faculty meetings, but a Nigerian woman and I were never told about these meetings. We are being excluded I told my supervisor in a phone call to Addis Ababa. A few days later, he arrived in Alemaya where we met with the department chair. The two men conversed mostly in English but also in Amharic. Finally, I asked a question: "What do you fear?" I'm sitting here. I exist! Both men looked at me. The supervisor, who seemed to know he had the "wrong kind" of Black person on his staff, hesitated but then he repeated the question to the chair.

Two weeks later, I found a flyer on the English department door. It was written in Amharic!

You women have your notice!

Maybe you will forget us, too.

Back on the road again, and I am on the way to Addis Ababa with my supervisor. As I was leaving the Alemaya region, I was thinking about a small town I passed through almost every Saturday on my way to the markets in Harar. Women produce chat, in this small town. They sit on the side of the road, some packaging the leaves in clear plastic bags and others press their faces and the bags on the windows of cars stopping for pedestrians. Chat is legal and cheap. It's cheaper than a poverty program. "Mellow" people are a less demanding people. If I heard someone young had died and asked how - the people would shake their heads and walk away. But soon, I understood that if the person was young, in their twenties, and died *suddenly*, it was chat. Others suffered lingering deaths from aids.

This land in the south and in the east is inhabited, for the most part, by the largest ethnic group, the Oromo. And I knew before I arrived in Ethiopia that the Oromo wanted the Amharic-controlled government to return the land to them. Walking is the primary mode of transportation and the people walk and walk. In the evenings, they sit and sleep on the earth. I can still see the flames of camp fires spread across the landscape where women and their children sleep under the dark sky.

In Addis Ababa, several times a day, the call for Muslims and Christians to pray lingered above the corrugated roof top homes built close together and existing alongside or behind Ethiopian businesses. I could occupy my time while waiting for copies at a copy center on Haile Selassie Boulevard (the mainly concrete sidewalk and street where our NGO office was located) by watching women clean their clothes in a pool of muddy water. Behind me, the Ethiopians in the building were dressed well - designer jeans and colorful shirts and blouses. Outside, below, young children, emaciated, clung to the worn clothes of their mothers. More often, young children and teens were alone, and they walked the streets either looking for food or offering to work for money. Music shops featured an Ethiopian male or female singer, but rap and hip hop DVDs also stocked the shelves. Other shops with U.S. football and basketball jackets were adjacent to Ethiopian restaurants. Old blue and white taxis (a 6-seater but usually packed with 8 or 9 people) were everywhere and the big pick-pocket-heaven diesel buses really had passengers packed against the windows and doors.

Men, young and old, dressed in khakis and jackets or just rough-cut dark shawls, leading cattle, goats, or chickens to market, have the right to be everywhere and be seen everywhere. I walked among the white shawl women (Christians) and the women in the black chadors (Muslims). Women look older under the yellow light.

Work takes place outside, for the "kitchens" are a space near the home where they work or outside a market where other women work as sellers of produce and owners of food stalls. Work is hauling concrete blocks on a construction site. Other women work lugging wood or water, walking in sandals or bare feet. Some were store clerks and secretaries. But at the time, only one official organization represented women. I learned to cover my dreads because, in Ethiopia, men, mostly high priests, wore dreads.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Bole Avenue is another world. Bole Avenue has sidewalks and western style cafes and grocery stores and stores like Sony, selling big-screen televisions and stereos. There are clothing stores with Western wear and stores with all the appliances a middle class or wealthy Ethiopian or expatriate desires to emulate the West household. Nike, Mc Donalds, IBM and all the other corporations and their products were well represented on Bole Avenue. Every nation had an embassy in Ethiopia. Most all of them were located on Bole Avenue! Why not? Nice structures with all the amenities, including running water, toilets, and generators to maintain lights even on the designated days when neighborhoods experienced "lights out" to conserve energy! Not far away, a Sheraton Hotel and a Hilton Hotel, each sat in lush green spaces of their own. A simple dinner at the Hilton Hotel then was roughly 150 Birr! My teacher's stipend of 800 USD a month (600 with taxes withheld) was over 6,000 Birr a month in a country where possessing 1 Birr is (for many Ethiopians) as impossible as possessing 1 million U.S.D for the average American.

Who wouldn't love the "democratic" government? It makes you forget!

I taught a graduate level African Caribbean Women's course with a well informed Ethiopian male faculty member at Addis Ababa University. My chair, educated in England, had no time to supervise or discuss with a woman, let alone an American

woman. I was able to work with a woman's association. I paid to copy the books I had with me to add to a bookshelf of books for women students. The chair didn't attend the workshops I conducted on women's issues, but there was always at least one male from the staff, just listening.

There was a big screen television at one Ethiopian hotel (my favorite) near the center of the city on Haile Selassie Boulevard. More accessible and inexpensive, at this hotel, European and African expatriates, middle class Ethiopians, embassy, and NGO personnel could catch the graphic depictions of U.S. fighter planes and smart weaponry "advertised" as news on CNN International.

This model can pinpoint its target with amazing accuracy...

Saddam, the evildoer...

Scud missiles are no match...

One Sierra Leone embassy personnel recognized I wasn't Condi Rice or Oprah Winfrey. He listened to my concerns and supplied me with the contact information to gain access to the UN. I was thinking about the 35 women students back in Alemaya, but no one at the UN was interested.

I gained access to the African Union, the division focusing on women's issues. They were not interested in some young women clear across the country, but while there, I saw a hallway display of posters and pamphlets about the practice of genital mutilation. I picked up a batch of pamphlets thinking I could distribute this information to my students and generate discussion. I showed the pamphlets to the assistant supervisor, and she (educated in the U.S.) told me that I was not to hand out the pamphlets. But the students...

No. Forget it!

Democracy? So many have died for *this* democracy?

There were dark figures in the sky when I looked up again.

What are those?

What? What?

And soon I realized those dark figures were hawks and vultures because below, on the grass, between the traffic of taxis and buses on one side and people walking on another, were the dying. Dark ashy skin, barely clothed, covered the bones of someone (I couldn't tell) dying in the open, under the yellow sky.

As it approached March, 2003, I learned to nod in the affirmative when the men call out, "Jamaica." Among the women at the markets, among the sacks of fresh basil, ginger, peppers, rice, green vegetables, mangoes, and bananas, I nod and keep walking. Jamaica. The Ethiopian Muslim population, numerically large, voiced its opposition to the pending invasion of Iraq. But the "democratic" government doesn't permit its fellow citizens the right to voice their opposition in the open. Ethiopians know

the very real fear of imprisonment. Die in the open, but you will not protest in the open! In the meantime, the U.S. Embassy sent us a notice: Stay home for the first four days of the air strike in Iraq. Watch the show!

I sat in my home, in the dark, listening to BBC and the women outside my door talking in whispers. Planes from the U.S. airbases were flying overhead. It was 9:00 p.m., and the planes were on their way to join others in Iraq.

The strikes continued. I couldn't watch the show except at that one hotel and even then I couldn't bear to watch the show. On the streets of Addis Ababa, I knew I had encountered a Muslim man if I was pushed and then I observed him uttering something with anger.

While the hawks and vultures took their break, the planes flew overhead to Iraq in the evenings.

Development - the American Way!

Hoist a few to the top at the expense of the masses and you have a U.S.-brand of political and economic oppression. Community members are no longer fellow citizens. *Development* fosters corruption since it begins with the premise that something will trickle down from the sky and, if the masses are lucky, they will catch it. They do, but it's called shit by then! *Development* is all about the advancement of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, installing the newest U.S. military base to further aggressive "development." *Development* is U.S. military aggression by proxy: Somalia and then Gaza, with a legacy of global economic disaster.

Washington D.C. is performing a farce we've seen before: A front face makes it appear that a team of busy bees are slaving away to remedy the domestic crisis with a "stimulus package," (that is, a package that returns some workers to jobs and enough women to the malls), when the real government, less visible, engages in business as usual, funnels bank rolls of billions to its War on Terrorism Enterprise!

Who can afford to forget!

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member, Lenore Jean Daniels, PhD, has been a writer, for over thirty years of commentary, resistance criticism and cultural theory, and short stories with a Marxist sensibility to the impact of cultural narrative violence and its antithesis, resistance narratives. With entrenched dedication to justice and equality, she has served as a coordinator of student and community resistance projects that encourage the Black Feminist idea of an equalitarian community and facilitator of student-teacher communities behind the walls of academia for the last twenty years. Dr. Daniels holds a PhD in Modern American Literatures, with a specialty in Cultural Theory (race, gender, class narratives) from Loyola University, Chicago. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Daniels.

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