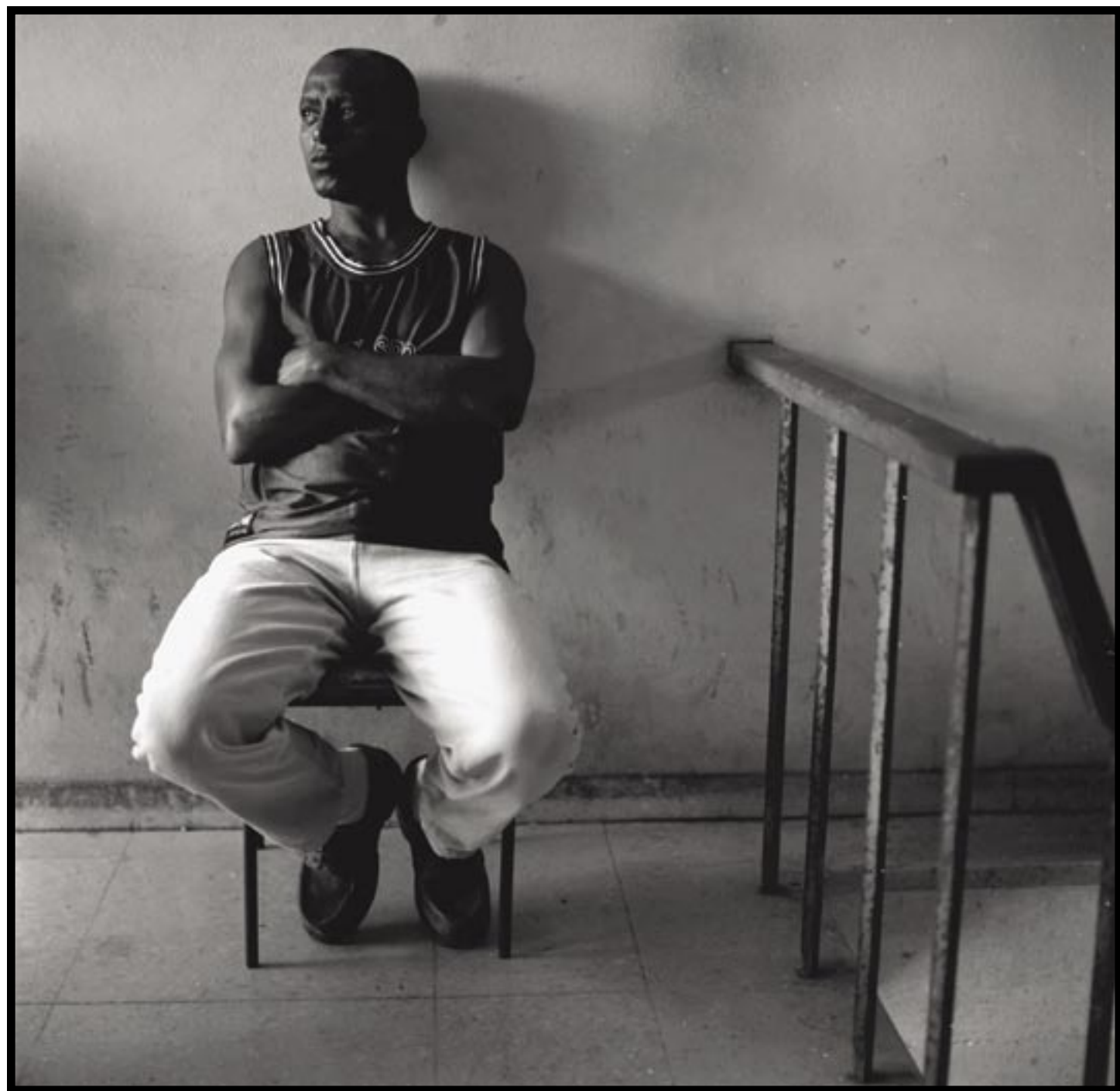


Healing the “Un- healing Wound”

by
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Determination to change the way the western world views Ethiopia and the rest of Africa is what Aida Muluneh's professional and to some degree interpersonal life is all about. Muluneh, 32 year old, is an accomplished photographer who captures images of classic and refined lifestyles of Ethiopians. She is driven by the need to help change the branded images of starved or dying Ethiopian children from the famine of 1984/5 that the world, especially the West, identifies as Ethiopia.

A graduate of Howard University in Washington D.C., with a degree in film, Muluneh says photography for her "has always been about telling a story." She now expands her storytelling to include the medium of film with her first and current documentary "Unhealing Wound."

"My passion is always going to be photography. But, sometimes, I feel photography is [not as far reaching] for the message[s] I am trying to get across," says Muluneh. "I have found that the film format fits perfectly [in] elaborating my ideas and my thoughts."

The "Unhealing Wound" is more like a documentary fit for Public Broadcasting Station [PBS], as it seems similar to the PBS documentary "The Lost Boys." It is a collection of stories of orphaned children of Ethiopian soldiers who fought in the 1977/78 Ethio-Somali war. Muluneh explains that during the Ethio-Somali war, Cuba, a communist nation, had a great relationship with Ethiopia under the communist leadership of Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. In fact, Cuba sent thousands of its young soldiers to fight alongside Ethiopians in the war. After the war, Cuba offered to import and educate about 4,000 Ethiopian mostly war orphans who ranged in age from six to thirteen years old. "The Cuban government said we have the facilities, we can provide adequate training and send [your children] back as doctors, engineers and so forth," says Muluneh.

Tragically, however, the mostly war orphans "got caught up in political red tape and were basically abandoned." The Ethiopian government in exchange for Cuba's offer had promised financial support and a return trip to Ethiopia, every two years, for these war orphans/students. The government never kept its promise.

While these students appeared to have received education, shelter, food and clothing, they were, according to Muluneh, also exploited and forced to do hard labor in the grapefruit fields of Cuba. Some of these students later escaped to European countries. Others still reside in Cuba living poverty stricken lives.

Muluneh stumbled on the idea of "Un-

healing Wound" in 2003 when her photographic work took her to Cuba to a group show called the "Imagenes Havana." While there, she met thirty of these students who told her their stories.

Their stories resonated strongly with her. "I can't possibly tell you that I know what these group of students have gone through," says Muluneh as the inflection of her voice becomes faint and introspective. "I haven't been in their shoes," she adds. Pausing and then continuing she says, "[b]ut, from my personal experience, having spent time on an island going to boarding school, being in a complete different culture, different society and trying to assimilate, I can relate."

Muluneh is indeed very familiar with the feelings of displacement evidenced in "Unhealing Wound." The mid-1970s to the 1980s saw a revolution in Ethiopia. Muluneh was born in 1974. At the time of her birth, Emperor Haile Selassie had just been overthrown as Ethiopia's leader with the subsequent introduction of the Dergue [Military Committee]. The Dergue under the leadership of General Aman Amdon pushed socialism on Ethiopians and they readily accepted because of the positive actions exhibited by the government. However, General Amdon was executed, as a result of preferring to resolve the Eritrean crisis peacefully. After his death, Socialism quickly converted into blood shed and created a massive exodus of Ethiopians to neighboring and European countries.

For Muluneh's family, her mother sent her to the Middle Eastern country of Yemen. Muluneh says Yemen had no "formal structure or educational facility." So, for an education, her mother sent her to the Eurasian Island nation of Cyprus. In Cyprus, she was placed in a boarding school. She was isolated from her family, friends, country and had to adjust to a new culture, language, people and value systems. Between 1980 to 1984, Muluneh would immigrate to Canada.

Once in Canada, she again had to adjust to a new country, people, culture and value systems. This time, however, what troubled her the most was the ignorance displayed by the West for Ethiopia. "I was living in the most remote part of Canada. I was one of two black kids in my class. There weren't that many immigrant children [at the time]. I grew up with that stigma attached so everybody when they thought about Ethiopia and Africa, they thought we were all dying and starving," says Muluneh as she reflected on the past.

She was subjected to questions such as, "[i]s it a jungle out there". "[D]id you live in huts?"



TOP: AIDA MULUNEH;
BOTTOM: TEENAGERS
IN CUBA



TOP: ARIEN AND
HIS BROTHER —
HAVANNA, CUBA;
BOTTOM: TEENAGE
GIRLS IN CUBA



AREDO



TEDDY

"[D]o you have an elephant?" Muluneh says she got tired of "such ridiculousness."

In 1985, Muluneh made one final move to the United States. She, however, was again confronted with the same ridiculous questions. It made a deep impression on her. Five years later, she decided to fight the stigma by showing the West how Ethiopians truly live. She got a camera and started capturing images of the refined, simple and elegant lifestyles of Ethiopians.

"The media is completely saturated with all these images of what Ethiopia and Africa is and it is not the complete picture!" she exclaims. There is a new generation of us trying to put Ethiopia on the map in a [different light]."

Sixteen years later and a very accomplished photographer, she continues to capture the story of the everyday life of Ethiopians which led her to the discovery of the subjects of the "Unhealing Wound."

For Muluneh, making the "Unhealing Wound" had presented a series of challenges. Initially, she started with grass-root efforts by trying to mobilize like minded people to help return these students to Ethiopia. She spoke as an activist to numerous global community organizations including the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR. She sent researched packets to legislators, among many, asking for help, but she quickly realized she was largely on her own.

Under the United Nations' guidelines, these students are not considered refugees. Further, her efforts raised logical and practical issues. For example, what is the point of returning these students, who have been in Cuba for almost 30 years, to Ethiopia? Don't they become displaced again? Most of these students are accustomed to Cuban culture, language and values it would mean another culture shock. Is this the result sought? What about the economic/governmental infrastructure to provide assistance to these students as they transition into life in Ethiopia?

Muluneh acknowledges the above questions are some of the real challenges she faces with her attempts to return these students to Ethiopia. "The Ethiopian government has said that these students are free to come back because they are still citizens," says Muluneh. "My argument is they come back to Ethiopia and have not been to the [country] for almost 30 years, so what happens next? [W]ho is going to support them? Some of them barely speak the language so the government needs to support them."

She concludes, "their life in Cuba is a waiting game. They are trying to figure out

where they can go, where they can earn a living and have a decent life and control over what ever is left of their future."

An equally big challenge, for Muluneh, is whether Ethiopians want this story told. "Aside from the Ethiopian government, there are people that do not want the story to come out," says Muluneh. "[I]t is a part of their life they just want to forget about."

Muluneh, however, thinks the "Unhealing Wound" is an attempt to tell "relevant history." She adds, "I [am] really amazed how Ethiopians, forget about the rest of the world, even Ethiopians [are] not aware of these students in Cuba." Continuing in a soft but passionate tone, "there are still lots of things in Ethiopia that we have not healed from. We have not [arrived] at a point where we actually discuss [and] grow from [our] experiences."

Besides the preferred amnesia and/silence by a lot, the challenge has also been the absence of documented evidence and the difficult financial constraints that come with making a film. "I spent a lot of time at the Library of Congress trying to find information. There isn't a specific text or book talking about this specific exchange of students," says Muluneh. There is lack of record on "what happened to these students while they were in Cuba."

As a result, Muluneh has been confined largely to direct personal accounts from these students, some of which she met in Cuba. "The story really continues to unfold," says Muluneh.

The financial constraints are "inevitable." What frustrates her most is the lack of appreciation of cinema by the Ethiopian community. "The Ethiopian community does not understand cinema and its importance." This, for Muluneh, makes it very difficult to find funding and to obtain supporters to help complete the film.

"I am hoping that the North America 'funders' will be open to a documentary about Africa." Chuckling she says, "right now in Hollywood, Africa is the big thing. A lot of times when I pitch my story [I] am asked 'who is your audience'? Once I reveal that it is an Ethiopian story, [I] get, 'that is a small audience,' says Muluneh expressing her frustration.

"This is a human story about children being abandoned and being in a different part of the world. There are lots who are immigrants that understand the immigrant experience."

Muluneh hopes Ethiopians and Africans alike watching and learning about the story of the "Unhealing Wound" will pull together to help heal the wound by finding solutions for these abandoned students. ❏



TOP: AIDA MULUNEH;
BOTTOM: GROUP OF
BOYS IN CUBA