TEODROS KIROS’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE


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Teodros Kiros is one of our foremost contemporary Africana thinkers. His works on moral, political, and social philosophy including *Toward the Construction of a Theory of Political Action* (1985), *Moral Philosophy and Development* (1992), and *Self-Construction and the Formation of Human Values* have received various accolades, among them the Michael Harrington award. Kiros’s contributions to modern African philosophy and politics—particularly with regards to his homeland, Ethiopia—, however, arguably are his greatest contribution to living thought. One observes this in Kiros’s many books and essays such as *Explorations in African Political Thought* (2001), “Frantz Fanon (1925-1961)” (2004), “Zera Yacob and Traditional Ethiopian Philosophy” (2004), the highly original *Zara Yacob: Rationality of the Human Heart* (2005), *Philosophical Essays* (2011), *Ethiopian Discourse* (2011), and the forthcoming “A Philosophical Re-Reading of Fanon, Nkrumah, and Cabral in the Age of Globalization and Post-Modernity.”

*Zara Yacob* delineates two traditions in Ethiopian thought: classical philosophy and the modern rationalist philosophy inaugurated by Yacob (2005: 1-29). Its examination of Yacob’s long under-studied seventeenth-century treatise, *Hatata*, and the transformations of Yacob’s thought by his student Walda Heywat challenge discourses in the field of African philosophy surrounding the forms of texts—e.g. written compared to oral—asserted as foundational to African intellectual production. Kiros calls into question René Descartes’s dualist conception of the self and the Cartesian aftermath in the West. Kiros also doubts models of reason and rationality in critical theory and liberal political thought respectively posited in the wake of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. He locates, as Zara Yacob did, the idea of reason in the human heart rather than the brain (2005: 39-80, 117-45). This is a provocative cardocentrist position. Whilst this may view be an irrational thesis, it is a profoundly reasonable conclusion in Kiros’s political imagination. The Rastafari develop a creolized articulation of this position.

Moreover, Kiros has been host of the widely viewed television show *African Ascent*, wherein he interviews prominent philosophers, social critics, activists, and musicians. The audio-visual medium serves as another platform to communicate ideas. Kiros possesses the gift of being able to translate complex philosophical concepts to specialists and lay audiences alike.

Until recently, Kiros conveyed concepts in the written medium through non-fiction. While continuing to publish in that style, he has taken a welcome turn towards composing fiction, especially short stories. For at least the last seventy-five years, leading Africana thinkers who have published both critically acclaimed fiction and non-fiction often are known first for their works in the former genre. Think of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maryse Condé, George Lamming, Orlando Patterson, Michelle Cliff, Wilson Harris, Edwidge Danticat, Sylvia Wynter, Dionne Brand, Wole Soyinka, Ngûgî wa Thiong’o, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Teju Cole, and
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. There are other thinkers who have written short stories, novels, poetry, and plays prior to essays and non-fiction treatises, but knowledge of these works has received negligible attention due to either their limited circulation or unpublished manuscripts status. C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon belong to this category. In the forthcoming novel Cambridge Days and impressive collection under review, Hirut and Hailu and Other Short Stories (2014), Kiros reverses the conventional trend through the creation of original poetivist works postdating his non-fiction texts.

A single word encapsulates the core theme of Hirut and Hailu: love. Kiros understands the potential for language to transform the lives of agents and the importance of articulating the meaning of key lexicon within a language. He discerns as well what wa Thiong’o refers to as linguicide (death of a language) and linguifam (linguistic famine). Whereas linguicide pertains to languages no longer retrievable as a result of plunder, enslavement, and geopolitics underlying the arc of history, linguifam is the conscious choice to avoid employing or studying African languages and by extension words, vocabularies, and histories integral to the stories and philosophies of a people (2009: 16-18). Kiros’s writings on Zara Yacob and rumination on love combat linguifam.

Kiros dives into the political philosophy of love, employing a poetivist imagination informed by historicism. Wynter (2000) conceives the poetics of words as quasi-magical and integral to love’s knowledge, humanism, and the reimagining of freedom. For Aimé Césaire, “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge” (1996: 134). Édouard Glissant suggests that poetics build community, express an author’s intentions, and forge a disposition of relation between agents (2010: 19). And for Jacques Rancière (2004), the politics of literature highlights ways of doing, saying, acting, and being human; ways not devoid of historicity and complexity.

Kiros’s collection places the imaginary circumstances of the protagonists and their interlocutors within the context of modern Ethiopian history, politics, and the dynamics of diaspora relating a people at home and abroad. It distinguishes itself from notable previous works in contemporary African thought that strive to capture the concept of love and relationship between literature and philosophy but do not accomplish the intellectual intervention Kiros achieves (Appiah 1992, Benmalek 2004, Bidima 2004, Verghese 2009). Its stories’ transnational plots span the geopolitics of Ethiopia, Denmark, and the United States. Readers become acquainted with characters intimately. Some characters that you connect with deeply reflect permanence. Yet there are figures whose archetypes represent the evanescent, the fugitive. The resultant plotlines offer critical insights into the meaning of love, the implications of love for politics, and attendant concepts crucial to our late modern world.

On Love

Hirut and Hailu contains nineteen shorts stories divided into two sections. Part One comprises the first and longest story, “Hirut and Hailu,” and it narrates the lives of Hirut Bekele and Hailu Demeke. The protagonists meet at a disco in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Hirut is a nearly twenty-year old graduate of Addis Ababa University. She is a sexual worker in the informal economy that, despite having a bachelor’s degree, prostitutes as a means to make a basic living. We learn later that Hirut is also an ardent
political activist highly critical of the state’s repression of journalists and free speech more broadly. Ostensibly a liberal democratic state, late modern Ethiopia for Hirut does not purge stringent limitations of the expression of citizens’ opinions that were customary under the prior authoritarian Derg regime, which collapsed in the late 1980s.

Hailu is an upper middle class physician raised in an upper class family from southern Ethiopia. He is in his thirties and a naturalized resident of Denmark, a polity he has resided in for the last decade. Hailu studied philosophy and medicine in Europe, and he maintains a comfortable bourgeois bachelor life in diaspora that nevertheless has an inexplicable void. Hailu has returned to Ethiopia for a period, however, in order to care for his ailing mother whose health has deteriorated. Hailu meets Hirut during an evening of socializing when he needed to clear his mind from the drama of the everyday. When Hirut and Hailu look at one another in the disco for the first time, there is an immediate mutual reaction: “This is love” (4, orig. emphasis). Whether love here indicates solely eros, the potential for philia, and/or what Martin Luther King, Jr. refers to in the famous sermon “Loving Your Enemies” as agape, “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all” (1981: 52), it is not entirely clear yet. An initial reciprocal attraction appears apparent.

Hirut assumes Hailu enters into discourse with her to discuss cost terms for a sexual transaction given the presence of persons at the nightclub on the prowl for that illicit desire. After Hailu dispels this intention, our protagonists begin a series of philosophical and political exchanges on death, rebirth, enslavement, tyranny, poverty, suffering, justice, the sublime, hope, freedom, existence, prisoners of conscience, and, most centrally, love. The story features section headings including “On Love,” “In a Mood for Love,” “Thinking and Flying,” and “Conversation on Baudelaire’s ‘The Balcony’: A Poem for Love.” The protagonists share their respective dreams of a future world in the ensuing weeks and months. They do become romantic lovers. But they become first and foremost best friends. They reminisce in a manner evocative of what Aminatta Forna (2010) calls the memory of love. And they discuss as well both excitement and fear of their life options and the political ramifications of defending specific ideals.

Hailu returns to Copenhagen after his mother’s health improves. He remains in regular long distance contact with Hirut in spite of his mother’s reservations with his relationship with her, principally because of class prejudice, age differential, and ethnic group differences. Hailu subsequently receives professional acclaim in Denmark for saving a young boy’s life. The case is deemed a miracle. It causes Hailu to reconsider the ongoing void his professional success does not fulfill. He formulates a solution, and the solution involves moving across the Atlantic from Copenhagen to Cambridge, Massachusetts to take up a new hospital job. The plan is for Hirut to join Hailu in the United States eventually. With that new base, they could still “build a hospital for the poor people of Ethiopia and contribute to an Ethiopian renaissance in the not too distant future” (33). A renaissance, after all, “describes a moment when the quantity and quality of intellectual and artistic output are perceived as signaling ‘a monumental historical shift’ in the life of a people, nation, or region” (wa Thion’o 2009: 70). Our protagonists are ecstatic about the prospects of auguring this epistemic change. They write each other passionate letters with language and political imagination reflective of Ethiopian and wider continental and diasporic discourses on an African renaissance.
And then the plot thickens. Hirut continues her political activism in Ethiopia while Hailu adjusts to eastern Massachusetts. The circumstances surrounding Hirut’s attendance at a meeting of Ethiopian youth radicalize her. Kiros writes with trenchant prose:

It is a rainy day when Hirut strolls to the meeting. On her way she notices that a young girl not older than ten is standing on a dumpster and competing with cats and dogs, scavenging for the refuse of the city, and not succeeding. The girl and the cats and dogs are aimlessly staring at passerby as their eyes zone in and out from existence and their bodies seem to have given up the will to live. Hirut secretly surveys the scene and immediately shuts her eyes. She closes her eyes in terror and increases her pace without turning to stare at the naked reality of Ethiopian pain. The meeting Hirut is attending features a speaker who is speaking on the Ethiopian condition and he speaks in graphic details about Ethiopian everyday life and the anatomy of tyranny. In a heartbreaking tone, he addresses the recent imprisonment of the leaders of the Ethiopian youth and warns that unless these prisoners are quickly released, the current leaders will pay a heavy price, as the pot of oppression is currently boiling far past the normal degree. As she is listening to the speaker, the reality of the dumpster keeps on visiting her and she cannot help but make it a part of the stream of consciousness that is flowing in her soul. She closes and opens her eyes as the speaker continues documenting the activities of the tyranny in power (32).

Refusing the reduction of human beings to refuse: Hirut make this a primary mission. That courageous decision lands her in prison. Hirut remains defiant during imprisonment. She becomes a prisoner of conscience, a figure she previously philosophized about. Hirut is unapologetic regarding the condemnation of structural injustice and advocacy of the poor and disinherited. “Where is the voice of the voiceless?” Hirut asks. ‘Why are the people not storming the prison gates and freeing the prisoners of conscience?’ she repeats” (42). On speech: Hirut contends she did nothing illegal. Her purported crime is expressing an opinion she believes the state should also be in favor of (maximally) and protect juridically (minimally). Hirut’s criticizes not the Ethiopian people, but the apparatuses of governance that suppress public opinion and pit, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) declares vis-à-vis postrevolutionary Haiti, state against nation.

Hirut experiences hair loss and declining health as a result of trauma, solitary confinement, and a self-imposed one-month hunger strike. After being informed of Hirut’s incarceration, Hailu pens a letter in defense of Hirut addressed to the Ethiopian Prime Minister (PM). Hailu emails a copy of the letter to a friend. “Please remember that you [PM] yourself were once a student—a rebel and a freedom fighter,” Hailu pleas (49, orig. emphasis). “I leave it up to your substantial intelligence, and your conscience, to discontinue crashing the voices of dissent and the fire of democracy” (49). Overcome by the moment, Hailu chooses to return to Ethiopia to visit Hirut in prison.

Hailu, though, experiences unexpected mortal tragedy: his plane explodes en route to Addis due to a mechanical malfunction, killing himself and the two hundred passengers on board. There are no survivors. Upon hearing the news of Hailu’s death
from a prison guard, Hirut faints and dies right afterwards. The Ethiopian PM eventually receives Hailu’s letter following these sudden deaths. While the PM does not inform the country of the letter’s existence, the PM contemplates the significance of its content and the actions of Hirut and Hailu. The story ends stating that our protagonists “both died for love, and both died in love” (50). To be clear: the love articulated in the second half of “Hirut and Hailu” is a form of political love: love grounded in a political philosophy attentive to the interrelationships between civil society and political society, individual and collective, self and world, person and country, and the national and transnational. The implications of political love are manifold, especially for revolutionary politics in counter-revolutionary times.

**Political Love**

The reader transitioning to Part Two of the book witnesses a proliferation of stories (eighteen) with shorter lengths. Kiros nonetheless does us a great service by maintaining an equally high level of intellectual engagement. Some of the stories indeed explore love in terms of romance, playful rapture, and the erotic. One observes this in “A Fleeting Moment,” “In a Mood for Love” (distinct narrative from the Part One subsection of the same heading), and “Friendly Lovers.” Other stories echo Zara Yacob’s preoccupations centuries before in their attempts to make sense of the love-metaphysics nexus. Put differently, Kiros examines in tales such as the “The Light Sleeper” and “Grief” the dilemmas faced by humans who believe in a power higher than humankind and wish to love God, gods, deities, ancestors, and nature even though their daily realities may be tragic, grief-ridden, and patently unfree. Rationality may be located in the heart as Yacob argues, but irrational metaphysical phenomena that can still be interpreted as reasonable exist. We must cope with and confront the irrational when trying to explicate the often unexplainable. Moreover, in “Philip,” readers encounter a character whose day job as a librarian and nighttime vocation as a poet are unable to mitigate the manic depression plaguing him. Philip Ward dies at age fifty-eight having lived a life where the ability to love on multiple registers was snatched away.

Yet, as with Part One, political love persists as the central leitmotif throughout Part Two. Kiros pushes readers to confront the value and efficacy of political imagination. Our capacity to reflect on the actions of the past and the realities of the present provide the bulwark to reimagine a future world. Our commitments towards refashioned constitutionalism and bringing into being our visions of the future are integral to the political love. “Inside a Shack” asks whether in Ethiopia “we can only build in dreams” (55). Guests enter a shack. They are a conglomeration of Haile Selassie University graduates with divergent employment prospects. When nighttime approaches, one of them observes that a hyena chases a goat nearby. Another comments on contemporary politics, to which somebody else retorts: “‘Stop it,’ says the young woman, ‘No politics! I am talking about animals.’ The boy laughs and says, ‘I, too, am talking about animals’” (56). If according to Ethiopian, Aristotelian, and Fanonian dictums the political area is animalization by other means, then revolutionary change requires a type political love forge by education that underscores the nuances of politics. Love in all its pleasures and arduousness, not nihilism, serves as a lesson.
The collection’s most striking tale on political love is “Hunting Agame.” By the way it begins, however, one would not expect this to be the case. Agames refer to Ethiopian “laborers carrying huge baskets on their heads filled with cactus pear” (62), and the practice of hunting Agames amounts to vendor harassment. The story’s main character describes being with a group of friends who target Agames routinely. Agames usually walk barefoot and the group climbs to a mountaintop in order to throw rocks as well as yell at them. One day, an elderly Agame named Tadesse had had enough of the aggravation and disrespect. After a young boy harasses Tadesse, Tadesse speak back, recovering a small amount of money from the boy in the process. A witness runs to the police station to report the seventy-year old instead of reporting the boy and his friends relishing in Tadesse’s ill treatment. Following the eye witness report,

A tall, cruel-looking policeman, who had a reputation for being an Agame-hater, arrived at the scene. He judged the Agame with a mere look, a glance. He concluded that he was guilty and that no matter what the boy had done, an Agame is absolutely prohibited from laying his hands on a boy. In the policeman’s eyes the boy is a person, whereas the Agame is not…The officer screams ruthlessly and then says, “Agame! Do you understand?! You are not a human being! You rogue! You dirty scum! You filthy house of fleas! (66, 69, orig. emphasis).

Sylvia Wynter states in the Jonkonnu musical play Maskarade via a conversation between the folk storyteller Lovey and Lovey’s apprentice, “The rule is love” (2012: 104). Political love works to cultivate the existence of the human after Man. Kiros’s Tadesse is classified as the untermensch, the subhuman, the being deprived of personhood, and the damnés whose actions counter-revolutionary political orders seek to suppress. The police function as an arm of the state and its assault on the damnés of the nation perpetuates the eclipsing of freedom and love.

The policeman publicly beats Tadesse before shepherding him into a cop car and transporting the Agame to prison where he is allowed to bath only once every four weeks. Tadesse dies after five years of incarceration and repeated dehumanization. The narrator, who was a member of the group of harassing youth, decides to study law and work on behalf of the people, the Tadesses, that he failed to treat as human earlier in his life.

Kiros is not an Afro-pessimist. Far from it. Afro-pessimism assumes slaves, the damnés, are socially dead beings with no intrinsic capacity for agency. Kiros rejects this stance. He also is not an Afro-optimist, for the latter worldview still subscribes to the rhetoric of social death. Kiros believes in the inherent ability of humans to be what Fanon calls actional and he thinks humans continually embark upon what I have detailed elsewhere as forms of marronage, or flight (Roberts 2015). Political love requires this constructive vision of alternatives futures.

Hirut and Hailu and Other Short Stories is an important contribution to Africana philosophy, political philosophy, theories of love, transnationalism, and late modern Ethiopian discourse. Let words from “Keep On Dreaming” serve as a concluding rumination:

We humans
We humans
We love easily
Hate quickly
All the good things that people do
Are forgotten too
Luckily there is this lover
Which never forgets
The lover who remembers the dead
Celebrates the present
Oh yes
Oh yes…
The others sing on. Together they dream on (58-59, orig. emphasis).

REFERENCES