

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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34. *Sankofa* and the Art of Archiving Black Atlantic Migrations

Gunja SenGupta

For women of African descent in the Atlantic World, migration has served at once as a source of trauma, a mode of resistance, a resource for regeneration, and a path to diasporic consciousness born of struggle and solidarity. As such, it has supplied a foundational trope in forging a liberatory art and politics of representation that debunks mythologies of female slavery, challenges metanarratives of the nation that rationalized such lore, and offers alternative diasporic visions of Black women as subjects of history. Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa*¹ portrays mobile Black Atlantic women in multiple places framed by an African diasporic metaphysics of "spiral" temporalities and "pidginized" imagery. Such dynamism links ancestors with the unborn in a Pan African story of "becoming" through belonging, forged in the crucible of interplay between history and memory.

In the pages that follow, I place Gerima's depiction of Black women in motion across time and place in conversation with fragments of enslaved resistance from official archives to ask: in what ways might films serve as what the French scholar Pierre Nora famously called *lieux de mémoire* (formal sites of remembrance), for women of the Black Atlantic? How might they constitute a repository of raw materials for exploring the mutual workings of history and memory in the construction of diasporic

1 *Sankofa*, dir. by Haile Gerima (Mypheduh Films, 1993).

identities? How might we use the concept of “sensibility” to translate cinematic languages of story-telling into documents for fleshing out elusive subaltern subjectivities? How do filmic projections of an activist, contingent, and open-ended vision of history that invests the future with the promise of creative fragmentation and continuous rejuvenation, challenge historians to rethink the frontiers of the traditional archive?

Framing Transfiguration

The opening scenes of the Ethiopian-born film-maker Haile Gerima’s 1993 classic, *Sankofa*, set the stage for a deployment of the trope of migration as a strategy for transfiguration.

The first frames project the figure of a woman, cast in wood, her intricately braided head inclined toward the child gazing up at her; a symbol perhaps of Mother Africa where it all began, or her daughters dispersed across the Atlantic World which they had in large part built through their work and reproductive labor.

There follows a montage of images that invokes a far-flung diaspora of ancestral spirits cemented by the trauma of racial slavery. An urgent voiceover summons these ancestors to emerge “from the wounds of the ship”, and tell their story. On the heels of an image of the Akan symbol of the “Sankofa” bird, sitting atop a staff with its head turned backward, the camera takes in American cane fields juxtaposed with West African slave castles, overlaid in shadow by a close-up of a “divine drummer.” These visuals synchronize with the soundtrack of beating drums, incantations, and an exhortation to action. “Lingering spirit of the dead,” urges the Voice as it rises gradually to a pitch, “rise up and possess your bird of passage.” These spirits once inhabited the bodies of “stolen Africans,” who had been “shackled in leg irons,” “raped,” “castrated,” “tarred and feathered,” from “Brazil to Mississippi,” Jamaica, “the fields of Cuba,” the “swamps of Florida, the rice fields of South Carolina,” and “from Alabama to Suriname, up to the canes of Louisiana.” The drummer urges them to “step out of the ocean” and reclaim their history. In this context, the Akan motif of “Sankofa” assumes a meaning well suited to a diasporic project of recovery: travel back to the past, and own it in order to advance. Close-ups of a buzzard in these early scenes launch the metaphorical refrain of this “bird of passage” in the rest of the film,

guiding the protagonists on their journeys through time and place. The vulture might also signify decomposition—an essential prerequisite for the fragmentation and renewal about to come.

Moments later, we meet Mona, a self-described “American” model shooting on location in the slave castles hugging Ghana’s Atlantic coast. Clad successively in haute couture animal-print beachwear, a strawberry-colored wig, and a resplendent wrap and headdress rendered in *Kente*, she laughs and poses for a white photographer against the backdrop of foreign tourists milling around within view of the camera. These scenes invest the site with an aura of both fashion and commodified commemoration that the configuration of sound and images in the inaugural frames promise to deconstruct. That expectation materializes when the self-appointed guardian of that “sacred ground”, the “divine drummer”, places himself in Mona’s path. “Return to your source”, he commands.

And she does, albeit unwittingly. She wanders into the sunlit dungeons which had once served as holding cells for chained captives on the eve of their descent into the dreadful holds of slave ships bound for the horrors of the “Middle Passage.” As the voice of the official tour guide—a representative of the neocolonial state—delivering his neatly packaged narrative to the visitors, fades in the distance, Mona is about to embark on an altogether different sort of experiential voyage into the past of which he speaks. It is one that brought her forebears to the Americas. She disappears in a deafening sound of thunder and an explosion of darkness, to reappear before the solemn faces of human chattel bound in chains—women, men, and children—visible by firelight. They advance toward her as she runs backwards into the tunnels of the slavers’ catacombs, only to be crowded in on all sides by the spirits of her ancestors, appearing to come out of the walls.

The screen fades to black, punctuated by Mona’s screams and sounds of banging on some faraway door of no escape as she fades into a dark passage of time. She has arrived at the start of her journey of “becoming”, when everything she knew about herself has to be fragmented into parts. The film-maker visualizes this process at different points in the film by cutting away to extreme close-ups of faces, eyes, and other body parts. Mona’s eyes are about to transform her gaze upon Africa from the impression of a picturesque, exotic locale for a fashion shoot into

an archive of personal and diasporic history, the key that will unlock her migration to subjectivity. Her African-ness is about to establish its presence even as she is transposed into the epic saga of her people's objectification. We encounter her next in the custody of armed European slave traders, stripped naked to her waist. We flinch at the searing pain of a branding iron that marks her as chattel.

It is, however, at this traumatic moment of history's rewind, when Mona is transformed from an American model into an African captive, and transported as Shola the slave to a sugar plantation in Louisiana, that the authorial voice in the movie shifts to her. It is her point of view that Gerima privileges as he demolishes the portrait of the antebellum plantation as a patriarchal paradise filled with benevolent masters and happy slaves depicted in films like the 1939 classic *Gone with the Wind*. Through her eyes, and the sound of her voice, the spectator witnesses the violence of New World slavery and the inner life of enslaved resistance. And it all culminates in the closing frames of the film in a transfiguration of both Mona and the meaning of the slave castles that once served as the location of her photo shoot. Mona the individual, Mona the (American) national, splinters into Shola as she travels through the wringer of an African diasporic metaphysics of spiral time and plural places. As the curtains go down, she re-emerges in the closing frames of the film, reassembled with a whole new consciousness of self and community that exists in tension with fixed temporalities and nation-state boundaries.

Politics of Representation in the Atlantic World

The Atlantic slave trade marks an appropriate moment to launch Mona's path to diasporic consciousness as one of Africa's daughters named Shola. For that centuries-long commerce laid the basis for the Atlantic World's rise as a theater of violent encounters and cultural exchanges, of population redistribution and disease dissemination, of wealth creation and poverty generation, of technological innovation and *différance* production. New systems of power and knowledge reconfigured the identities of the people involved in these transactions, not simply through the structures of political economy and nation building, but also through new modes of representation which included, as I have

co-written elsewhere, “word and visuals, architecture and rituals, and sound and motion.”²

Within this new politics of representation woven into forced border crossings, history emerged as a major strategy of dominance, resistance, and negotiation. Technologies that re-invented people as chattel, wiped out their pre-enslavement histories, incorporating them instead as eternal subordinates into meta-narratives of new nations emerging

2 On an overview of Atlantic historiography, see Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities”, *American Historical Review*, 111 (June 2006), 741–57. A few examples of Atlantic history include Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hebrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Dylan C. Penningroth, “The Claims of Slaves and Ex-Slaves to Family and Property: A Transatlantic Comparison”, *American Historical Review*, 112 (October 2007), 1039–069; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Bayo Halsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivory: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); John W. Sweet, “The Subject of the Slave Trade: Recent Currents in the Histories of the Atlantic, Great Britain, and Western Africa”, *Early American Studies* 7 (Spring 2009), 1–45; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Awam Amkpa and Gunja SenGupta, “Picturing Homes and Border Crossings: The Slavery Trope in Films of the Black Atlantic”, in Ana Lucia Araujo (ed.), *Paths of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Interactions, Identities, and Images* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011); Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1480–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Joao José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, trans. Arthur Brakel (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

in the New World. African slavery shaped constructs of “race” as the “ultimate trope of difference”³ to rationalize power relations between “masters” and “slaves.” Defenders of racial slavery portrayed peoples of African descent as inherently incapable of participating in the linear progress of reason and individual freedom that defined official national histories and historiographies. Planters of the American South, for instance, sought to shroud the brutalities of “slavery’s capitalism”—of the institutionalization of enslaved people as not simply labor, but as liquid capital, credit and collateral—in a comforting mythology of feudalism-inflected paternalism. The imagery of the plantation as a big, happy household portrayed African-descended women in slavery as promiscuous temptresses à la Jezebel, or as faithful, asexual nurses and household managers lovingly styled “Mammy.” Both constructs served to buttress the structures of patriarchy and white supremacy, of the practices of sexual abuse and labor exploitation, of the foundation of violence and dehumanization that propped up the sordid infrastructure of racial slavery in antebellum America.⁴

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- 3 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Editor’s Introduction: Writing “Race” and the Difference It Makes”, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985), 1–20; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race”, *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992), 251–75.
- 4 On “slavery’s capitalism”, see Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (eds), *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). On the mythologies of female slavery, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985). On enslaved women in the U.S. South through the Civil War era, see the “Introduction” by Jennifer L. Morgan, the essays by Diana Ramey Berry, Stephanie M. H. Camp, Leslie M. Harris, Barbara Krauthamer, and Jessica Millward, and the response by Deborah G. White in the Roundtable, “The History of Women and Slavery: Considering the Impact of *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*”, *Journal of Women’s History* 19 (Summer 2007), 138–69. A sample of the rich and voluminous literature on enslaved women in the U.S. South includes Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21–43; Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Rebecca J. Fraser, *Courtship*

But what of the enslaved in the New World? How did Atlantic slavery reconfigure African-descended people's self-understandings? Scholars have shown that shared historical experiences of violent uprooting, forced migration, chattel bondage, and racism welded disparate cultural and political groups from West and West Central Africa into a common consciousness of diaspora. The African Studies scholar Paul T. Zeleza defines "diaspora" as a complex community created by "real or imagined genealogies and geographies" and a "process-cum-space" for navigating multiple belongings.⁵ It is key to the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy's conception of the "Black Atlantic" as a dynamic space defined by migration and cultures born of engagement between roots (home or imaginings of home), and routes (places you have been; paths you have traveled). Migration determined what it meant to be "Black" in the New World. Subsequently, scholars and artists addressed the limitations of Gilroy's Anglo-Atlantic focus by writing Africa and gender into Black Atlantic narratives. They located the emergence of Afro-Atlantic cultural identities within the transnational and intercultural spaces produced by

and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Pamela Scully and Diana Paton (eds), *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Wilma King, "'Mad' Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts", *Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007), 37–56; Brenda Stevenson, "The Question of the Slave Female Community and Culture in the American South: Methodological and Ideological Approaches", *Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007), 74–95; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Mary E. Frederickson, Darlene Clarke Hine and Delores Walters (eds), *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Alexandra Finley, "'Cash to Corinna': Domestic Labor and Sexual Economy in the 'Fancy Trade'", *Journal of American History* 104 (September 2017), 410–30.

5 Paul Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic", *African Affairs* 104/414 (2005), 35–68 (p. 37).

the experience of diaspora both within and outside Africa. Diasporic sensibilities rendered the historical memory of violent border crossings, as well as the “roots” that pre-dated that history, a principal motif in the construction of a counter-politics of liberation, and the art forms that embodied these politics.⁶

Gerima himself acculturated to an African diasporic sense of self through experiences of anti-Black racism shared with African Americans in the United States—Chicago and LA—where he had moved to pursue graduate work in theater.⁷ Influenced by the independent Black film movement at UCLA, he appeared to view historical consciousness as vital to the project of creating an activist art. Such art necessarily engaged the nexus between power and knowledge production, offering memory as a crucial resource for historicizing identity formation.

History, Memory, Sensibility: Archives and the Art of the African Diaspora

We might locate *Sankofa* within a Black Atlantic methodology of history-telling through film. Such methodology counters the “epistemic violence” embedded in official documents that recorded the transformation of “people into prices”⁸—the instruments of finance, commerce and correspondence maintained by slave traders; the letters, journals, and literature produced by slaveholders; the records of state,

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- 6 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). For a recent perspective on the politics of Black Atlantic scholarship, see Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Patrick Manning, “Africa and the African Diaspora: New Directions of Study”, *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 487–506. Gilroy has been criticized for neglecting the roles of both Africa and gender in shaping modernity; privileging the racialized “minority” paradigm of the African American experience whereas the Caribbean is predominantly Black; and decrying essentialism while constructing the Atlantic world as “Black.” See Zeleza, “Rewriting the African Diaspora”, 37. On the diasporic nature of Africa itself, see Charles Piot, “Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Gilroy’s Black Atlantic”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (Winter 2001), 155–70.
- 7 Diane D. Turner and Muata Kamdibe, “Haile Gerima: In Search of an African Cinema”, *Journal of Black Studies* 38 (July 2008), 968–91 (p. 969).
- 8 I borrow the expression “people into prices” from Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

law and church confounded by the conundrum of “animate chattel.” A deafening silence often greets the professional historian listening hard for marginalized voices in traditional archives—voices freed from the dominant discourses that produced them.⁹

Enslaved rebels in particular rarely lived to tell their tales of resistance, let alone in their own voice. Archival fragments offer only fleeting glimpses of commodified lives at the moment of their brush with structures of law, discipline and punishment.

Consider for example, the well-known case of nineteen-year-old Celia, pregnant and enslaved on a Missouri farm in 1855, amid heightening sectional tensions over the fate of slavery in the trans-Mississippi West. Her middle-aged master, Robert Newsom, had acquired her at the age of fourteen, and raped her repeatedly until one night in June, she clubbed him to death in her cabin. She was discovered, tried and condemned to death by an all-male jury that included slaveholders. Archival sources on her trial tell her story in the words of men with power over her. Her sworn statement before a justice of the peace, for instance, notes,

Celia, a slave, duly sworn, belonging to Robert Newsom says that she killed her master on the night of the 23rd day of June 1855—about two hours after dark by striking him twice on the head with a stick, and then put his body on the fire and burnt it nearly up, then took up the ashes on the morning after daylight. After breakfast, the bones were not entirely burnt up. I took up the ashes and bones out of the fireplace in my cabin where I burnt the body and emptied them on the right hand side of the path leading from my cabin to the stable. Sworn to + attested before us on this 25th day of June 1855. D. M. Whyte J.P.¹⁰

What thoughts and emotions plagued this enslaved teenager in the last months of her life? Did she wonder what would become of her two children, born in slavery, one of them sired through rape by the man

9 On issues of agency and epistemic violence, see Saidiya V. Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See also Morgan, *Laboring Women*, and the references on gender and slavery in footnote 2.

10 “Famous Trials”, by Professor Douglas Linder, <https://famous-trials.com/celia/184-statement>. On this case, see also Wilma King, “‘Mad’ Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts”, *Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007), 37–56.

she executed? What of her enslaved lover George, who had reportedly instructed her to resist her master's assaults, or the stillborn child she delivered in custody? Did scenes from her childhood, spent on a neighboring farm before her sale to Newsom, flash before her mind's eye as she awaited the gallows? Did she weep for the family and community she might have left there?

We shall never know the answer to these questions. The empirical limits of the state archives stand as a wall of silence denying us access to the interiority of "Celia, the Slave" even as reports of her deeds dominated the public sphere of her time and place. How then to overcome epistemic dehumanization? How to reclaim what the historian Marisa Fuentes has recently described as "dispossessed lives" from formal erasure?

In this context, we might think of Black Atlantic films as belonging in a corpus of cultural productions and oral histories that compensate for archival occlusion by delving deep into communal reserves of collective memory, and the artifacts that memorialize them. The French historian Pierre Nora distinguished between *milieux de mémoire* ("real environments of memory"—when memory is part of everyday experience) and *lieux de mémoire* (formal sites of remembrance, like museums, monuments, holidays) which societies manufacture when ruptures with the past cause real environments of memory to fade.¹¹ In interviews, Gerima assigned to his *Sankofa* project the purposes of what we might think of as a *lieux de mémoire*. *Sankofa* underscores the "importance of remembering [...] and the therapeutic power of history", he noted in an interview.¹²

Whereas Gerima saw history and memory as sharing a symbiotic relationship, leading scholars of slavery have sometimes made a distinction between the two. Thus the US historian Ira Berlin set memory apart from history by arguing that memory, unlike history,

11 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*", *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7–25. See also the Introduction by Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn in this special issue of *Representations* on Memory and Counter-Memory. On a critique of Nora's conception of the difference between history and memory, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory", *American Historical Review*, 106 (June 2001), 916–20.

12 Cited in Michael T. Martin, "Podium for the Truth? Reading Slavery and the Neocolonial Project in the Historical Film: *Queimada! (Burn!) and Sankofain Counterpoint*", *Third Text* 23 (November 2009), 717–31 (p. 718).

“rejects a skeptical, detached reconstruction of the past”, and that it “speaks [...] to personal, individual understandings based on the most intimate experiences in families, churches, and communities. It is conveyed through symbols and rituals...”¹³ Yet history and memory are more interdependent than this formulation suggests. Official and professional histories often mediate the meanings that people give to their memories, while professional historians seek to gain access to non-literate worldviews through symbols, rituals, spiritual songs, folk tales, and other cultural productions of the powerless.

Indeed, Gerima, in his endeavor to construct a redemption story for Afro-Atlantic peoples through a recovery of their memories of the past, consulted professional histories about the everyday lives and resistance of the enslaved in the New World. For instance, he drew upon scholarship that revealed the reverberations of the Haitian Revolution from port to plantation in far corners of the Atlantic World, conveyed through the medium of Black sailors, that may have influenced a Denmark Vesey to rise in rebellion in faraway Virginia.¹⁴

Critics who have treated *Sankofa* as a documentary have criticized it for its alleged lack of fidelity to “facts.” They contend that Gerima erased the role of Africa and Africans in the making of Atlantic slavery, and the complex and hybrid nature of Africa itself, that he embraced essentialist ideas of race, and romantic notions of an “organic past.” They have decried the absence of fixed moorings of location and chronology, noting that configurations of geography and economics shaped specific forms of enslaved resistance.¹⁵ Yet, rather than debate whether a purportedly historical film represents “good history” judged by standards of traditional, archive-based empiricism, why not mine the possibilities of Black Atlantic films as primary sources on African diasporic identity formation predicated upon shared histories of migration and exchange?

Such shared histories of the marginalized become legible within shifting matrices of memory, raising the questions: what do we select to remember? What do we forget? What is transformed? The concept of

13 Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice”, *The Journal of American History* 90 (March 2004), 1251–268 (p. 1264).

14 Turner and Kamdibe, “Haile Gerima”, 972–73.

15 For instance, see Sylvie Kande, “Look Homeward, Angel: Maroons and Mulattoes in Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*”, *Research in African Literatures* 29 (Summer 1998), 128–46 (pp. 130, 140).

“sensibility” offers a promising framework for understanding how the dynamism of memory affects the translation of history into a language and politics of filmic representation.

Daniel Wickberg has explained the usefulness of the concept of “sensibility” for cultural historiography by noting that it brings together “the elements of sense perception, cognition, emotion, aesthetic form, moral judgment, and cultural difference.” Historians, he wrote, “have frequently overlooked the terms of perception and the forms of expression, both of which embody the linkages between, say, ontological commitments and pre-cognitive dispositions, moral values and categories of sense perception, ideas and emotion. But sensibilities are not organized in archives and conveniently visible for research purposes; they are almost never the explicit topics of the primary documents we use. We need a concept that lets us dig beneath the social actions and apparent content of sources to the ground upon which those sources stand: the emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral dispositions of the persons who created them. That concept is sensibility.”¹⁶

If, as Wickberg suggests, we dig through to the ground upon which a cultural text such as the film *Sankofa* stands, to the “emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral dispositions” of its architect, Gerima, what do we find? What we possibly unveil is an African diasporic metaphysics of plural times and places, transformed into semiotic spaces that exist in tension with national and nationalistic narratives. In this context, it is important to note that in this essay, I use the term “place” in its traditional sense as a geographical location, while I see “space” as a “dynamic, constructed” site of contests over tropes of difference and discourses of power such as race, gender, sex, sexuality, class, and nationality. “Space” serves also as a theater for identity formation.¹⁷ Plurality not only served as a survival strategy in slavery times, but functioned to cement intergenerational bonds of belonging and foster solidarities in struggles for self-determination and human rights among Afro-Atlantic peoples flung far from each other by period

16 Daniel Wickberg, “What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New”, *The American Historical Review*, 112 June 2007), 661–84 (p. 669).

17 This discussion is drawn from Kathryn Beebe, Angela Davis and Kathryn Gleadle, “Introduction: Space, Place and Gendered Identities: feminist history and the spatial turn”, *Women’s History Review* 21 (September 2012), 523–32 (p. 524).

and place. It also recalls Kaiama Glover's description of "spiral time" in the context of Haitian literature: an oral tradition in which "stories unfold cumulatively or cyclically" without following a linear trajectory, involve conflicted characters who "move back and forth in time and space" and muddy the concept of "time's linear passage" by implicating the past in present conditions.¹⁸ Shifting temporalities, moreover, signify fragmentation and revitalization. In *Sankofa*, Mona enters a different time, place and body, fragmenting into a past that explains how she came to be American while restoring her relationship with the African diaspora.

Visualizing Spiral Time, Plural Places

Sankofa counterposes sounds and images of slavery's everyday violence against intergenerational traditions of African diasporic resistance on a space-time continuum that moves between different planes of existence. The affective and material tropes of abolitionist slave narratives are encased in an aesthetic of spiral time and multiple locations. Props like nooses, stocks, pillories, whips and guns; flashbacks to scenes of rape, references to auction blocks, and images of Black bodies bloodied and scarred by thrashing and branding; sounds of beating and cries of anguish, all convey the terror of the chattel principle on the Louisiana sugar plantation where the passage to her past has taken Mona-turned-Shola. Moreover, Catholic symbols and images serve as metaphors for slavery's project to strip the enslaved of all vestiges of African culture. This motif culminates in the matricide of an Akan mother by her devoutly Catholic, biracial son, born of rape.

Yet, the diasporic community that Gerima constructs on the plantation manages to transcend the constraints of the here and now by sharing memories of the there and then. It includes Şango, named after the Yoruba god of retributive justice, who has arrived from the West Indies where he was sold for being a "trouble-maker." He wears dreadlocks and speaks a creative patois. But African-born Nununu is this enslaved

18 Kaiama L. Glover, *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. viii-ix. See also Allyson Nadia Field, "To Journey Imperfectly: Black Cinema: Aesthetics and the Filmic Language of *Sankofa*", *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 55 (Fall 2014), 171-90.

community's rock. She is dark-skinned, displaying her natural curls on her bare head proudly and defiantly. She is said to have supernatural powers, having bewitched a white man to death by simply staring at him. A catalyst for Shola's rebellious transformation, she remains in full possession of her Akan soul, experiencing her body as a liability as long as it remains trapped in the wrong place and time.

Nunu weaves imaginaries of other times and places, of shared experiences of "roots" and "routes" into ties that bind the living with ancestors and the unborn. In one sequence of scenes, she circles the mangled body of the pregnant Kuna, a runaway who got caught, as she lay suspended from a post. Wielding a machete, Nunu breaks into the performance of an Akan ritual, invoking ancestors—warriors, saviors of nations—and consults the Akyemfo, the Akan oracle. Nunu assumes the role of both midwife and priestess, bringing Kuna's child into the present world in a communal ceremony that is at once funerary, a call to arms, and the welcoming of a new child. She thanks Nana Akonadi, a deity for women, for the baby's safe arrival. Onscreen, the infant's cries merge into Mona's screams of terror as the scene cuts back to the moment of her metamorphosis as Shola in a collective birth into community cemented by the trauma of enslavement. Time is manipulated to synchronize these new beginnings of life, and of the birth of diasporic consciousness.

Other scenes depict Nunu regaling the enslaved community with tales of Afriye, the Porcupine girl, who presumably like the Ashanti description of the porcupine as warrior, wears an indestructible armor of spines. And she speaks of the "beautiful Kotoko girl"—the warrior girl, daughter of a powerful medicine woman who saved many lives with her root potions. While initiating members into a secret rebel society, Nunu offers Akan incantations, making reference to anti-colonial heroes and sacrificial drinks: "O, Almighty God. Mother Earth. The spirits of Asona ancestors. Come here's your drink... You deserve the Obirikisi, Birim and Okrikra that we sacrificed for you... The spirit of Prempeh, Ani Abena, come and eat with us."¹⁹

These scenes illustrate how artists might select and adapt memory to forge a usable past while consolidating time into chain links of

19 On Akan symbols in *Sankofa*, see Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past: Reading "Sankofa," "Daughters of the Dust," and "Eve's Bayou" as Histories* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

subjectivity. Gerima harnesses the Akans' skills in warfare for the purposes of rebellion. In doing so, however, the film-maker erases the Ashanti's complicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade, honoring them instead for their role in combating British imperialism. The heroes Nunu invokes belong in the future. Yet, the film's structure and artistic language of spiral time makes it possible to integrate struggles against slavery and colonialism into a shared genealogy of diasporic solidarity and the quest for freedom.

Spiral time is closely linked of course, with both the transgression and the transcendence of place. In the process, Nunu is constructing a space of defiance which keeps time differently than the material world of the plantation. African symbols and Akan heroes invest this space with the meaning of resistance. For instance, Shola's transformation into insurgent is realized only when her lover, Şango, places a wooden carving of the "Sankofa" bird around her neck while tending the wounds that she has sustained from a whipping as punishment for associating with rebellious "heathens" in the woods. These forests represent space that mobility has reconfigured on an immediate and local level. While denial of the right to move freely was a hallmark of slavery, the enslaved on Lafayette Plantation are voting with their feet to transgress plantation space. They congregate secretly in woods and caves to plan an armed rebellion for freedom with maroon communities. Among them is a dissembling head slave, who cracks his whip with his master during the day, but is "all mixed up with field hands" in the caves plotting rebellion at night.

Along the vein of plurality, the climactic scenes move rapidly in a loop between time and place: Şango advancing through cane fields, machete in hand—his work tool turned into a weapon of resistance; an enslaved woman confronting a white overseer with his own gun; Shola cutting cane overseen by her sneering white master on horseback; a closeup of Mona/Shola in the dungeon; enslaved rebels in hot pursuit of a white tormentor to the beat of drums; cries of terror; a flashback to a rape scene; Shola's master alighting from his horse, circling her as you would prey, until she cuts him down with a machete, and runs accompanied by sounds of the rebels' pursuit by guns, horses, and dogs, until we hear the drum beat of the divine guardian and watch the skies fade into the blue waters of the Atlantic off the coast of Ghana. The drumbeats keep pace

with Shola's voiceover telling us that the next thing she knew, she was flying high above, making the return journey to the land of the Akan. As the camera moves in on a close-up of Cape Coast and into the dungeon, now brightly lit by sunlight, Shola appears in the frame, her naked body silhouetted against the entrance to the dungeon. She staggers out, reborn to a new consciousness of "home", which the spectator suspects signifies less a physical place than a particular meaning that the hallowed ground of the slave castles have now assumed, with all their implications for community. Home is a repository of cultural resources to forge subjectivity. It is a platform from which to develop an imaginary of belonging. The courtyard of the slave castle is a setting for that sense of community, the members of which, dressed in African robes, arrayed before the drummer, the buzzard and Sankofa, include Nunu who died by her biracial son's hand back in America. This then is a community anchored in the historical experience of the Atlantic slave trade. Time has come a full circle. The moment of insurrection in Louisiana does not dismantle the system of New World slavery but it creates a voluntary community formed of struggle and survival, of historical memory and contingency.

Epilogue: An Archive of Black Atlantic Migrations and Diasporic Discourses

Asked whether there was such a thing as a "Black aesthetic", Gerima compared the cinematic structure of *Sankofa* to jazz.²⁰ This essay has, of course, characterized such an aesthetic as a "sensibility" of spiral time and plural spaces shaped by African metaphysics and diasporic consciousness. The Akan presence in *Sankofa* assumes special significance in light of scholarly insights into the group's association with qualities of heroism among enslaved Jamaicans.²¹ Moreover, as John Thornton has noted, the Akan or Twi language group formed the basis for linking the enslaved from different parts of Africa, landed on the Gold Coast, and dispersed among estates in North America, the

20 Turner and Kamdibe, "Haile Gerima", p. 983.

21 Robert P. Stewart, "Akan Ethnicity in Jamaica: A Re-examination of Jamaica's Slave Imports from the Gold Coast, 1655-1807", *Maryland Historian* 28 (2003), 69-107.

West Indies and Brazil, where it assumed the cultural group signifier, “Coramantee.”²²

Sankofa's score offers a *mélange* of sounds born of Black Atlantic migrations across time and place: African ritual music, divine drumming, Gospel, and spiritual, spelling alienation and renewal. The editing is sometimes nostalgic with slow pans on things which signify passage: oceans, sitting and soaring birds, and the topography of the New World. It is shot entirely outdoors, for the Big House, demographically dominated by the presence of the master class, is no place for subjectivity. If the point of Shola's time travel is to find her Pan African identity and community, it can only happen among field hands in the slave quarters from sundown to sunup.

Moreover, as a cinematic language, Gerima's sensibility extended the work of strengthening diasporic ties into the public theaters and communal venues exhibiting the film. For it embodied “a set of signifying practices”²³ that African and African American audiences could decode in order to make sense of the past, practices that linked film-maker with spectators in a shared project of meaning-making, across “local and national landscapes.” The politics and economics of *Sankofa*'s production and distribution constituted a community discourse in which audiences could interpret the significance of “rituals, symbols, the language structures, and the historical frameworks that these narratives imbed.” Thus, Akan symbols could become dynamic signifiers of something new.²⁴

It is the dynamism of this meaning-making—in keeping with the trope of creative fragmentation and renewal—that lends *Sankofa* its interactive, open-ended, and contingent aspect. As story, and as community discourse, this species of Black Atlantic art extends the archive for understanding diasporic formation into spaces of performance and audience reception across Pan African terrains. And it is an archive, that like the diaspora itself, is in a constant state of regeneration.

22 John Thornton, “The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean”, *Journal of Caribbean History* 32 (1998), 161–78.

23 Quotation from Jay Winter, “Film and the Matrix of Memory”, *AHR Forum, American Historical Review*, 106 (October 2001), 863–64.

24 Martin Mhando and Kenyan G. Tomaselli, “Film and Trauma: Africa Speaks to Itself through Truth and Reconciliation Films”, *Black Camera* 1 (Winter 2009), 30–50 (pp. 38, 37).

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