

LEARNING  
COMPANION

A FILM

BY

HAILE GERIMA

# SANKOFA

ARRAY PRESENTS A NEGOD GWAD PRODUCTION A FILM BY HAILE GERIMA "SANKOFA"  
IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH THE GHANA NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CULTURE AND DIPROCI OF BURKINA FASO AND NDR/WDR TELEVISION IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHANNEL 4 TELEVISION  
OYAFUNMIKE OGUNLANO ALEXANDRA DUAH KOFI GHANABA NICK MEDLEY MUTABARUKA AFEMO OMILAMI  
PRODUCED BY HAILE GERIMA EDITED BY HAILE GERIMA CO-PRODUCER SHIRIKIANA AINA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AGUSTIN CUBANO  
MUSIC BY DAVID WHITE LINE PRODUCER ADA BABINO FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ANDREW MILLINGTON  
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY HAILE GERIMA

ARRAY





“The sankofa bird is first characterized by a very long neck, which reaches all the way to the back, holding in its beak an egg. It is interpreted that the egg held at the beak is symbolizing the forward historical process of the future. The physical position of the actual body of this mythical bird is represented in constant forward motion. The final telegraphed statement of the holistic meaning of the sankofa bird is saying that without reclaiming the past, the future cannot be forged.

Black people, more than any race in the world, are miseducated to think that they can go forward without referencing the past and that is the all-time tragedy. All human beings all over the world utilize the power of their historical experience to forge towards the future. However, in the most unnatural way, both on the Continent and in the Diaspora, we were made to feel ashamed of these vital historical experiences, including that of slavery. Personally, in the process of my journey, I discovered the glorious history of the Diaspora Africans to be a very powerful spiritual energy of resistance.”

— Haile Gerima, Filmmaker



# Overview



Image courtesy of SANKOFA



Taking viewers on a journey back in time, the film SANKOFA, written and directed by Ethiopian-born filmmaker Haile Gerima, tells the story of an African American fashion model named Mona who goes on a spiritual journey of resistance to confront her past. Often seen in the form of an Adinkra symbol of a bird with its head turned backward, the word “sankofa” comes from the Akan people of Ghana and translates to “go back to our past in order to go forward.” Gerima uses this symbolic title to encourage viewers to search for the good in the past and bring those learnings forward into the future.

Gerima introduces Mona as a model posing for sultry photos in front of Elmina Slave Castle on the coast of Ghana, without any awareness of the depth of the historical tragedy that took place there. An angry encounter with a local griot called Sankofa sends her on a transcendental journey back through time where she emerges as Shola, an enslaved woman on a plantation somewhere in the Americas. Mona, now Shola, is faced with the choice of continued abuse or fighting back.

“While I was in Ghana researching for SANKOFA,” says Gerima, “I gained an understanding of ‘kra,’ and in the Akan language, kra means spirit. The philosophical departing point of the film SANKOFA is one of forward motion, atonement and in the case of Mona/Shola, revenge. I embraced the idea that a being may never settle with the ancestors while hosting a destabilized spirit that has not been amended or atoned or revenged upon. The kra is the spirit. The sankofa bird is the vessel of the journey. Mona/Shola has desecrated sacred ground in the opening scene and during her journey is revenging something that is disfiguring her.”

At the time of its release, SANKOFA was the first feature film directed by a person of color to center an enslaved African American’s journey. **“But to be clear,”** says Gerima, **“SANKOFA is not a film about slavery, it is a movie about resistance.”**

Independently released in 1993, SANKOFA received glowing reviews while in competition at the Berlin Film Festival. “Haile Gerima’s poetic and precisely detailed film takes its audience into its heroine’s life and mind as her moral sense is challenged and changed,” said the *New York Times*. “No viewer can avoid the discomfiting questions the film so eloquently raises.”

Distribution of the film in theaters, however, proved a much harder task.

Prior to the release of SANKOFA, Haile Gerima had already set out on his own journey — one that included becoming an exhibitor and distributor of independent Black films, side by side with his wife Shirikiana Gerima. With the help of the grassroots community, they sustained two years of theatrical distribution for the film. Their desire to see collective success among Black filmmakers has motivated them to create independent cinema for decades.

“When you don’t work together you can’t emerge as a force,” Haile Gerima states. “It becomes what some call a ‘lonely struggle’ and individual self-destruction.”

“It’s our task to find whatever budget we have to make movies because the more we make movies, the more we release our people from a psychologically incarcerating historical legacy,” Gerima continues. “It’s nobody else’s business but ours to do it. The more we do it, the more we heal ourselves.”

“Just as jazz is a resistance music, SANKOFA is a resistance film. The journey, which is the sankofa bird for me, shows one foot is always in front and the other behind. It speaks to motion, an African ideal of didactic motion, forward motion. Yes, the word sankofa means to return and get, but not returning to Africa to mythologize Africa. You claim what you want; you leave the rest behind to go forward. There are many things I don’t want to retrieve from Africa, myself being from there. Our killing each other? I don’t want to retrieve it. Enslaving each other? I don’t want to retrieve that. The demons of our psyche? I don’t want to retrieve that either. Enslaved Africans did not arrive on new shores empty-headed. Like the sankofa bird, those who survived knew how to generate their own nourishment and their forward movement allowed them to do something specific.”

— Haile Gerima, Filmmaker



Image courtesy of SANKOFA



# Using This Learning Companion

**This learning companion has been developed to deepen the conversation and inspire personal action after viewing the feature film SANKOFA.** During your SANKOFA journey, you will study the history of your families and communities to understand how your individual and collective past impacts your daily lives.

Every person has a history, a family, a name and a community. Your 'return' could be one generation back, to a recent city of origin to gain a deeper understanding of a place, or many generations back, to a forgotten country of origin to better understand your past.

The way your personal story is told — now and in the future — can be, and should be, steered by you.

The word "sankofa" translated means: return (san), go (ko), and seek/take (fa).

During your sankofa journey you are urged to return to your roots to seek knowledge; go to your community and share the wisdom you've acquired; and take action, in the form of resistance, to make an impact in the world.

**Participants will be encouraged to:**

- Explore the themes of community, reclamation and resistance
- Take action to change themselves, institutions and systems based on your learnings

## Key Vocabulary

**Community:** Community has been defined simply as a group of people who share something in common. For the purposes of this learning companion, we will approach the definition of community as both a descriptive category of shared attributes (ex. geographic location, gender, ethnicity and belief systems) and as a value (ex. trust, shared history, sense of belonging).

**Reclamation:** The noun form of the verb "reclaim," reclamation can be defined as the act of taking something back, performing an act of rescue or rehabilitating something that has been forgotten or dismissed.

**Resistance:** Resistance is the refusal to be affected adversely by something, a refusal to accept or comply. In this learning companion, we explore various examples of resistance to oppressive systems that are often hidden or overlooked.

## Ancestral Memory

Films like SANKOFA may evoke trauma responses in viewers. There is a justifiable and important reason for this response.



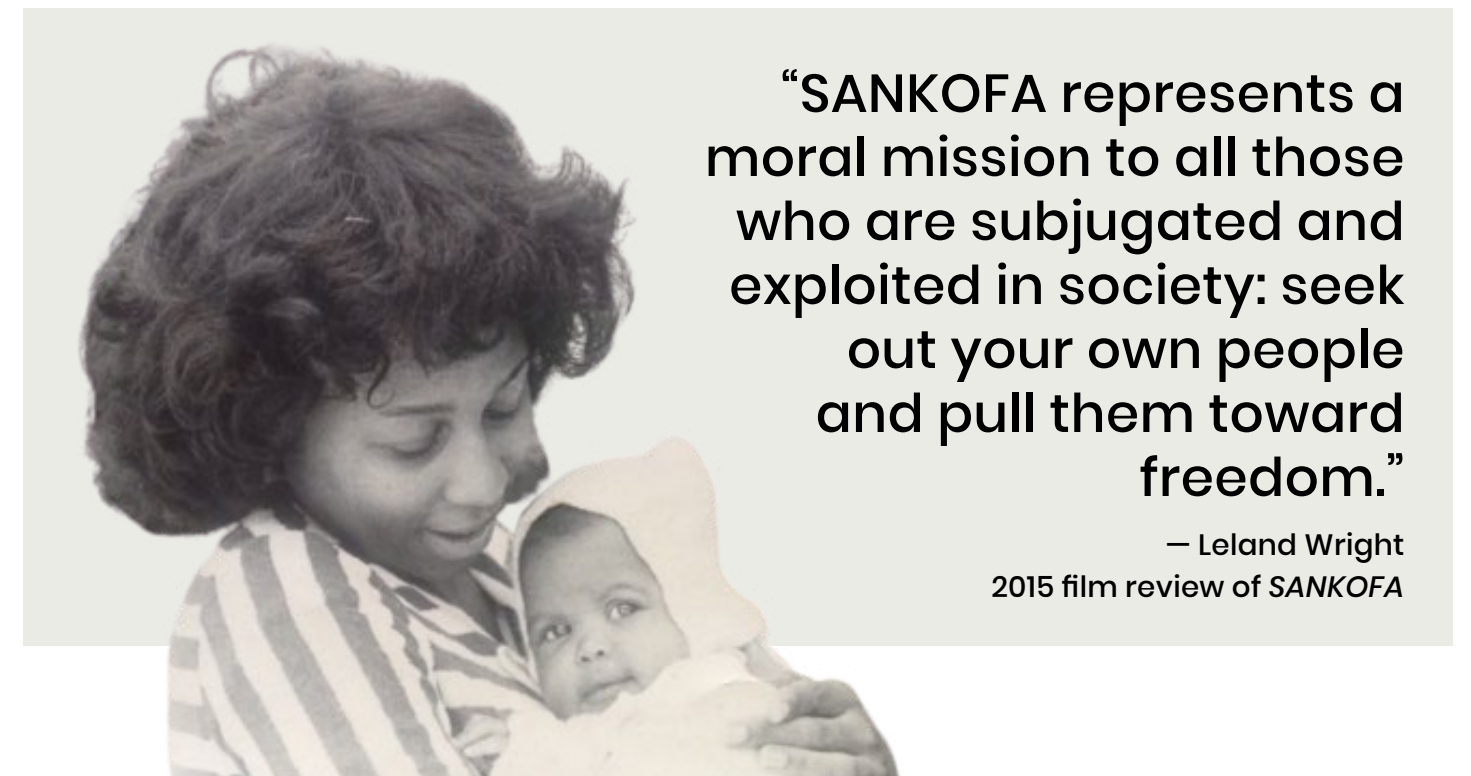
Image courtesy of Mercedes Cooper

Discussing the legacy of SANKOFA, Haile Gerima described the descendants of the formerly enslaved as carrying "scars and psychological issues." Indeed, those scars and psychological issues that Gerima referred to are known as transgenerational and intergenerational trauma. Based on literary explorations of trauma, memory and testimony, literary scholars and others have argued that the trauma of slavery still lives with contemporary Black people, that the trauma of slavery is "ghosted" in the bodies and collective consciousness of each generation of Africans in America. Moreover, this collective trauma is handed down physically and physiologically. This is called epigenetics in the biological sciences and ancestral memory in the social sciences.

While other racial groups have experienced extreme trauma during their journeys and existence in the United States, the trauma experienced by descendants of enslaved Africans in America stands apart. The descendants of enslaved Africans experience trauma that has deepened and endured over the past 400 years for several reasons. Unlike other groups that were indigenous to, or migrated or fled to the U.S., for descendants of enslaved Africans, it was a *forced* migration. They were taken from their homelands against their will, shackled in the bellies of ships, forced to endure the perilous Middle Passage (if they survived), and yoked to the brutality of chattel slavery for the entirety of their lives. Their enslavement was transgenerational; for the vast majority, their children, their children's children and their grandchildren's children would be born enslaved.

Today, Black people are still navigating and negotiating the trauma that enslavement and its legacies left with them. With every act of physical violence against Black bodies, with every act of psychological violence against those Black bodies, descendants are forced to relive the traumas of slavery, racial prejudice and violence over and over again.

Slavery leaves no hands clean. If Black people are carrying the trauma of enslavement in their DNA, what has slavery done to those who are not the descendants of enslaved Africans? Even slaveholders in the country's founding era recognized that the practice of slaveholding had a detrimental effect on them. Films like SANKOFA are imperative for viewers of all races. SANKOFA is just as relevant now as when the film was originally released.





# Lesson Summary



## Lesson One

Lesson one explores the power of storytelling and oral histories.

**The theme of this lesson is COMMUNITY.**

Participants analyze historical narratives as primary and secondary source documents and record the story of a family or community member, adding it to the public record online.

Learners will leave with an understanding of how communities have communicated for centuries through sound and music.

## Lesson Two

Lesson two helps learners build on the theme of community, exploring the idea of people and place.

**The theme of this lesson is RECLAMATION.**

Participants will develop tangible research skills that can be used to learn more about their family or the place where they or their ancestors have lived.

At the conclusion of the lesson, they will have created a family tree and learned the name of an ancestor or community member.

## Lesson Three

Lesson three asks the question, 'how will you make sure the wisdom learned from the past is part of the present?'

**The theme of this lesson is RESISTANCE.**

Students will learn how acts of resistance can take on many forms.

After exploring Maroon communities, participants discover tangible ways they can save disappearing historical artifacts in their communities and contribute to a crowd-sourced transcription project.

## Lesson Four

Lesson four introduces learners to the work of filmmaker Haile Gerima, his independently driven, community-based style of creation and his belief in collective success.

**The theme of this lesson is LIBERATED TERRITORY.**

Filmmaker Haile Gerima seeks to deconstruct many of the colonial and post-colonial constructs of the African self, of Black cinema and Black cinematic form. In this lesson, learners will learn more about the work of Mr. Gerima and be encouraged to seek out their own liberated territory.





Lesson 1

# Community



# Introduction

Being savagely taken from one’s homeland and family is a violation beyond imagination.

Enslaved Africans were transported primarily from the west coast of the African continent to Europe, the Caribbean, South America, North America and the British Isles beginning in 1500 and continuing through the mid to late 1800s. Although England and the United States both legally abolished the international slave trade in 1807, illegal slave ships still arrived in the United States as late as 1860, and even into the 1890s in some parts of South America.

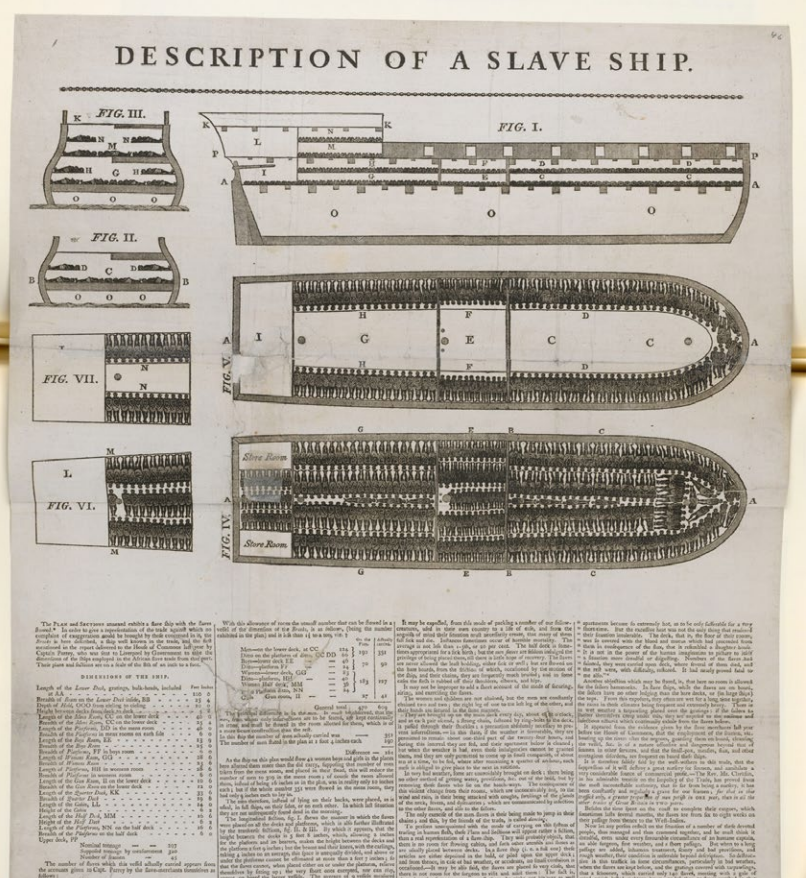
This unfathomable journey, the transatlantic trafficking of humans from the African continent to nations throughout the world, bore witness to more than 12.5 million people being stripped from their families and communities and sold to slave owners desiring unpaid labor for their personal wealth-building schemes.

According to estimates from *Slave Voyages*, Spain’s colonies received over one million humans, while almost nine million people landed on the shores of Brazil and other Portuguese colonies. Over three million men and women were sent to British imperial holdings aboard slave ships, while the Dutch and Danish colonies received over half a million souls. French colonies demanded 1.3 million and more than 305,000 people would directly land on the shores of the United States, in addition to many that initially landed in the Caribbean.

How desperate were enslavers? The amount of greed shown in the transport of captured human cargo can be seen in the graphic drawings of the slave ship *Brooks*. According to a 1788 account by abolitionist William Elford, in an effort to maximize the number of trafficked humans onto the enormous vessel, the idea of placing people head to toe was sometimes abandoned and *men were placed so that one person’s head was between another person’s thighs*, thus maximizing the length of 6 feet and width of 16 inches allowed for each adult male.

## Expert Knowledge

The expert knowledge held by African men and women in the areas of farming technology, architecture, medicine and engineering made them a desirable commodity for planters and landowners seeking fortunes in new worlds. “People of African descent come from ancient, rich and elaborate cultures that created a wealth of technologies in many areas,” explains Dr. Sydella Blatch. Writing about scientific achievements in ancient African civilizations, Blatch draws attention to the omission of the technological genius found on the African continent, remarking, “Sadly, the vast majority of discussions on the origins of science include only the Greeks, Romans and other whites. But in fact most of their discoveries came thousands of years after African developments. While the remarkable Black civilization in Egypt remains alluring, there was sophistication and impressive inventions throughout ancient sub-Saharan Africa as well.” As detailed in the iconic book by Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the unique skills these talented individuals brought with them from their homeland had been developed for centuries, a fact that could not be denied by those looking to profit from their abilities.



Slave ship *Brooks*. Source: The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament, 1808, British Library

## TEACHER AND GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

### Key Theme: Community

**Objectives:** At the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Draw evidence from informational texts to describe the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on today’s society
- Record and post an oral history
- Understand how communication tools, such as drumming, have been used by cultures around the world to keep stories alive for generations

“The pressure on Black filmmakers not to address their humanity in motion pictures is enormous. They are told in one way or another, again and again, that their grandmother’s story is not ‘commercial,’ meaning not important enough to be told on film. Who cares about a 50-year-old Black woman from Louisiana? Who cares about a 50-year-old ordinary African American man from Kentucky? Directly or indirectly in silent and common understanding, what African American filmmakers are told again and again, by the white supremacist cultural industry, is very humiliating to say the least.”

— Haile Gerima, Filmmaker



**“We don’t have to wait for somebody to tell our story; we can do it ourselves.”**

—Haile Gerima, Filmmaker



Image courtesy of Jordan Tyner

## An Investment Worth Protecting

Enslaved humans were so profitable that institutions around the globe found ways to protect the investments of the enslavers through financial instruments, including insurance policies and stock in slaving companies.

In *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, historian Daina Ramey Berry notes that value was assigned to enslaved African men, women and even young children. They were considered commodities from birth, through their lives and even after death. “In addition to buying, selling and transporting enslaved bodies for medical research, enslavers took out life insurance policies on children at age nine and ten to protect their investments.” Analyst Michael Ralph, creator of the database *Treasury of Weary Souls*, explains that “after the slave trade to the U.S. was outlawed in 1808, Africans were smuggled into the country (a tricky process), they were bred (which depended on the human life cycle), and they were rented (so the people who treated them as property could make as much money as possible). People who rented slaves insured them so that these valuable assets would not be destroyed while in someone else’s possession.”

In a modern-day act of resistance, a CA state law pushed by then-Senator Tom Hayden (D-Santa Monica) and signed into law by Gov. Gray Davis in 2000, requires all insurance companies doing business in California to publicly release information about policies they or their predecessor firms wrote insuring slave owners for losses if slaves died or ran away. Learners can view the names of the insured enslaved at [www.insurance.ca.gov](http://www.insurance.ca.gov).

## The GU272

Not only did individual people looking for financial gain benefit from enslavement, but so did institutions, including some of the most highly regarded universities in the United States.

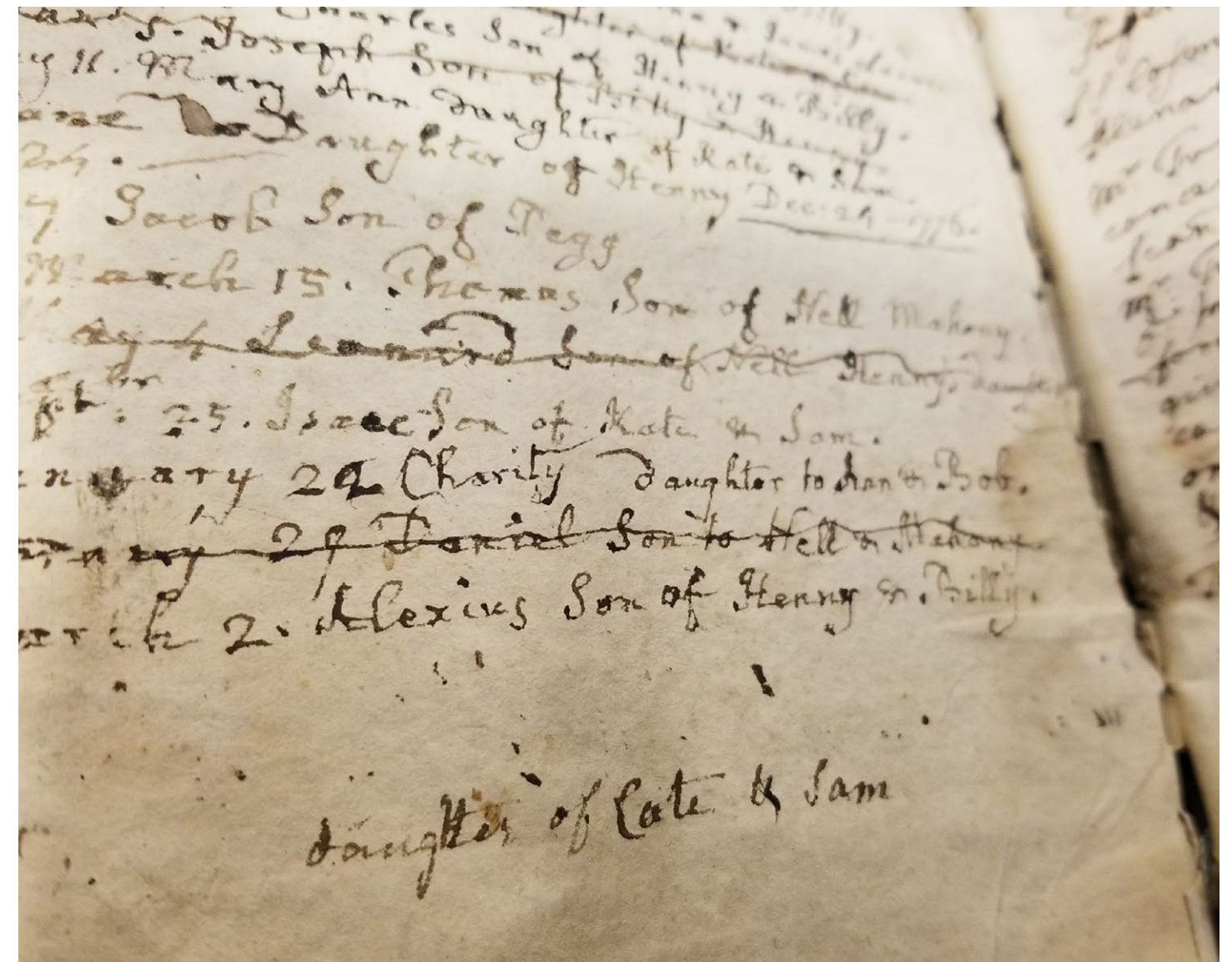
Search the hashtag #GU272 online and learners can see hundreds of posts, articles and conversations by the descendants of the enslaved women, men and children of the Maryland Jesuits’ 1838 slave sale that helped keep the doors of Georgetown University open for business. Due to recent outcry and resistance efforts from descendants, students and employees, a residence hall on campus has been renamed to Isaac Hawkins Hall and an archive has been dedicated to amplifying the plight of the nearly 300 men, women and children who were sold.

## The Griot

The practice of remembering history through storytelling can be found in every community

where humans have ever lived. In many West African cultures, the griot or storyteller profession is hereditary and coveted in the community. This person is responsible for memorizing and retelling genealogies, family histories and stories about members of the community. As we see in the beginning of the film, the griot plays a very important role. He is considered a guardian of the culture and he is respected for his wisdom. The first written account of the word griot is found in the 14th-century writings of traveler Ibn Battuta while visiting Mali. Present-day scholars have used the word to describe a vast number of storytellers. Scholar Thomas A. Hale describes the duties of griots — and their female counterparts, griottes — as historians, genealogists, poets, teachers, exhorters, town criers, reporters and more, depending on the needs of the time.

What was life like for enslaved Africans before, during and after enslavement? The life stories of thousands of formerly enslaved individuals have been recorded and published for centuries. This collection of narratives located at the Library of Congress is called *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives*



This document is a record from Georgetown University’s Slavery Archive. It shows children into slavery at Port Tobacco from the 1750s to the 1770s. The record is one of the earliest in the Maryland Province Archives to reveal the names and family relationships of enslaved people. Visit <https://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu> to view more documents.



from the *Federal Writers' Project*, 1936 to 1938. These narratives, mostly told to and written by non-Black writers, provide a glimpse into what life was like for descendants of the Africans who survived the harrowing journey through the Middle Passage through the stories they passed down.

But there are also narratives of enslavement still remembered on the African continent.

*Go ka nu dze ge woyina.*  
(On which shores are we going to land?)

*Go ka nu dze ge woyina.*  
(On which shores are we going to land?)

Those lyrics were passed down from one generation to the next by elders in southeastern Ghana, once known as the 'Old Slave Coast' and documented by historian Anne C. Bailey in her book *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame*. They come from the songs heard by those remaining on land as a slave ship sailed into the distance with captives. "This song is like a wailing, a lamentation – a song that simultaneously captures the deep grief and anxiety of those fateful moments of capture and enslavement in a way that mere words cannot," says Bailey. It is no wonder that this story was repeated orally for hundreds of years before finally being written down and archived.

The next section of this learning companion will allow learners to **hear stories** told from the perspective of the enslaved. The narratives are taken from first-person interviews, deep dives into court records, deeds of sale, wills, probate records, and family histories collected over decades of interviews and historical research.

Next, learners will learn how to **collect an oral history** from family and friends, keeping the tradition of the griot alive and contributing to the complicated history of our world.

Everyone has a story to tell and collectively, these stories create the history of the lands on which we all live.



# Activity One:

## SAY IT LOUD: Examining Narratives Using Primary & Secondary Sources

**Objective:** Draw evidence from informational texts to better understand the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on communities.

**Participants will** review narratives of enslaved individuals and discuss the intersections between the lives of the formerly enslaved and current-day issues.

### The Resistance Narrative: Who was Omar Ibn Sa'id?

"According to his autobiography, and to articles written about him in the American press while he was still alive, he was a member of the Fula ethnic group of West Africa who today number over 40 million people in the region extending from Senegal to Nigeria. In the interviews he gave during his lifetime he stated that he was born in a place called Futa Toro 'between the two rivers' referring to the Senegal and Gambia rivers that separate those two countries. His father, who was a wealthy man, was killed in an inter-tribal war when he was five, and Omar and his family had to move away to another town. In his autobiography, Omar Ibn Sa'id writes that as he grew older he sought knowledge in Bundu, an area in modern-day Senegal that had historically been controlled by another ethnic group, the Mande people, until the Muslim Fulas conquered the region in the second half of the 17th century. Omar Ibn Sa'id writes that in Bundu he studied under his own brother Sheikh Muhammad

Sa'id, as well as two other religious leaders and "continued seeking knowledge for twenty-five years." He then returned to his own town and lived there for another six years, until a "big army" came "that killed many people," captured him and sold him to a man who took him "to the big Ship in the big Sea." After sailing for a month, he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, where





he was bought by a man called Johnson, who apparently was cruel to him. So he escaped, was captured and landed in jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he spent 16 days. That is where he began writing in Arabic on the walls of his jail, and where he was discovered and eventually taken into the household of Jim Owen and his brother John Owen, the Governor of North Carolina (1828-1830) with whom he remained until his death in his late eighties.”

Primary Sources

Primary sources are from the time period in which a person lived. They can be accounts of a person’s life, like Omar Ibn Sa’id whose narrative you just read or William Wells Brown’s after he escaped slavery when he wrote *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave: Written by Himself* in 1847. They could also be written or dictated by someone, like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* a “first-person account of the brutality of the Guatemalan government and ruling class toward indigenous Guatemalans.” Although Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú dictated her story to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray who transcribed it, it is still considered a primary source or first-hand story.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are ones written later by historians that explain a past event or person’s life based on primary sources. Secondary sources include things like biographies. The word ‘story’ is tricky because sometimes it is used to mean fiction but other times, especially when referring to a life story, it means non-fiction.

Can a Document be Both?

Sometimes, a document can be both a primary and secondary source. Take, for example, an 1876 article in the historic Black newspaper *The Colored Tribune*. The article references an act of violence against African Americans and then calls for acts of resistance. The recounting of the story serves as secondary source information. The call to action against the Ku Klux Klan makes it a primary source highlighting how Black people were asked to respond to acts of terror a decade after the end of the Civil War. “It is a game at which both sides can play,” writes the author. “And the whites have vastly more to lose than the negroes. Let the negroes prepare to defend themselves and wives and families by every means at their command...”



Keeping the Story Alive

Men, women and children brought to Europe, Cuba, South America, North America and the British Isles and sold into the construct of slavery kept the memories and histories of their homelands alive for many generations. While it is often difficult to piece together the full life story of individuals who were enslaved since the records kept about them by their enslavers are often limited, many stories have endured and can now be found online, at libraries and in museums. Primary and secondary sources can help us know more about people’s journeys and experiences as they cultivated farmlands, built cities, lived as both enslaved and free people and raised families.

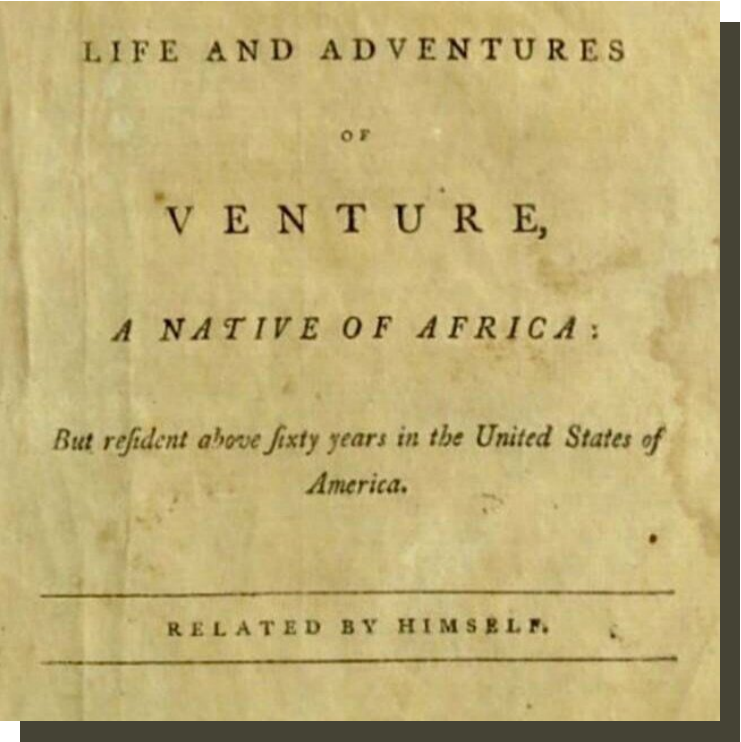
Procedures:

- 1. Read a primary source of enslavement, the excerpt from Mr. Venture Smith’s narrative.
- 2. Read a secondary source of African enslavement, choosing one on Enslaved.org.
- 3. Evaluate the differences between the two types of narratives.

Examining the Life of Mr. Venture Smith

The following passage comes from *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa*, another personal account written by a formerly enslaved person, Venture Smith (birth name Broteer). As a child, he was taken away from his home in Africa when his father’s kingdom was attacked and sold into the transatlantic slave trade from the port of Anomabu, in the modern-day country of Ghana. His family had named him Broteer, but a sailor on the slave-trading ship that took him to America considered him his private business venture, and accordingly called him “Venture.”

The slave ship *Charming Susanna* collected newly enslaved people, including Venture, in Anomabu in 1739, and sold most of them on the island of Barbados. Venture was taken to the mainland of North America, where he was enslaved in Rhode Island, New York and Connecticut. Although we mainly associate slavery with the American South, the northern states also allowed slavery during the colonial period and, in some cases, for many years after the American Revolution. Despite receiving harsh treatment during his enslavement, Venture managed to accumulate enough money working on his own time to purchase his freedom in 1765. After that, he continued





working to purchase the other members of his family so he could set them free as well. He published *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture* in 1798, when he was a free man. He died in Connecticut in 1805.

### Excerpt from *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture*, by Venture Smith

“A detachment from the enemy came to my father and informed him, that the whole army was encamped not far out of his dominions, and would invade the territory and deprive his people of their liberties and rights, if he did not comply with the following terms. These were to pay them a large sum of money, three hundred fat cattle, and a great number of goats, sheep, asses, &c.

My father told the messenger he would comply rather than that his subjects should be deprived of their rights and privileges. ... The enemy pledged their faith and honor that they would not attack him. On these he relied and therefore thought it unnecessary to be on his guard against the enemy. But their pledges of faith and honor proved no better than those of other

unprincipled hostile nations; for a few days after a certain relation of the king came and informed him, that the enemy ... meditated [planned] an attack upon his subjects by surprise, and that probably they would commence their attack in less than one day, and concluded with advising him, as he was not prepared for war, to order a speedy retreat of his family and subjects ...

The army of the enemy was large ... consisting of about six thousand men. Their leader was called Baukurre. After destroying the old prince, they decamped [left] and immediately marched towards the sea, lying to the west, taking with them myself and the women prisoners. ... The enemy had remarkable success in destroying the country wherever they went. For as far as they had penetrated, they laid the habitations [homes] waste and captured the people. The distance they had now brought me was about four hundred miles. All the march I had very hard tasks imposed on me, which I must perform on pain of punishment. I was obliged to carry on my head a large flat stone used for grinding our corn, weighing ... as much as 25 pounds; besides victuals [food], mat and

cooking utensils. Though I was pretty large and stout of my age, yet these bur[d]ens were very grievous to me, being only about six years and an half old. ...

The invaders then pinioned [tied up] the prisoners of all ages and sexes indiscriminately, took their flocks and all their effects, and moved on their way towards the sea. ... They then went on to the next district which was contiguous to the sea, called in Africa, Anamaboo. The enemies provisions were then almost spent, as well as their strength. The inhabitants knowing what conduct they had pursued, and what were their present intentions, improved the favorable opportunity, attacked them, and took enemy, prisoners; flocks and all their effects. I was then taken a second time. All of us were then put into the castle, and kept for market. On a certain time I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode-Island, commanded by capt. Collingwood, and the mate Thomas Mumford. While we were going to the vessel, our master told us all to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel's cargo, were two hundred and sixty.

AFTER all the business was ended on the coast of Africa, the ship sailed from thence to Barbadoes. After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes: but when we reached it, there were found out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive. These were all sold, except myself and three more, to the planters there.”

### Reflection Questions:

1. What surprised you about Venture Smith's account of the slave trade?
2. What effects did the presence of European slave traders on the coast have on African communities?
3. What important questions about the transatlantic slave trade does this section of Venture Smith's account leave unanswered?
4. Can Mr. Smith's decision to tell his own story in the 1700s be described as an act of resistance? If so, why?

### Read a secondary source of African enslavement, choosing one from *Enslaved.org*.

Secondary sources are ones written later by historians that tell stories based on primary sources. Secondary sources include things like biographies. The website *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade* ([Enslaved.org](https://enslaved.org)) contains the true stories of the lives of dozens of enslaved people from across the Americas. “Through these biographies, we can better understand the complexities of people's lives and the role of slavery and freedom in shaping them,” explain Steven Niven and Kristina Poznan, two of *Enslaved.org*'s historians.

Go to <https://enslaved.org/stories> and choose one person's story to read. In the “Find a Story By Title or Keyword” search bar, you can search for a story about a person from a specific place by typing “Barbados” or “North Carolina,” etc.



Photo courtesy of SANKOFA



Reflection Questions:

- 1. What did you learn about the experience of enslavement and the life of the person you read?
- 2. How were the person’s experiences similar or different to Venture Smith’s?
- 3. Was it different to read about Venture Smith’s story from his own recollections (a primary source) vs. a story written by a historian later (a secondary source)? What’s the value in each approach?
- 4. Is there someone in your family or community whose story should be recorded and preserved so that future generations can read about it?

Activity Two:  
Decolonize the Narrative

**Objective:** Learn techniques to collect oral histories within families and in communities.

**Participants will** learn how to collect personal narratives, then interview a family member or community member and post the interview online.

Collecting oral histories is a form of resistance. When learners uncover truth through self-discovery, they reframe narratives and change the way history is remembered and taught. Oral histories are essential to supplement and challenge narratives developed by scholars who often exclude the voices of those who are marginalized.



Image courtesy of Gabrielle Russo

“For thousands of years, indigenous people have told and retold stories through oral traditions (chants, stories, sounds) and embodied physical movements (dance). Despite colonization and marginalization of indigenous people within their nations, these traditional practices have served and continue to serve as vehicles for transmitting genealogical and cultural knowledge. It is because of these oral traditions that indigenous people are able to perpetuate and promote their cultural practices and language.”

Source: Kim-Hee Wong, Oral Historian, Columbia Center for Oral History Research

What is Embodied Memory?

In *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View, Knowledge and Space* researchers acknowledge that “uncovering the historical experiences of marginalized communities, previously silenced because of their ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality, is now a primary objective of historical inquiry,” reinforcing the desire by average people to reclaim a sense of self through exploration of family and community.

Steeped in traditions from griots of countries such as Ghana and of indigenous peoples around the world, oral communication through storytelling, music and even food is critical to preserving and learning about the past.



*“Today, ‘neo griots’ have a tremendous responsibility in capturing stories to preserve historic events. From recording interviews with elders about history and community to collecting recipes in a foodways exercise, learners will leave with new knowledge of their family, their surroundings and themselves.”*

– Andre L. Taylor, Oral Historian



The activities below will educate individuals of every age on successful concepts in oral history collection. Learners will be empowered to seek out the stories of others, record stories and place them within a historical context.

## Collect Oral Histories:

### Step 1: Oral History: Best Practices

Oral history collection can be a strenuous time commitment; however, the gratification of documenting and chronicling stories of community members is worth the effort. The fact that you are taking on this challenge by completing this lesson and collecting oral histories is a resistance to standard history that often excludes individual stories in its narratives. View Lesson 1, Activity 1 in the SANKOFA learning companion online to complete this activity.

### Step 2: Oral History Activities: Young Learners

We are all oral historians by nature. Conversations between children and their family members, community elders, educators and others are excellent opportunities for oral history collection. The next two online exercises are designed for youth ages 12 and under to engage with members of their family and community. View Lesson 1, Activity 1 in the SANKOFA learning companion online to complete this activity.

### Step 3: Oral History Activities: Adult Learners

Steeped in traditions from the griots of countries such as Ghana and indigenous people around the world, oral communication through storytelling is critical to preserving and learning about the past. Today, “neo griots” have a tremendous responsibility in capturing stories of old and contemporary communities to preserve historic events. View Lesson 1, Activity 1 in the SANKOFA learning companion online to complete this activity.

**Visit [array101.org](http://array101.org) and choose the SANKOFA Learning Companion to download the oral history activities shown above.**



Photo courtesy of Paul Barnes





Lesson 2

# Reclamation



# Introduction

## It's a Family Affair

Miriam Weiner's database, *Routes to Roots*, highlights the fact that the journey of self-discovery through ancestral connections is felt across ethnicities. "Forty years ago, genealogy was typically described as a hobby for retired people who trudged from archive to archive and few Jews at that time were among them. Then a series of events occurred beginning with Alex Haley's *Roots* that mesmerized television audiences night after night. The thought of tracing one's ancestors back to the old country struck a chord in literally millions of people, whether it was back to Africa or the shtetls of Eastern Europe."

In the film SANKOFA, Mona makes a spiritual return to the past so that she can learn lessons that will empower her in the present. This next lesson encourages learners to also revisit the past, but this time the tool is genealogy.

Family historian Hannah Scruggs will walk learners through the steps of building a family tree, explain best practices and share tips on how to perform successful research. While the need to take a trip to your local library, state archives or county courthouse still exists for many family history researchers, hundreds of thousands of people have now harnessed the power of the internet and the science of DNA testing to jumpstart their research about their family history and heritage.

**Objective:** Collect vital information such as names, dates of birth and residences from family or community members to begin building a family tree.

**Participants** will create a family tree chart based on the data collected in this activity.

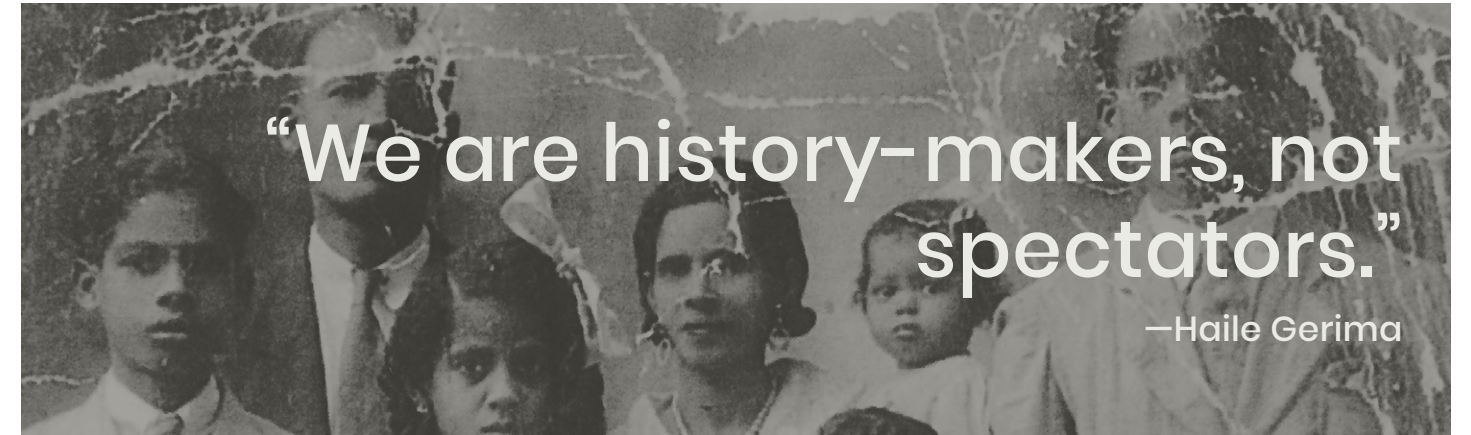
Genealogy is the study of family and the practice of tracing family history. People use genealogy to learn more about their ancestors, the places their families came from and what their lives were like. Genealogy can help us learn more about what our ancestors lived through in order for us to exist today, and can help us understand our families and ourselves.

## TEACHER AND GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

**Key Theme:** Community

**Objectives:** At the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Use the U.S. Census and other vital records to perform family history research
- Create a family tree
- Understand why genealogy is an important tool on the Sankofa journey



When we study genealogy, we're not just learning about our nuclear family; we're also learning about extended family and community networks, the people who feel like family. All of those people have an impact on who we are and how we live today.

There are different ways to access genealogical information, but we recommend getting started by talking to a family member, friend, or community member who is older than you to learn more about their story — when and where they were born, who they grew up with and experiences they remember strongly.

The next section of this lesson takes you online. Listen to four audiograms created by ARRAY 101 and family historian Hannah Scruggs at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org). Answer the discussion questions that follow.

## Part 1: What is Genealogy?

**Listen to the audio lesson at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org). View lesson 2 in the SANKOFA learning companion.**

**Write** what you already know about your family or community. Examples include:

- The name of the place where you were born
- The names of people close to you (could be parents, grandparents, cousins, close friends)
- A special family tradition or community event

**Make** a family tree chart based on the information you've learned in this activity. It's okay if you can't fill it all in yet. It can take decades to build a tree. Start with the information you know and document what family members and friends tell you on your tree. You can download free family tree and ancestor charts from the National Genealogical Society. Visit their site at [www.ngsgenealogy.org/free-resources/charts/](http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/free-resources/charts/)

**Explore** by performing an online search to learn one new fact about the place where you live. Sample information to search for includes:

- Who was the first mayor or leader of your city?
- Who or what is your town, city, or county named after?
- What indigenous people previously lived on the land you live on now? Visit [www.native-land.ca](http://www.native-land.ca) to find out.



## Part 2: Think Like a Genealogist

Genealogy is a bit like figuring out a mystery or putting together a puzzle. To think like a genealogist, you have to think about both what you already know and what questions you are trying to answer. Treating each record like a clue and incorporating what you're learning into the direction you're going will help you discover more about the lives your ancestors lived.

In this activity we will explore the census. Every ten years, since 1790, the United States attempts to take a count of the population. The count is used to get an understanding of our demographics, what places people are moving from or living in and how populated these places are. This is called the decennial census because it happens every ten years, and aside from giving us statistics about our country, it also informs how many Congressional seats a state receives.

The census is an amazing resource for researching ancestors in the United States because it lists much of the United States population by name and address and shows each person by household, often indicating a familial relationship or connection. It also shows who was living in and around the families we are researching, giving us a sense of the community where our ancestors lived.

*Listen to the audio lesson at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org)*

### Research Tip:

Records aren't always perfect. People's names are sometimes misspelled, their ages are listed incorrectly, and sometimes the handwriting is messy and difficult to read. Keep an open mind and compare each finding to other records when possible. Visit [support.ancestry.com](http://support.ancestry.com) and search for "handwriting" to find articles that can help you with your research.

## Reflection Questions:

- How is the census a valuable source for learning about your ancestors?
- What are the limitations of the census in tracing Black ancestors before the Civil War?
- How have questions about race and ethnicity changed with each census?

## Part 3: Vital, Military, and Community Records

The census isn't the only set of documents where we can find information about our ancestors. Birth, marriage and death certificates, also called vital records, are also helpful sources of information. Vital records help us place where our ancestors lived during key life events and often list the names of the parents of the main person or people the record is about. For example, a marriage certificate will usually list the names of the parents of the two people getting married. Other helpful information on vital records includes birthplace, age and place of event.

Vital, military and community records can help fill in the gaps and answer questions that the census doesn't always cover. These records help provide texture and context to our ancestors' lives.

**Find:** A vital or community record about your ancestors. What kind of record is it? What can you learn about your family or community member's life from that record?

**Learn:** Learn about the place where your ancestor or community member was living at the time of that record. Use google maps to locate it on the map. Using Google street view, what stands there now?

**Research:** Look in a newspaper for a date at least fifty years ago from a nearby city or community. What was the biggest headline? Do you see community events or birth, marriage or death announcements?

*Listen to the audio lesson at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org). View lesson 2 in the SANKOFA learning companion.*

## Reflection Questions:

- Which of the various types of vital records discussed above are potentially the most relevant for researching ancestors in your own family?
- Although they might not be digitized yet, what kinds of vital or community records do you think have documented your own life so far?



Photo courtesy of Mehelet Gezachew





Photo courtesy of SANKOFA

## Part 4: African American Genealogy – The 1870 Brick Wall, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and Records of Enslavement

Researching African American ancestors brings specific challenges once we reach the 1870 census. Prior to emancipation in 1865, about 90% of African Americans were enslaved and counted as property and not people on documentation. Though free Black Americans were listed by name in the census, they were in the minority. Genealogists often call this the 1870 brick wall because it can feel like the trail goes no further, and you’ve hit a brick wall. However, the 1870 Census, Freedmen’s Bureau records, slave schedules, and the wills, deeds and other property records of enslavers can help us potentially identify our ancestors and better understand the context and places where they may have lived.

The 1870 Census was the first census that listed African Americans by name. When this census was taken, it had only been about five years since Emancipation. Many African Americans continued to live in the South, near where they and their families had been enslaved. Because of this, it is often useful to pay extra attention when you’re looking around to see who is living nearby. On that census in particular, people were often living near family, their kin, networks that may have been developed on and across plantations and their former enslavers. If you’re able to locate your family in the 1870 census, note who’s nearby. The 1870 census also asks about how much a person’s real estate and personal estate are worth. Paying attention to the numbers in that column can give clues as to who may have enslaved people — it’s more likely that people who had significant wealth enslaved people than those that did not.

*Listen to the audio lesson at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org). View lesson 2 in the SANKOFA learning companion.*

### Takeaways:

Even though most African Americans are not recorded on census records prior to 1870, it does not mean your search has to end there.

The Freedmen’s Bureau, courthouse records, and plantation records can all help identify and name enslaved ancestors.

### Search:

Search in the Freedmen’s Bureau for free by visiting [www.ancestry.com/cs/freedmens](http://www.ancestry.com/cs/freedmens). Open and read documents that seem interesting to you. Answer these questions:

- What is the document about?
- Who is listed in the document?
- What type of Freedmen’s document is this? Bank records, marriage or another type?”
- What might the lives of these individuals been like prior to Reconstruction?
- Look at the columns that list personal and real estate. When you spot a family or a person with large numbers in that column, look to see who is living around them.



Freedmen and teachers in front of school and library at College of Beaufort, 1862. Library of Congress

### Reflection Questions:

- Most “slave schedules” in the census before 1870 did not record names, only ages. How does this contribute to genealogy’s 1870 “brick wall”?
- Why was the Freedmen’s Bureau significant to newly emancipated people? What kinds of information do its records capture?

## Part 5: Indigenous & International Records

In the United States, many of us come from different backgrounds. Your own family and community history – whether you’re part of an Indigenous community that has lived on this land for hundreds

“My grandmother’s story is my story. No one owes me to make my grandmother’s story but me.”

— Haile Gerima, Filmmaker



of thousands of years, or you're a first-generation American – will determine how you conduct your genealogy research. In this lesson, we will specifically talk about researching both Indigenous ancestors and international ancestors. The basic process for doing genealogy research that we discussed in lessons 1-3 remains the same: use information you already know to learn more information and to continually build on and repeat that process, taking notes and keeping track of the information as you go. The biggest thing that changes is the type of databases you are using.

When researching Native American ancestry, it is helpful to know tribal affiliation and where that family or community member lived. In addition to sources that have already been discussed earlier in this guide, Native Americans were documented by the federal government in the Indian Census Rolls, the Dawes Rolls, and the Guion Miller Rolls. Doing research at state, local, and tribal libraries and archives can provide more background and history on different tribal communities. Tribal enrollment applications and documents can also help trace Indigenous ancestors.

If you are searching for family members who immigrated to the United States, the first goal is to determine when they arrived and the country of their birth. The U.S. Census always lists birthplace, and between 1880-1930 also lists the birthplace of one's parents, which can help us figure out where the family may have immigrated from. Once you've figured out where they immigrated from, it is important to learn what records are available.

Many genealogy databases discussed earlier have some international records, however, some countries maintain their own databases and records that may or may not be publicly available. You can look up what records are available for many countries on FamilySearch.org's research wiki, linked in our resource guide. Depending on where they came from, it may be difficult to read all of the records due to language differences, but some records, like baptism, birth, marriage and death records, are fairly standard, and if you know the names you're looking for, you can figure out what the records say.

*Listen to the audio lesson at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org). View lesson 2 in the SANKOFA learning companion.*

Takeaways:

- Though the research process is largely the same for everyone, different countries have different sets of records.
- Once we learn where our families are from, we can utilize records from those places.

Reflection questions:

- How is genealogical research different when searching for tribal ancestors or those who were immigrants from other countries?
- How can you learn information from the vital records of your ancestors from other countries if you don't read the languages spoken there?

L	57	U.S.C.T.
Berry Loach		
Co. H, 57 Reg't U. S. Col'd Inf.		
Appears on		
Company Descriptive Book		
of the organization named above.		
DESCRIPTION.		
Age	28	years; height 5 feet 6 1/2 inches.
Complexion	Black	
Eyes	Black	; hair Black
Where born	N. Carolina	
Occupation	Laborer	
ENLISTMENT.		
When	Jan. 18, 1864	



Image courtesy of Aurelio Lopez





## Lesson 3

# Resistance



# Introduction

## Do You Want a Revolution?

Oppressed people, including enslaved Africans, have always practiced both confrontational and non-confrontational methods of resistance.

As Mr. Haile Gerima argues, “Black people, from day one, resisted and that resistance is a threatening expression.” Why might it be threatening? Perhaps because it is a tangible indication that oppressed people no longer view themselves through the lens of the oppressor and they are poised to reclaim whatever it is they’ve lost.

Lesson three asks the question, “How will you make sure the wisdom learned from the past is a part of the present?” After watching SANKOFA, learners will explore various methods of resistance to oppressive systems and discover tangible ways that they can save disappearing records and historical artifacts in their community.

## Resisting Enslavement

Since the beginning of the slave trade, people of African descent have engaged in resistance to the oppressive systems they were forced into. On the Middle Passage, countless captured people threw themselves overboard rather than live the trauma of enslavement a minute longer. Once in the Americas and other lands, enslaved people resisted by forming families even when enslavers forbade it, tried to keep work at a livable pace rather than comply with overseers’ attempts to speed production and ran away to escape violent retribution or enslavement altogether. Between 1820 and 1861, thousands escaped from slavery in the American South to northern states or Canada via the Underground Railroad.

## TEACHER AND GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

### Key Theme: Resistance

**Objectives:** At the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Understand the many different ways over time that Black Americans have resisted oppression
- Apply past examples of resistance to resisting continued oppression in today’s world

## Maroon Communities

In the earlier decades of slavery in North America, some enslaved Africans who ran away sought refuge with nearby Native Americans, or set up isolated colonies of runaways called maroon communities. A keen student of these communities, archaeologist Dan Sayer, has dedicated himself to telling the story of maroon communities in North Carolina and Virginia, specifically the Great Dismal Swamp. “Rather than go to the Washington Mall and hold up a protest sign, I choose to dig in the Great Dismal Swamp. By bringing a resistance story to light, you hope it gets into people’s heads,” says Sayer.

## Rebellions and Revolts

Primary sources document several heroic cases of individual resistance. Frederick Douglass famously fought back against Edward Covey, a particularly ruthless slaveholder that he had been rented out to for the explicit purpose of making him more compliant. Rather than submit, Douglass resisted and beat Covey back. “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”

Other acts of resistance were more coordinated and amounted to open revolt. Examples in the United States include the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, Gabriel’s Revolt in Virginia in 1800, The 1811 Slave Revolt in Louisiana, Denmark Vesey’s planned uprising in South Carolina in 1822, Nat Turner’s Revolt in Virginia in 1831, the mutiny aboard the *Amistad* in 1839, the revolt aboard the *Creole* in 1841, the revolt in the Cherokee Nation in 1842 and the Harpers Ferry Raid in Virginia in 1859.



Jamaica Assembly, The proceedings of the Governor and Assembly in regard to the maroon negroes” [with introductory account by Bryan Edwards] (London, 1796)

“Spirit of the dead, rise up,” the voice says, “and claim your story.”

— SANKOFA



Revolts occurred in other countries as well. Major rebellions occurred in Brazil in 1822 and 1835, including the 1835 Muslim Slave Revolt in Bahia, Brazil. There were uprisings throughout the Caribbean, including in Jamaica, Barbados and frequently in Cuba. In his book on Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760, historian Vincent Brown explains how revolt was an effective form of resistance: "With each successive discovery of new unrest, the slaveholders grew more fearful and bewildered. Suddenly the uprising seemed to be happening everywhere at once."

The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) succeeded in overthrowing slavery and French rule in the colony altogether, gaining independence and setting up a free Black republic. "Shortly after Haitian independence in 1804," however, writes journalist Tarik Ata, "France demanded that the newly formed country pay the French government, French slaveholders and for French recognition of Haiti as a sovereign state, a total of 150 million francs; with France frequently threatening Haiti with its warships if Haiti did not cooperate."

### "Contraband" and USCT Soldiers

During the Civil War in the United States from 1861 to 1865, enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the South marched to Union lines to seize their freedom instead of waiting for the army to come to them. At Fort Monroe in Virginia, nicknamed "Freedom's Fortress," the fort's Union commander freed the fugitive freedom-seekers by slyly calling them "contraband" of war, "property" seized from the Confederate enemy. Enslaved and free men and women guided Union troops through the backroads and creeks of Confederate territory and enlisted themselves in the U.S.C.T., United States Colored Troops, some eventually receiving pensions from the U.S. military. As in other American wars before and after, Black Americans actively fought for their freedom.



Photo courtesy of SANKOFA

## Activity One:

### This Land is My Land, This Land is Your Land

**Objective:** Learn about ways Maroon communities were sites of resistance and how the legacy of that resistance is being preserved today.

**Participants will** read the article, watch the video and discuss the ways in which the legacy of Maroon communities lives on today.

**Step 1: Read** Deep in the Swamps, Archaeologists Are Finding How Fugitive Slaves Kept Their Freedom. Locate the article by visiting [www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com). Search for "Great Dismal Swamp" to find the 2016 article written by Richard Grant.

**Step 2: Watch the first 20 minutes of** "How a Sovereign Group in Jamaica Is Fighting a US Mining Company," from Vice News about the Jamaican Maroon communities fighting to preserve their towns from bauxite mining. The residents here have been fighting invaders since the 1700s. Visit [www.youtube.com/user/vicenews](http://www.youtube.com/user/vicenews). Then search for "Maroon."

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why would Dan Sayer describe the archaeological work he does as an act of resistance?
2. How does the mining of Cockpit Country represent a modern day threat to the members of the community?
3. Whose responsibility is it to preserve historical sites and ancestral land?



Osman, a Great Dismal Swamp Maroon, by David Hunter Strother (Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1856)



# Activity Two:

## Transcribing Documents about Slavery and Freedom

Keeping the history of past acts of resistance alive is itself an act of resistance; the exclusion or erasure of stories of resistance from history robs people of examples and lessons on how to put their opposition to oppression into action. By helping to digitize and preserve historic documents, learners can help make the history of *all people* more accessible and widely known.

### After completing this activity, participants will be able to:

- Contribute to the transcription or verification of transcriptions of historical documents
- Find crowdsourced transcription opportunities
- Understand how the act of transcription contributes to stopping the erasure of enslaved and freed people from the major narratives of American history

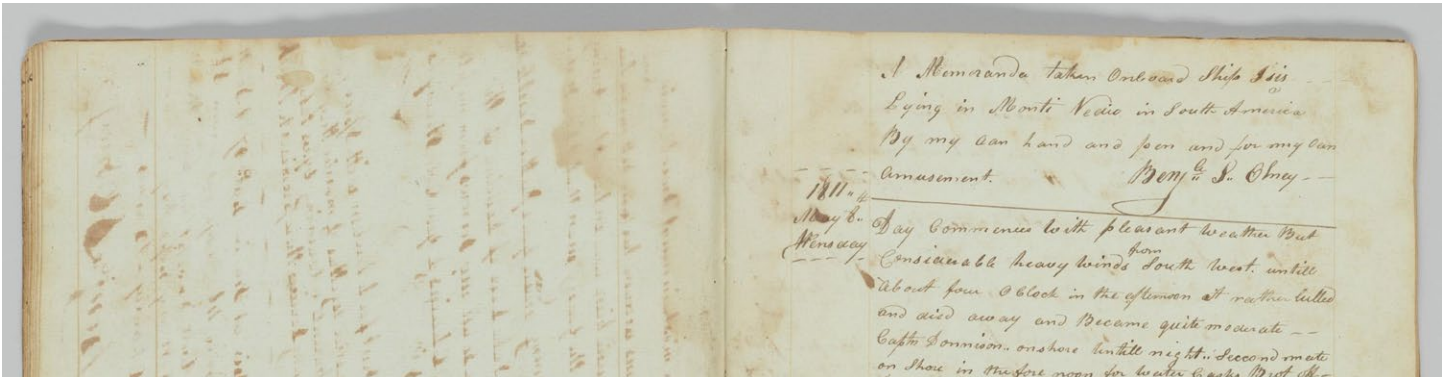
### Procedures:

- Part I: Read the text below to learn about how to transcribe a historical document.
- Part II: Practice a transcription with the provided excerpt from the Journal and Manifest of Benjamin. S. Olney onboard Ship I.s.I.s.
- Part III: Reflect on your learnings so far, including common challenges in transcription.
- Part IV: Transcribe! Contribute to a crowdsourced transcription project of your choosing.

### Part I: Learn About Transcription

Transcription is one way that you can explore history while contributing to the preservation of documents that tell the story of people and places. For historians today, transcription usually means converting handwritten documents to typed documents (though sometimes even typed sources need to be transcribed to be usable). This makes documents more legible (easier to read) and searchable, while allowing archivists and librarians to keep the original copy (which may be fragile or one-of-a-kind) safe for future generations.

Transcription is a time-consuming process, but a critical one for making historical records



accessible, especially for those searching for documents online. Some archives have started crowd-sourced transcription projects, like the ones at the Smithsonian Institution, which involve students and others in the process of transcribing important collections. This work can be challenging but is important for professional and student historians seeking to understand the past.

### Part II: Practice

Type what you see:

To zoom in or out to get a better view, you can use this link:

[https://transcription.si.edu/transcribe/41182/NMAAHC-A2018\\_17\\_2\\_3\\_1\\_4\\_012](https://transcription.si.edu/transcribe/41182/NMAAHC-A2018_17_2_3_1_4_012)

### Part III: Reflect on Your Learning

Were there any words or phrases that you zoomed in very close to, or very far out from? Why do you think this helped with reading and transcribing the text?

Why do you think some words were shortened?

Why do you think some of the words in this transcription were spelled in a way that we think of as being “incorrect”?

### Part IV:

Choose a crowdsourced transcription project to contribute to. Spend an hour helping to digitize and preserve the contents of these

documents for future generations. Remember to have the Smithsonian’s Guide to Transcription and Review handy as you get started. Other projects may have a separate tutorial that provides useful information for people working on the collection; make sure to read this before you get to work. Remember that not every archive will use the same setup for their crowd-sourced transcription projects.

Several options related to the history of slavery and emancipation can be found at the following sites:

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Freedmen’s Bureau Records

Smithsonian Transcription Center

Alternatively, to doing your own transcriptions, you can also verify the transcriptions of others. Visit the Smithsonian Transcription Center and compare your transcription to the one there

***Are there any words that you read differently from the person who wrote this transcription? Does reading their transcription help you read any words you were not sure about?***

When you finish, print your transcriptions (or screenshots) and answer the following reflection questions.

Visit Lesson 3 Activity 2 in the SANKOFA Learning Companion online for more information on transcription lessons.

### Reflection Questions:

1. What did you learn from the records you transcribed?
2. Who wrote these records? Do you know when and where they wrote these records? How?
3. When you encountered words that you could not immediately read, how did you figure out what they said?
4. How do you feel that you contributed to the accessibility of these documents for other users of the Smithsonian archives today and in the future?
5. Why can transcription be defined as an act of resistance?





Lesson 4

**Liberated Territory**  
The Work of Haile Gerima



“Often we are made to disconnect our nerve endings, our antennas, meaning in spiritual terms, and therefore miss out on all kinds of possible communications with our past ancestors. We’re not listening to the bones from the past that are trying to talk to us, even if they traveled like an arrow and tried to jar open our spiritual memory. I think the one thing that this film project enlightened me on is one’s ability to recall past ancestors. That is, even for simple and daily invocation, in order to say thank you. This is a very important philosophical principle of the ancestral referential way of co-existence, not only for Black people but for the world. I grew up with these invocations. My mother never ate anything without invoking, without saying thank you, and she’s even Catholic on top of that. She always said thank you as she threw some of the food around for the ancestors to eat also. Even on a personal level, my journey to give birth to the film story of SANKOFA has connected me. In spiritual terms, where I was disconnected, it has made me more centered and partially fulfilled.”

— Haile Gerima, Filmmaker





# Introduction

## The Personal is Political

“Ordinary community members are who made SANKOFA what it is today, not the elite, not the bourgeois.” – Haile Gerima

When director Haile Gerima speaks, people all over the world listen. And when he talks about his most famous film, SANKOFA, his words become a rallying cry for artists around the globe. For more than 40 years, his charge to himself, other creatives and the hundreds of film students who have passed through his Howard University classroom is to take control of their narratives and get their stories to the masses by any means necessary. It is a mission that has met its moment.

Arriving in the United States from Ethiopia as a theater student in 1967, Haile Gerima followed in his father’s footsteps, a dramatist and playwright. Gerima studied acting in Chicago before entering the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, where his exposure to Latin American films inspired him to mine his cultural legacy. After completing his thesis film, BUSH MAMA (1975), Gerima received international acclaim with HARVEST: 3000 YEARS (1976), an Ethiopian drama that won the Grand Prize at the Locarno Film Festival.

Following the award-winning ASHES & EMBERS (1982) and the documentaries WILMINGTON 10 – U.S.A. 10,000 (1978) and AFTER WINTER: STERLING BROWN (1985), Gerima filmed his epic, SANKOFA (1993). SANKOFA received glowing reviews while in competition at the Berlin International Film Festival. However, distribution of the film in traditional theaters proved a much more challenging task, though not impossible. Before the release of SANKOFA, Gerima had already set out on his own journey — one that included becoming an exhibitor and distributor of independent Black films, side by side with his wife Shirikiana Gerima. With the help of the grassroots African-American community, they sustained two years of theatrical distribution for SANKOFA. Their desire to see collective success among Black filmmakers has motivated them to create independent cinema for decades.

“Be history makers, not spectators,” says Gerima when speaking about how he believes Black people should show up in the world. “Everyone isn’t going to like the art you create, and that’s ok; you aren’t making it for everyone.”

For decades, followers of Haile Gerima’s work have been drawn to his unique method of explaining film narrative and intrigued by his rebellious attitude towards the traditional systems of making and criticizing films. His lectures often mirror the call and response experience seen in Black churches.



Image courtesy of Haile Gerima

Whether speaking about collective success, liberation or resistance – the audience’s physical and verbal affirmations make clear that his message resonates deeply with those who understand and embrace his canon of work.

## Liberated Territory and Methods

Gerima continues to distribute and promote his films, such as TEZA (2008), which won the Jury and Best Screenplay awards at the Venice International Film Festival. He also lectures and conducts workshops in alternative screenwriting and directing both within the U.S. and internationally.

The Gerimas’ bookstore in Washington D.C., Sankofa Video Books & Café, is referred to as “liberated territory,” a space where creatives are allowed to unshackle themselves from the binding colonial construct that dictates what art matters and which artists should be celebrated. Founded in 1996 with a desire to create a communal space where marginalized voices take center stage, the bookstore has

become sacred ground for self-expression, offering film screenings, book signings and artist showcases to the community. “We wanted people to learn about Black people in Black spaces designed for intellectual engagement. We wanted to create a liberated territory,” says Gerima. A family affair where you can find Mr. and Mrs. Gerima, as well as their adult children, the Sankofa bookstore is an extension of his work as a young filmmaker on the campus of the University of California in Los Angeles in the 1960’s.

Then, just as now, it was essential that Gerima carve out safe spaces within systems when possible, and outside of systems when necessary, to explore and create. When speaking about critics, Gerima reminds audiences, “No one has gone into our cinematic form. We have critics who do not know how to read our films. Our critics used conventional barometers to judge our work. Even when trying to speak about the work we did with other filmmakers at UCLA, they create a caste system. We were people who were made who we were by the Black community.”

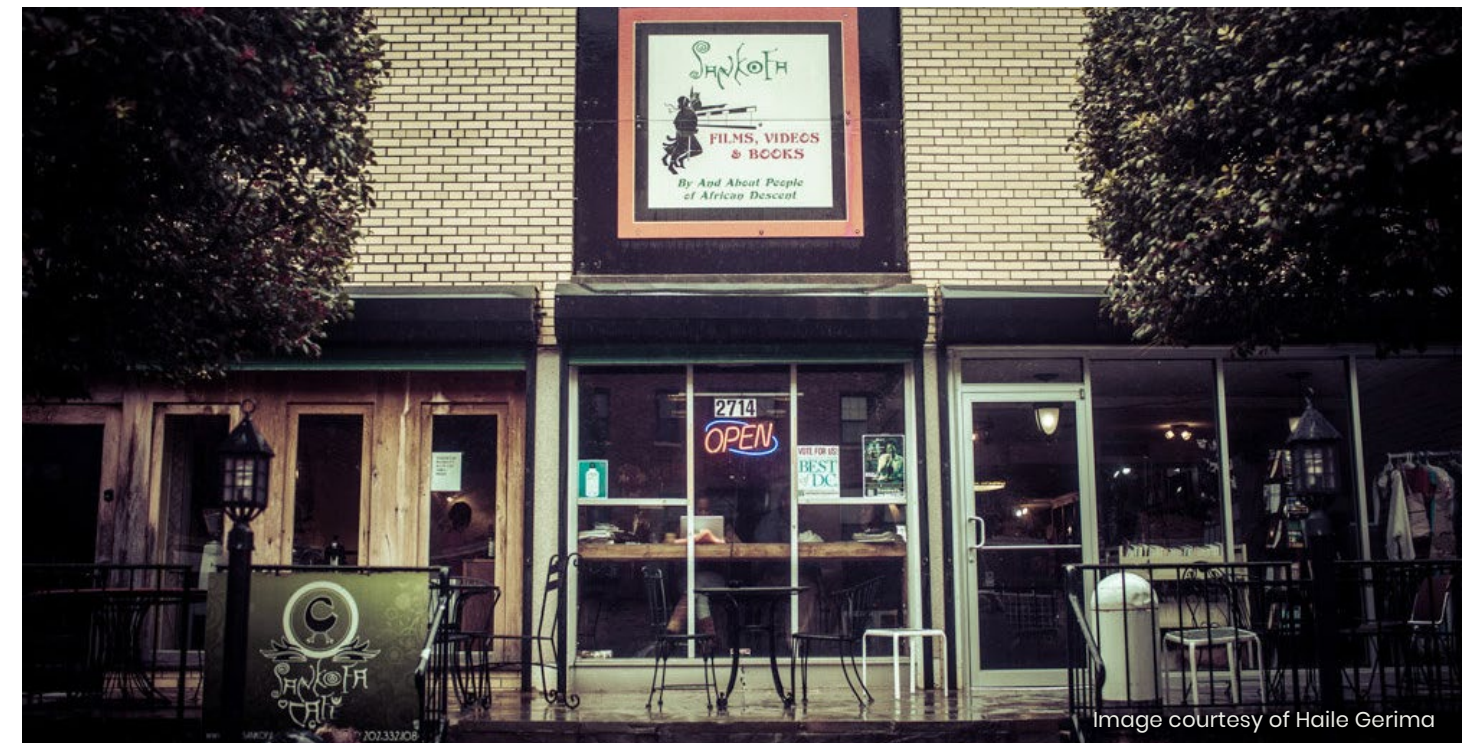


Image courtesy of Haile Gerima



Speaking about the audience-spectator relationship that his cinematic form achieves, Gerima explains that, “We have been inundated for over 100 years by Hollywood to be passive spectators. My idea is active spectatorship that culminates in a historical making. The individual, the community and the collective community enters into the psychological idea of wanting to be a history maker or recuperating or snatching our capacity to be history makers.”

Gerima continues, “The framing is the struggle. Movies can be made about anybody and be used as an instrument to enslave us. My idea is to break down that whole idea, that formula cinema, attack it, and destroy it. While I make my movies, I am fully aware of what I want to be doing; I want to tear down the oppressive form. If not, no one is going to be liberated, including the filmmaker, I.”

Gerima has championed work for over 45 years that is “innovatively independent” from mainstream cinema. He has also encouraged other Black filmmakers to do the same. “Most especially the young filmmakers do not see strength in communal or collective existence,” says Gerima. “They just think they’re going to conquer the world as individuals. There is no world like that. In cinema, it’s always [been], even in Hollywood, a collective surge.”

His point of view is shared by filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay, who has expressed her struggle to work simultaneously independent of and within the traditional Hollywood filmmaking model: “The fact that so few people had seen *Ashes and Embers* before our media collective ARRAY re-distributed it is a travesty. It’s a masterpiece and deserves to be a part of every film school curriculum in this country. Not including it is cinema segregation, and we’re done waiting on others to acknowledge and distribute the work of the geniuses in our communities, we’ll do it ourselves, and we will do it spectacularly.”

Haile Gerima teaches us, through his words and his art, that there must be new movement and new learning with each generation.

## Activity One:

### Liberated Viewing

While writing about SANKOFA, director Nijla Mumin, a former student of Haile Gerima, said “Gerima encouraged us to break and subvert that paradigm. To create Black characters that were rich with inner turmoil, who resisted, struggled, who sought intimate relationships and who possessed sensuality. It is on this foundation that *Sankofa* rests.”

Like close reading of a text, close viewing of a film is the act of carefully and purposefully viewing and reviewing a film clip in order to focus on what the filmmaker is trying to convey; the choices the filmmaker has made; the role of images, narration, editing and sound; and the purpose of the film.

This activity ensures that participants become critical viewers of film content and can use it to understand complex issues both in and outside of the film. Learners can choose any clip from the film SANKOFA for this activity. This exercise can be completed by individuals, in a small group or as a large group.

### Step 1: Choose a Scene

View a scene of your choice from the film SANKOFA. After watching the clip, learners should write down their general thoughts and reactions. Group leaders and teachers can feel free to prompt participants with questions such as: What stands out for you? What resonated with you? What questions do you have?

### Step 2: Focused Viewing

Films are layered media involving story, character development, images, sound and pacing. When making a movie, there are many people involved in each of these areas who contribute to the end result of the finished movie, and they each view the film through their own lens. For instance, a composer will watch a movie, looking for opportunities to evoke emotion through sound, whereas an editor may make choices that speak to the pace of the film. Learners will view the chosen scene and only use ONE lens while doing so. Use the prompts below to guide thinking and take notes.

- Sound: Focus on the music in the series as well as the sound effects. What do you notice? What stands out to you? Does the music make you feel joyful, sad, angry, hopeful?
- Editing: Pay attention to the way that the images and videos are edited or ‘cut’ together. Does the director make lots of quick cuts? Does the filmmaker spend more time on some scenes than others before transitioning to a new scene? Would you describe the editing as fast-paced, slow-paced or even-paced? Does the pacing have an impact on the emotional response of the viewer? If so, how?
- Images: Focus on the visual experience; do not pay attention to the audio (you may choose to watch in silence). What do you notice? What choices did the filmmaker make as they relate to color and movement? How does the director frame the images? Are there several people in most of the scenes or are the characters often alone? What is the impact of these choices? Could other choices have been made?
- Storyline/Historical Facts: How is the story unfolding? What historical facts are portrayed in this film? Are you learning new information?
- Human Behavior: How do you see the range of human behavior represented in this film? Where do you see the themes of humanity, power or privilege? What is the purpose of this film? Is it to teach, entertain or do something else?

### Step 3: Discussion

- What motivations might the filmmaker have? How are these manifested in the scene?
- Were there examples of inner turmoil, resistance, struggle, intimacy or sensuality in the scene as mentioned at the beginning of this activity? If so, what were they and how were they used in the scene?
- What did you already know about this topic? How might your prior knowledge of the topic change how you experienced the scene?

View citations and attributions for this learning companion at [www.array101.org](http://www.array101.org).



ARRAY 101 is an online education initiative delivering dynamic social impact learning guides for our ARRAY Releasing films and ARRAY Filmworks original content. Available to educational organizations and institutions and to the public for free, ARRAY 101 expands our mission to amplify storytelling by Black artists, people of color and women directors of all kinds. The learning companions provoke important conversations among students, educators, families, and communities around who we are and how we engage in the world.

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