



Filming Slavery

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FILMING SLAVERY

A conversation with Haile Gerima

Pamela Woolford

In October of last year, independent filmmaker Haile Gerima's latest film, *Sankofa*, had its United States premiere in Washington, D. C., where sold-out crowds extended a scheduled two-week run to eleven weeks. The film now has scheduled dates in cities throughout the United States, and has received rave reviews internationally. It won the grand prize at the African Cinema Festival in Italy and Best Cinematography at the FESPACO Pan-African Film Festival in Burkina Faso.

Haile Gerima spent twenty years researching, writing, and producing *Sankofa*. The film portrays the enslavement of African people throughout the Americas, and represents an artistic expression of historical realities not often portrayed in film: the rebellions of enslaved African people; the segregation and hierarchy among African people during slavery; the use of religion to justify and condone slavery; the practice of using African people to whip and abuse other African people; the rape of African women by slave masters; the revolutionary actions of Ma-

rooms, communities of escaped slaves living in hiding from slavers and slave masters. The film narrates these events through the story of Mona, an African-American model who is transported back in time to a sugar plantation where she becomes Shola, an enslaved African woman.

Haile Gerima was born in Gondar in northwest Ethiopia in 1947 and has lived in the United States since 1967, when he came to Chicago to study at the Goodman Institute of Drama. He began making films as a graduate student at UCLA, where he received his B. A. and M. F. A. in film. Today, he teaches film as a tenured professor at Howard University. Throughout his films he has presented a range of Black experiences to counter the medium's history of stereotype and simplification. "The cinematic challenge before us is to innovate rather than imitate," he has written. "If we want to tell the trillion untold stories of our people, our film approach has to be as creative as the stories themselves." Through film, Gerima as-

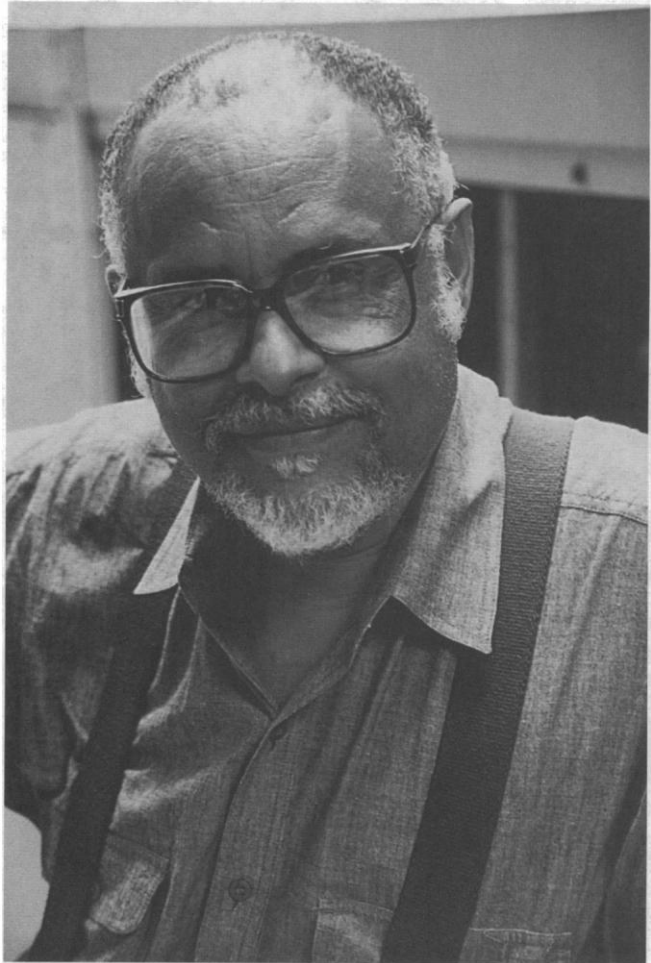
serts his impressive vision of Black life and history. Both the texture of his film and the rhythm of his conversation convey wisdom in a lyrical style that is his own.

Pamela Woolford: In *Sankofa*, we find a diverse mixture of languages and musics of people of African descent. Even the setting, you have said, has purposefully not been authenticated to represent a specific place in the Americas. Can you tell me something about what you hoped to achieve using this diversified aesthetic of the African diaspora?

Haile Gerima: The first obstacle when you deal with this period is that there is so much guilt and denial tied to both the plantation owner's perspective and that of the Africans who are condemned to be slaves. That split in perspective still exists today. There is this protest, "It didn't happen here, not that much here. It didn't happen . . ." There's a great deal of doubt. And because I did a great deal of research from Brazil to Barbados to Louisiana—all over, you know, most places that slavery took place—I felt that whenever the film shows, it should play as if it happened in those places. Any of those places.

PW: Did you want it to have a kind of universal theme?

HG: Well, not necessarily. I didn't want people, viewers, to point their fingers any place but where they are. The film gets localized within the particular context of its reception. And the whole idea that it could have happened in another place—anyplace—allows for a common understanding. Brazilian Africans will not think



differently from American Africans. And I do this because there is this ideology of "specialness," of human exceptionalism in regard to the plantation owner. For example, with Portuguese slavery there is this idea of, "Well, it happened like that in the English-speaking plantations, but not in the Portuguese." Everybody's trying to find out who was the more humane slave owner. I prefer to confuse this kind of localization. I want to say, "Hmm . . . it could have happened here, but it also happened there."

There is also the whole idea of slavery

Haile Gerima
Edgar Patterson Davis



Shango, played by Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka, peers through fields of sugar cane in *San-kofa*

itself. Slavery was a scientific adventure, an attempt by an industrialized society to create a robotic or mindless human being, pure labor. And there was the further idea of creating slaves who would be happy as slaves—it didn't happen in reality, but it did happen in the plantation school of literature, for example. And it happened in the plantation school of cinema.

In Hollywood, most slaves are happy. They talk the same. Their identity is fully determined by the context of the plantation. They are nothing. They are property utilized to make the plantation life better, and they have no human dimensions, no desires. And this stereotype does not operate solely against Africans: the

experiment began with Native Americans. So, the whole idea of Africans who are happy to be slaves, devoted to their owners, who will sell themselves twenty times over to save their gambling master—all this is the romantic literature of the plantation, the view from the plantation owner's perspective.

Now, what I did was flip this. I brought out the individual identities and motives of the characters, transforming the "happy slaves" into an African race opposed to this whole idea, by making the history of slavery full of resistance, full of rebellion. Resistance and rebellion—the plantation school of thought believed it was always provoked by outsiders, that Africans were not capable of having that human need.

PW: Now, within the context of what you're saying, how do you feel about something like "Roots," the television miniseries?

HG: "Roots" is, you know, a political film. I don't think it's an artistic film. "Roots" was about creating harmony between Black and white people. But to me, harmony comes from facts, not delusions. And so while "Roots" did portray certain aspects of slavery, there's this false human union between white plantation owners and Black people. And to me, that's not what history testifies. I think politics usually is an art of lying. When art becomes politics it deceives. I think healing can only come out of truth and reality. Stronger people face certain facts; they become stronger nations.

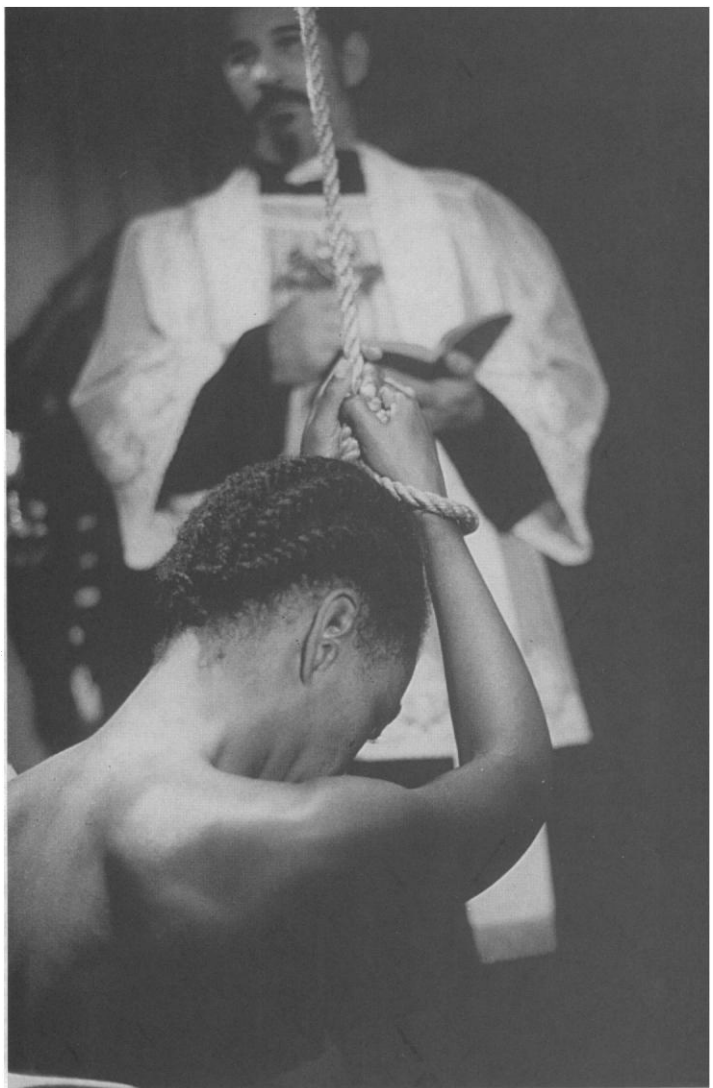
I think that by individualizing and giving specific identities to characters, by speaking to motives, we can negate the

idea of the “happy slave,” this whole uniform group talking the same, thinking the same, shuffling the same, dancing the same. So you flip it and say, “No, they were just human beings caught up in a given circumstances, but they remain human, fighting it to the end.” In American movies there’s a major denial of the human motives of Black people. There is not that much film that takes time to develop those human textures.

PW: And with this understanding of the humanness comes an understanding of the larger picture.

HG: Yes. Yeah. And also the understanding that Africans in America don’t need always guidance and plantation-owner sponsor/parents, who will think for them, who will work for them, who will take care of them: “They don’t need to have salaries. They’ll be fed quite adequately next to the horses and the cows.” I think this mentality prevails now. Even now.

And the other aspect of film representations is this idea of whites freeing Black people. Whites wrote a history of Whites having freed Black people, which makes Black people people who never freed themselves. In fact in some history, in some literature, Black people are pictured as being against freedom. People continue to present writings in which Black people were happy to be slaves and fought against those who tried to free them. For example, in *Birth of a Nation*, the house servants were beating up and hating and fighting for the masters. There was a constant division between the loyal slaves and the nonloyal ones. But it does not correspond to reality. And sociologically, it



still happens. I’m trying to give you the demography of plantation school still prevailing.

Let me give you another example. I don’t know if you know this logo, the “I’m a brother, too” logo that was conceived by the abolitionist movement. Basically, it’s a picture of an African on his knees with chains pleading, saying, “I’m a brother, too.” I’m sure you’ve seen it in history books. And usually you find Lincoln, and at the feet of Lincoln there’s an African with a chain in pleading hands. Even when Blacks appropriated that image, Booker T. Washington would be standing and an African is at the foot on his knees with a chain. The slave’s offer-

Father Raphael (Reginald Carter) condemns Shola (Oyafunmike Ogunlano) and her “heathen” African religion for her escape attempt

Bebeto Matthews



Kuta (Alditz Mckenzie), a pregnant field hand, is whipped by headman Noble Ali (Afremo Omilami)

ing of the chain toward some force to remove it perpetuates this idea that Africans are incapable of rebelling to free themselves.

PW: And also, it never occurred that way.

HG: Yes. Africans fought slavery, making all the compromises human beings do, but they were responsible for breaking their own chains, fundamentally, with the support of other progressive people. The thought that "Other people freed Black people" still prevails among little kids growing up now, in this country, because that's the information that's fed to them.

PW: Do you feel like there's any hope for changing what people believe is history?

HG: Well, culturally, I think, by bringing forth the censored information, yes. Instead of feeding them the myth of Lincoln, just bring Nat Turner. You have a statue of Jefferson; next to him put Nat Turner or Harriet Tubman. Juxtapose it and say, "This is a man who is a very intelligent statesman, but he's also a plantation owner who mortgaged his slaves."

PW: Do you think that America will ever come to that point?

HG: If it doesn't it will always have riots every twenty, every fifteen years. But culture, a true culture, a democratic culture, can heal society by juxtaposing two histories of a people. That's why African Americans continually are struggling now to have their sense of history, their own history, told to their own children. Because they realize their children cannot transform or go forward without this fundamental requirement of human nature, the history of a people. White kids are told, "Oh, be nice to Blacks," and Blacks are growing up knowing that they're not entitled to a lot of things. . . . Just by watching television a little Black kid just automatically realizes subconsciously even the role playing, you know. If I take my kid all the time to *Home Alone*. . . .

PW: So, you believe that changing the culture in terms of art can actually change the country sociologically.

HG: Oh yeah, I think this is what the black intelligentsia is now faced with, the

task of forging a culture—because up to now people have been working on matters of food and shelter and medicine, but not mind. The killing of each other, the whole backward reactionary trend of some rap music, and the degradation of women in their cultural expression comes out of a certain generation that is not mentally nurtured by culture. The emphasis has been too much on food, shelter, and medicine, which is important, but, to me, what makes us different from the animal kingdom is the cultural nutrition. And the whole mass media continues to impoverish the mental capacity of young people.

PW: I want to ask you a question about violence in your film. Your co-producer [Shirkiana Aina, Gerima's wife] has commented that although *Sankofa* is about a violent subject, slavery, an effort was made to refrain from showing gratuitous violence. In fact, during the slave rebellion the viewers are not graphically shown the violence directed towards white male slave masters. In contrast, however, the viewers are shown the graphic blood and slashes from whippings on slave women, and the branding and the graphic rape of a slave woman. How did you decide when to show violence in the film?

HG: Well, I would say this: I think all of it, all of what you described, is shown carefully. I think the co-producer meant we tried not to be indulging in pointless violence. I think we've shown everything. I think the violence, for example, that Shola perpetrates against the plantation owner is as bloody as anything. The rape is more powerful in the way it's presented, but the violence against the plan-

tation owner is still presented in a very, very compensatory way to the rape.

PW: But you see the violence against the plantation owner as shown just as graphically?

HG: Well, none of what you described is even graphic. To me, if I indulged in graphically filming the rape scene, I would be going against my purpose. I think I did not shoot that scene graphically. I shot it to show that white men's relationship to black women was like an outright treatment of an animal. It's not this love story. I wanted to show that he rapes her the way he would rape a cow or an animal. He was not having a human relationship with this African woman. And so, to me, I don't see it as graphic. Graphic, to me, is going into the elements of sex. For example, in that scene I don't even show him; I don't even care to show him. I only show the map of the idea of what I wanted to express.

PW: Did gender figure in your decision-making process in showing violence? It seems to me like there's more violence shown towards the slave women than the slave men.

HG: Well, I guess maybe I'm not conscious. . . . I mean, this could be one of the flaws of the film. You know, we could go nitpicking and say we see Shango [a male slave in the film] get shot. But I am not in the gender-dichotomy world that this society has. To me, Shola is a man, Shola is a woman. I didn't want men not to have the journey Shola takes, on the basis of gender. And to me, Nunu is a man, Nunu is a woman. And the gender

thing that is now a major obsession within this society—while I recognize the importance of it, I wouldn't go to a very brutal position where Black men and Black women during slavery—a very brutal period—are divided on a gender basis. That would be too oppressive.

PW: There is one thing that may distinguish *Sankofa* from other works that have dealt with slavery. You do show slave women with just as much power for rebellion and motivation for revolt as slave men. Usually men are the ones we are shown taking those roles.

HG: Well, in the historical facts I don't see the difference. I didn't find it historically. You know, in Jamaica, in Surinam, men and women took different positions at different places to lead a rebellion. And I guess because I didn't get caught up with this whole politically required gender theme, maybe I was freer to make that happen.

PW: So, in your creative process in writing you're not consciously worrying about what a character's actions should be in reference to what gender the character is or whether the character represents a stereotype of his or her gender?

HG: Well, let me back up. Two things: One, I believe everything is political. Two, in terms of art, I study all the questions. I don't want to be behind in any topic . . . on the women question, on race, sociology, etc. But I would not impose my political obsession on a given script. I go for character creation, and my hope is that the substance of the character is sexless.

If you try—in a very algebraic or geo-

metric way—try to measure and add and subtract political considerations based on gender or even on race, and not go to the content of the human character, it's a tragedy.

I would want Black men to go through the journey of Shola. I don't want them to say, "Oh, my woman went through this." I want them to say, "I felt I went through the journey with Shola." And I think this is what was very important for me to hear from people who saw the film. That people kept seeing themselves in this character, and they didn't have this separation "because I'm a man." They didn't say to me, "You didn't show a man." They told me they went through what she went.

PW: And you're finding that even with Black men?

HG: Oh, yeah. And I'm very happy because I just think it is very sad how the program has worked on black men. Without translating it into my film, I think the program of false manhood has successfully been transmitted to a great deal of African men. A lot of women have their minds more intact and are trying to do their best with all the hustle-bustle of society.

PW: Now, what do you mean by false manhood?

HG: False manhood, you know—whatever sociologists have written about what Black manhood is or whatever the perception of society is of what a Black man is. Black men get caught on that plastic and never discover their own individual sensitivity. And they go around parading

false manhood while, in fact, inside them there's another person—fragile, or strong, or cowardly, or whatever different kind of human character. And you can see in some of these young people's films this kind of characterization. And so, there is this problem of reenacting false definitions of what manhood is.

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In fact, when one of the characters in *Sankofa* says, "I'm a man. I'm a man," Nunu says, "Then, you can be a man, a tender man. And nothing wrong with it." I know in the block a lot of guys cannot be tender, because they're afraid of its stigma or social definition. I see it in my teaching. I have men and women students. When I try to nurture the individual writer to come out, I spend more of my time trying to demystify manhood; the women don't need that much of that. You know, it's a lot of tissue-covered men playing parts and not themselves. And society presents them that way in documentaries and in fiction because the artist fails to interpret them and go into the meat of the matter. They just show the exterior cover of what is Black manhood. And it's the most deformed expression.

PW: So, do you think that Black men today are actually taking on the roles that they see themselves portrayed as in art?

HG: Most. Yeah.

PW: I want to bring up that in your essay, "Thoughts and Concepts: The

Making of *Ashes and Embers*," you write that during the screenwriting stage of your work you are constantly applying safeguards against the phenomenon of stereotypes. But some people might say that you use stereotypes in *Sankofa*: the light-skinned biracial character who sees himself as removed from and better than other Black people; and the "westernized" African-American model, who makes her living off her looks and apparently is not in touch with her African heritage. Can you comment on the use of these characterizations in your film?

HG: Well, again, stereotype is a very important point to study and watch for because I think stereotypes are not only the terrain or the turf of racist people. We impose them on ourselves. And so, in terms of filmmaking from an African point of view, an African-American point of view, one has to study stereotypes a great deal because they continue to destabilize good intentions.

But at the same time I think there are certain stereotypes that you have to demystify. I know a lot of people, for example, if they see a dark-skinned Black woman, they say, "stereotype." I know my students, if they saw a fat woman in a movie, they would say, "stereotype." The first question I ask them is, "So, from now on fat Black women would be totally barred from your movies?" And they begin to think. Because, to me, stereotype comes when you don't care about the character, when you don't develop the character, not because one is fat or light-skinned. You can't shy away from stereotypes. But you have to take them and demystify them. And you can't be afraid of them and not tackle them.

For example, Joe to me is light-skinned not because he was working with the master. Nunu [Joe's mother] was raped by two white men on a slave ship. It's logical for me to have him light-skinned. And I also wasn't thinking about his light skin; more, I was looking at his bone structure. I don't know if you remember the river scene, for example, between them. That's her son; I wanted people to look at their bones, the mother and him, their faces. That was the map that I was working from, family: Would he come out of her?

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The other thing is the fact that in the diaspora a mixing has taken place. For example, when I did *Ashes and Embers*, in fact, some Black people would see the movie, and they would say something to me about the white guy in the TV repair shop. But he was actually a light-skinned Black man. And, to me, these are very important challenges I have to bring to my society in the way we play with pigmentations. I wanted to challenge Black people so they don't go around as we usually do with certain defined notions of Blackness.

To me, the characters continue to challenge people on those bases so we don't go around judging Black people on the cover, on the hairstyle, on the exterior, instead of on the content or what they stand for. To me, the TV repair man is more militant than any Black Panther

party member who never developed as a human being but who was intoxicated with slogans only. These are the things, the backgrounds I work from.

But again, you know, one of the most tragic things about filmmaking within the African and African-American reality now is we always justify our errors, we argue, and the art never develops, never grows. And this is the tragic period now, where the art and our language as filmmakers is not developing because there is no concrete criticism. Our flaws, our imperfections, are not pointed out to us.

PW: So, you appreciate criticism of your films. You welcome it?

HG: Oh, yeah. I do. I do because it helps me to develop. You know, sometimes I crave and pray for people who would understand, first, my aim. I am still trying to develop my language as a filmmaker. I think what's killing Black people is that we imitate formulas, and we never give birth to our art. Our artists are never born. They continue to do a formula. And so, we don't get the accent, the linguistic temperament of Black people in film, while in music it's more successful. So, if somebody understands where I'm coming from, then they will really help me, and they will also find my flaws. People who are good critics are those who want to participate in forging a film language with the filmmakers and the audience.

PW: Now, I did want to get your reaction to some comments that were made by some reviewers.

HG: Did you read the one Professor Mbye did? That challenged me. I didn't get any

very critical comments from him, but I think his reading of the film blew many people's mind because he comes out of African literature, and so he saw that there are many codes to reading my work. There are certain cultural metaphors in my work, so I'm not always read well. My father was a dramatist, and I grew up in another society that had a tradition of drama, you know, pre-Europe. And so my father didn't study Aristotle or Shakespeare. I am not read well. People don't read me critically. In the primary, secondary, tertiary meanings, in metaphors about Africa and the diaspora, in triangular metaphors of characters, there is a higher map in my work. But people go, for example, for the gender, for the woman/man question while, in fact, I was working with a higher map of configuring characters. If you looked at the German reviewers, or at least what we got from Berlin, and juxtapose it to the American reviews, you'll just see what the problem is.

PW: What were the reviews like in Berlin?

HG: Well, the Berlin critics—they understand where film is at now. They are aware film is not about Europe and America only. They seem to know Indian cinema, Brazilian cinema, African cinema. And then they put you in the context of the battle of film development. And you're not insulted.

I need—for my own development—I need a person who spends time understanding how sound and picture are put together, how many months are devoted to the sound work alone, and what is buried in the sound, what are the metaphoric messages conveyed by the sound, what are

the literal messages, etc. If nobody gives you that, then you don't develop. I value criticism that comes from an equal partnership—criticism which arises not because somebody wants to praise you or disgrace you, but because you are equally interested in developing the film language—then it gets to become the most valuable, cherished relationship, however hard it is.

Now, I think feedback is the most important aspect of development in an artist's life. So, I'm known with all my friends to be open to criticism in script. Before I even show them rough works, I show scripts, and I debate, argue. I am the one who benefits the most even from bad feedback.

PW: Now, in terms of criticism, I did want to bring up something that I felt in watching the film. The plot of *Sankofa* could potentially leave viewers with the message that someone like the character Mona can connect with her ethnic background only through experiencing the abusive victimization of her ancestors

Why is society always running for cover when Africans in this country want to make linkage with Africa?

firsthand. Could this plot, even if unintentionally, feed into the mentality that carries on certain violent traditions? Now, I'm thinking of two in particular. One is the abusive hazing that has occurred in initiations into African-American fraternities and sororities. And the other is the passing on of the tradition of female gen-

ital mutilation, which Alice Walker has been crusading against.

HG: The question is so incompatible to what the film is about.

PW: I agree with you in terms of the major theme or premise of the film, what you're doing here. But I did have the feeling, in viewing the film, real strongly. I saw a representation of something that I see going on in modern-day times.

HG: The problem is it doesn't have anything to do with me nor with my film. I would speak more if I get the connection of that. Who would want to go back to a tradition that is so oppressive?

PW: I agree with you in terms of that, but there are people who do argue otherwise.

HG: I think the confusion arises because discussion of Africa is so censored that many people only think of it in romantic, sentimental terms. Africans in the diaspora who are obsessed with Africa—don't you think that obsession has to be demystified? And that has to be exorcised in order to see situations in Africa for what they are. And that's where I'm working. I think the only weapon the African race has is history. And history exorcises, history heals, the African people. I think memory and history heals everybody. And, I think, especially Black people.

One thing that's going to heal us is coming to grips with this and allowing an open discussion of Africa. Africa is still very censored. I think Blacks have always

paid a penalty for discussing or thinking about Africa. At a certain time in this country, people have been lynched for playing the drum. Speaking the African language has been punished. And I think from Denmark Vesey's uprising till now, the whole identification that Africans have with Africa should never threaten anybody. Why is society always running for cover when Africans in this country want to make linkage with Africa? Why is it even a big topic, you know? The talking drum is something we have disconnected ourselves from. And therefore, we are spiritually incapable of receiving those Africans that might want to talk to us because they are stranded, unhealed, uncried for.

And so, in terms of your question, I'm sure many Africans in the world will be against genital mutilation if they are not still stuck with their futile, cultural, traditional fundamentalism. And Africans will fight it in years to come. To reprimand the the negative aspects of their culture is going to be African people's problem. They have to work it out and transform it because they can't go forward with oppressing each other. I think that's symbolized and is daily seen in Africa. The turbulence is part of that process. The new emerges, but I think, to me, there is no future without the past.

The branding [that Mona experiences] allows an exploration of the past. It unleashes the collective memory of people who had certain identities and characters and beliefs. I mean, this is not my wish, but I think sometimes we are in crisis or a tragedy occurs, and we get awakened to a certain memory bin. It's [as if it's] the mind that is branded when Mona is branded.

PW: So, part of what you wanted to bring out in the film is a return to the historical past using collective memory?

HG: Oh, yeah. How many people try to stop us from telling the story? Why am I even telling this story? Why are certain stories coming out of me? Is it money? Is it fame? Why did I do this story? Why are the stories coming?

I, myself, have gone through an amazing spiritual transformation in doing this film. And most of the actors, too. To be sitting in the dungeon for hours to shoot a film and still smell the stench of the history of hundreds of years ago is not an easy experience. And there are some shots that are in the film that I didn't invent, that I got by being in the location or by walking in Louisiana or by going inside the cave where Maroons lived in Louisiana.

And so, why am I doing this? Why am I obsessed by this story? Would somebody do it five hundred years from now? One thousand years from now? I think they will. Human beings are very complex. Jews, for example, after so many years of banishment, they continue to say, "Next year," and they are trying to have a life in Israel. People are capable of storing memory in the marrow of their bones. When people don't recognize that, there's an explosion, there is violence. I think I am more worried about the violence that is inevitable than the violence we have to recall to heal ourselves.

PW: And you truly believe that people are capable of storing collective memory of past generations within themselves?

HG: I think so. I can't explain. You talked

about Alice Walker. Why is she concerned about Africa? What pushes her? How else can you explain all these writers? I mean, eighty–ninety percent of African-American men and women writers are dealing with Africa now. Are they trying to exorcise something out of their system? Is this a memory trying to gash out of their bodies? And why is it underestimated? It's been discouraged for years.

PW: In your director's statement for *Sankofa*, you state that it's your "hope that this film will stimulate the necessary thought processes needed to engage in meaningful discussion and debate about the present-day 'slavery' in which we as Africans find ourselves." Can you speak on what you see as present-day slavery?

**The Farrakhan thing is
discussed in Congress
the way they
discussed what
percent of a Black
person was human**

HG: I think America is constructed to this day around a very plantation arrangement. I think especially African Americans and white Americans—their relationship is from the old tradition of ownership, guidance, responsibility. These are still the problem of this country.

I think that even the idea of a Black story cannot be told without a white point of entry—from *Mississippi Burning* to Stephen Biko. White distributors and producers continue to say it's not commercial to do a film about Black people without having a "point of entry," which means

white people. When I went to film school, point of entry was the sympathetic character or the character that you want the audience to be anchored by. Now, when you are a Native American or Hispanic or Black, you go to Hollywood, they tell you, "What's the point of entry?" It means, "Who is the white lead person that the Blacks will be endorsed by for a commercial guarantee?" Now, this whole understanding—where did it come from? It goes back to the plantation.

The debate I think should take place is always censored from the cultural sphere to the educational system. Why is it that *Washington Post* would write an article repudiating all "Black myth" while whites do have myths from George Washington and the cherry tree to everything? So, to me, it seems like Black people are not allowed to even fantasize about Africa.

Being an outsider, I have always been amazed that whites panic when a Black person tries to link with Africa. And I have been to parties and social gatherings where whites coherently want to explain Africa to Black Americans. So, there is this continued tendency to belittle Black people's obsession, belittle Black people's fantasy.

Also, there is a tendency of continually pacing Blacks with a whipping clock to go into what whites think is the next point on the political agenda instead of what African Americans have to do. For example, after slavery they should have been working about healing, but they went straight to work from the mines to the train tracks, to the pullman porters. Escaping North didn't allow people to be healed. They went to go back to new slavery of not owning anything.

And so, to me, it's a curse that has to

be worked out in a very spiritual, cultural way. Blacks have to create monuments, healing symbols, Nat Turners: they have to convey their variety and the truth of their history: they were nice; they also fought; they were lynched. This presentation of history shouldn't be shy; they shouldn't be afraid. I mean, the Jewish question is presented correctly and well all the time. I think it should be presented.

Knowledge of this history is necessary to change the climate of this country. For example, I was in a gas station, just coming out of my movie with my wife—we were going towards a radio interview, and a young white kid attacked me, cursing at me and calling me "boy" in 1994. You know, I see it daily. I mean the racism, the pressure, even on the so-called Black bourgeoisie, is amazing.

And when you sit down and talk about it, it sounds like the days of slavery. People divided on loyalties. Every time this country has a crisis, the first few people asked to promise they are loyal are Black people, historically. Even during the Iran-American problem, it was the Black Americans who were asked to be on television to repudiate Khomeini's situation because they freed the Blacks, or this or that.

The Farrakhan thing is discussed in Congress the way they discussed what percent of a Black person was human. Yet, when congressmen and Buchanan speak racism nobody repudiates them. You know, Ted Koppel doesn't say anything to Buchanan when Buchanan is racist towards Hispanic people.

So, you feel powerless, you feel hopeless, you feel against the wall, you try to do your best, you finish your film, you still can't show it. That makes you con-

nect with other people who are rejected in other fields. You know, it takes you nine years to make a film, and then they say, “Yeah, you know what? It will not be distributed.” Why? “It’s too Black.”

Why would a white person in Hollywood who is supposed to be a liberal say to you, “It’s too Black”? And we see only films that are too white. We all line up and see films that are too white. There are double standards. There are rules, there are constitutions, but when you get to the door, the rules and constitutions change. When Blacks get close to making some transformation, a new game begins, a new rule.

Nobody would finance us. We can barely get places to advertise it. We depend on word of mouth, like in slavery times during church sermons.

PW: And the traditions are still passed on.

HG: Yeah. Now, if I was a white kid . . . oh, forget me . . . if Julie Dash, who did *Daughters of the Dust*, was a white woman—even if it was not accessible to a large audience and limited to intellectuals—she would be glorified as this woman intellectual filmmaker. We didn’t see that with Julie Dash. And so, there’s a double standard, and that dates back to the plantation period.

I studied the the accounts of missionaries, plantation owners, and slave drivers; I hear that language echoed sometimes now. During the Attica prison revolt, I was still developing the script in the fifth draft or something. During the Attica incident, everything said by the guards, the news, everything sounded like the words that were uttered during [the slave revolt

led by] Nat Turner. The press, the sound bites, the guards, the prisoners, the dialogue was almost an echo of the past.

PW: It’s scary.

HG: It is.

PW: Now, of course, in the Akan language, *sankofa* means returning to your roots, recuperating what you’ve lost, and moving forward. You spent nearly twenty years researching, writing, and producing *Sankofa*. Through that process, what have you recuperated, and where do you hope to go from here?

HG: Well, I have matured. As I was telling you earlier, I used to be very disconnected from the possibility of relating to things in a spiritual way. But then, I was in Ghana doing research on what they call *cra*. *Cra* is a belief in spirits, a belief that people who have died but are not yet settled roam the village, trying to find a living body to enter, to go back into the living world to repent their crimes or avenge injustices done to them. All of this was on my mind while working on the story for *Sankofa*.

When I started shooting in Jamaica, I had a lot of problems—financial, technological, everything. I asked a Ghanaian woman to pour libation, and this is something I had forgotten for years though we do it at home. We poured libation during shootings [of the film], while a few years earlier I would have thought it nonsense to do all these things. But throughout the shooting in Ghana, the drummer, who is a high priest, continued to pour libation, and I feel there was more power for that reason to finish the film. Even if it only

translated into the energy of those people who committed their life without much pay for five years, maybe those things have a place.

And so, spiritually, I have grown. I am more at peace with myself, I will say.

It's also a turning point as far as the storyteller in me, helping to make the stories I have jibe with the medium of cinema. I learned a great deal in terms of the mushrooming of a script into film. The process developed me as a person and as a filmmaker, I think. I'm waiting to see in my next film how all this factors out. I can't predict, but I just think it's a turning point.

Film-wise, we're just too busy pushing this film now. And in the meantime, I'm just doing a side project, a documentary film about Ethiopia, commissioned by the BBC.

PW: What is that piece on?

HG: It's on the contemporary and past political and cultural situation in Ethiopia. But it's just a bridge to this film I hope to do in Ethiopia next. But most of the time I'm really tired, driving to Baltimore . . . to Boston . . . train . . . bus . . . go there, push the film, come back, and things like that.

PW: Are you at Howard [University] this semester as well?

HG: Yes. I teach, I coordinate, and then I go run . . . push the film. We actually rent the theaters to show everywhere, so we are planning to rent a theater in New York, a theater in Detroit, L. A., etc., Philadelphia. . . . So, we are just marching with this film. It's just a new form of struggle.