The African Diaspora

Henrique Cunha, Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Ceara, Brazil, provides us with an insightful analysis on African Technology in Colonial Brazil. He points out that the contribution of Africans to the Brazilian economy and society has been under-estimated. Numerous communities of Quilombos-of those Africans who liberated themselves from Enslavement-assisted in the process of Brazilian economy and industrialization over a two hundred year period, according to Cunha.

Africans in Brazil contributed to the development of technologies related to sugar production, gold and iron metallurgy as well as building technology. Cunha argues that Brazil is an African creation but because of a strong eurocentric intellectual tradition embedded in a powerful racist ideological structure, there has been a systematic marginalization of Africa-related fields of research and a systematic reluctance to give Africans credit for their accomplishments and contributions.

In her discussion, Katherine Harris shifts the focus to Africans in the United States and the migration patterns associated with the African continent over time. Voluntary and involuntary migration trends are identified as they relate to the evolution of African diasporas around the world. Harris is not only concerned with the historical context of these various migration movements but also some of the discussions and courses that have emerged in the American Academy. Conceptualizations about Atlantic History, the Black Atlantic, the Atlantic Slave Trade and other such intellectual formulations have undoubtedly dominated the discourse. An important aspect of the debate has centered around quantification. Harris informs us of the DuBois database and the statistical package for Social Studies Program.

The kind of issues raised by Professor Cunha have been overlooked by a generation of Africanist scholars. In-depth studies on the impact of African technology on various sectors of the North American economy are difficult to come by, for example. Emphasis on the Atlantic Slave Trade, while instructive and of major intellectual value to our knowledge and understanding of the African diaspora, should now be linked to the study of Human Rights and various holocausts in the international system. The on-going Mazrui-Gates debate over the PBS production, Wonders of the African World, should indeed lead to more in-depth studies of African Civilization in its various manifestations.

Reflections on Haile Gerima's Sankofa and Oprah Winfrey's Beloved have been included in this issue, thus facilitating the intersection of film studies and African diaspora scholarship. We thank all the contributors to this issue of AfricaUpdate.

Gloria Emeagwali, Chief Editor, AfricaUpdate

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African Technology in Colonial Brazil<O:P</O:P

Introduction<O:P</O:P <O:P</O:P

African contribution towards the development of Brazilian civilization still continues to be underestimated. It is almost always reduced to contributions related to music, religion, capoeira, eating habits, part of the national folklore and some words incorporated into the national vocabulary. Within the interpretive eurocentric schemes of Brazilian history and culture, there is a distinct separation between physical and intellectual production, the first being totally associated with the African and the second with the European. Despite the large amount of tasks performed by Quilombos (communities of enslaved Africans who liberated themselves) in-depth and global study of these communities within the areas of Brazilian politics, sociology, economics, history, philosophy and thought, is lacking. Quilombos, communities of Africans who had escaped the slave system, because of their large numbers, their long periods of existence, their material, political and social organization are indeed of great significance. They are important especially for the pressures and constant threat they represented to the institution of slavery. The Quilombos facilitated the transition from slavery to capitalism, with its introduction of modernization and industrialization. The Quilombos have existed for 200 years and continue to exist at the present moment in significant numbers, retaining principles of political, economic and social organization.

The main purpose of this article is to suggest interpretive notions with respect to the intellectual contribution of enslaved Africans with reference to African technologies used or developed during the historical development of the country. The technologies discussed here are those referring to technical expertise and production in the Quilombos since there are few studies on the technological and economic features of the Quilombos. Archeological and anthropological studies, still need to be done in this area. The technologies commented on here are those used in sugar production, gold production, iron production and construction. We also make some introductory comments on the status quo of African and Afro-Brazilian studies.

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Brazil and African History<O:P</O:P

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Brazil is a country with strong eurocentric intellectual and educational traditions, mixed with a powerful racist ideological structure. The participation of Afro-Brazilians students, university workers and researchers in the universities either as students or university workers and researchers is very little, perhaps not beyond 2% of the university population. Courses and seminars introducing African history, geography and sociology from the past and the present, at all levels of education (primary, secondary, university - graduate or extension courses) are few. Of the 400 municipalities in existence in the country only 5 produced projects introducing ompulsory courses of this nature in the basic teaching syllabus. Only 3 states showed any interest in the pedagogical updating of basic teacher training so that teachers could have some fundamental information for the task. To date, there are no programs at the undergraduate level in African history in many leading Brazilian universities. Only a few graduate programs have any academic activity related to Africa. The same can be said for Brazilian studies or studies on race relations. This picture gives an idea of the difficulties involved in introducing new ways of focusing on the African contribution to the historical and cultural formation of Brazil.

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African Technology in Brazil

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The Africans who were enslaved in Brazil continue to be viewed as no more than manual laborers. Little or no emphasis is placed on the intellectual and cultural baggage brought by the African. However, emphasis on the African cultural and intellectual participation points to new issue. Perhaps the most important issue has to do with the intellectual production of the enslaved African people. The second relates to the needs of the slave system. The third issue is that Brazilian colonial economy perhaps would not have survived without African technological knowledge. The fourth matter is that colonial Brazil is an African cultural creation and not a European one. It is a country deeply consolidated in Africa and not in Europe. These questions will be taken up again in

the conclusions since I now propose to discuss the technologies themselves.

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Science and Technology

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Since the Industrial Revolution, both science and technology in Western societies became formalized, not only in the preparation of the scientist (or technologist), but also in the procedures used to perform technological and scientific work. With the technological revolutions, the links between science and technology were greatly strengthened, with each depending heavily on the other. During this century, technology, as well as science has gained great public recognition. At the same time, during the same the period, starting from the seventeenth century, Europe created the context and rationale for African enslavement and colonization. The justification of enslavement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were generally racist. Anthropology was put in charge of reducing other intellectual and scientific formalisms, to "primitivism." Scientific and intellectual thought may well be defined as any form of systemization of human knowledge which produces results in the context of need. Within this line of thought, the recreations of African experience in Brazil are the results of intellectual processes and are the scientific or technological result of their systemization.

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Formation of Colonial Brazil

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Two cycles of economic production are of paramount importance in the history of colonial Brazil: the sugar cane cycle and the gold cycle. In both cycles, the building of houses, during the gold period, in cities like Sao Joao Del Rey, Parati and even Salvador, Bahia were markedly influenced by African technological processes. Constructions made of various types of beaten earth and tiles of clay or "adobe" were common in various African regions. These constituted the basic building materials or this period. Descriptions of the organization or construction work in many places point to the existence of a black "master of construction," either an African or someone of African descent. Brazil produced a rich religious architecture. This architecture retains fundamental differences in the materials used when compared with the European methods. The use of wood and the art of wood sculpturing takes us back to the African regions known today as Angola, Zaire and the Congo. The knowledge of producing sugar originally belonged to the East Indians and later the Arabs. This knowledge was taken to Portugal and the Azores and later Brazil. Nevertheless the processes had African participation in its development. As regards the

production of sugar in Brazil, the technological innovations of grinding equipment and wood screws were derived from African know-how. The making of tools and pieces of iron in colonial Brazil was
also supervised by Africans. The first products of the iron industry in Brazil occurred in the seventeenth century and all the masters of production were African. Iron was known and produced in the entire African continent in periods prior to the twelfth century, during the Christian era. Gold is a traditional product of at least two widely known regions of Africa. These are regions of West Africa at the source of the Niger River where civilizations like Mali and Songhai emerged
and also the Zambezi River in the region dominated by the Monomotapa Kingdoms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This empire was known for its large-scale export of the precious metal through the port of Sofala in present day Mozambique. The process of gold extraction developed in Brazil was African . The extraction of gold in Brazil led to the search for Africans from specific regions of the continent.
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Conclusion

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The technologies discussed , as well as other cultural, social and political realizations, were adapted and modified for the new realities and demands of Brazilian colonial life. They can be seen as the product of intellectual, scientific and technological processes and were vital in the historical formation of Brazil. If seen in this way, they offer a new perspective on enslaved workers. We must recognize that the skill, expertise and knowledge of the African was
fundamental for the viability of colonial Brazil.

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African Indigenous Science and Technology Site is Award Recipient
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African Indigenous Science and Technology
(http://members.aol.com/afsci/africana.htm) has received a UNESCO award for being one of the top fifty of African sites.
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African Diaspora, Atlantic History and the TransAtlantic Slave Trade<O:P</O:P
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by Katherine Harris, Central Connecticut State University
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Beneath the headlines on Structural Adjustment Programs, civil wars or South Africa's Government of National Unity, lies another part of the discourse on African Studies. Several themes are sparking inquiries on Africa as the millenium comes to a close. These areas of inquiryÄthe African Diaspora, Atlantic History and the TransAtlantic slave trade Äare not new. But new scholarship and technologies are igniting dialogues.
Columbia University's Colin Palmer probed the idea of an African Diaspora in "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora." It was the lead article in an issue of Perspectives, the American Historical Association's newsletter. The article was a prelude to the Association's 1998 annual meeting featuring the theme of migration.
Palmer pointed out that the discussion of Diasporan History is not confined to people of African descent. He identified Asian migrations and Jewish migrations and their formation of diasporan communities around the globe. He listed Muslim migrations and the diasporan communities they transplanted in the North, South and Caribbean/West Indies regions of the Americas, and other parts of Asia and Europe. Palmer accented the study of the African diaspora and its complexity. It does not represent a single movement. He identified five "African diasporic streams." The first African diaspora began as a result of the movement within and outside Africa about 100,000 years ago. Palmer suggested that this"African exodus" was unique from later movements and it should not be seen as a phase of later diasporic processes.
He identified a second major diasporic stream dating it around 3,000 B.C.E. (Before the Christian Era). It was characterized by the migrations of African communities in present day Nigeria and Cameroon into other parts of Africa and the Indian Ocean.
The third stream was a trading diaspora. It involved the movement of traders, merchants, captives and soldiers according to Palmer. This third stream crossed geographical regions within Europe, the Mediterranean, and areas of Western Asia, commonly called the Middle East.
This resulted in African diasporic communities in India, Portugal, Spain, the city states of Florence, Milan and other areas of contemporary Italy, parts of Europe, western Asia and eastern Asia. This "premodern African diaspora" predated Christopher Columbus's voyage across the Atlantic Palmer concluded.
A fourth African diasporic wave intersects the Atlantic trade in captured Africans destined for the Americas. Beginning in the 15th century, this trade

involved the forced migration of an estimated 11 to 12 million Africans who worked as slaves in Europe and the Americas according to Palmer.

The fifth diasporic phase during the 19th century began after the end of slavery in the Americas

and continues currently. It involves the movement of people of African descent and their relocation in a number of societies. Palmer offered the example of Jamaicans moving to England. He rejected the idea that this fifth diasporic formation involved a sustained desire on the part of people of African descent to emigrate to Africa.

Palmer recognized, however, that thousands of freed Africans left diasporan

communities. They made the transAtlantic voyage for Liberia and Sierra Leone. Such individuals as Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, Henry McNeal Turner, African American missionaries like Althea Brown Edmiston, Reverend and Mrs. Sheppardson (who worked in Congo), or Marcus Garvey and the Rastafarians supported the goal of emigration. African Americans also traveled to late 19th-century South Africa to reconstruct their lives in the ancestral continent.

But the modern diaspora, wrote Palmer, consists chiefly of millions of people of African descent living in various societies. He added that they are united by a past rooted, in part but not exclusively in "racial oppression" and their resistance to it. They share a common ancestral continental connection, emotional bonds, similar problems of reconstructing their lives despite varied cultural and political divisions.

Palmer posed the question: How should these diasporic streams be studied? Though he stated that the inquiry should begin with Africa, he urged rigorous scholarship on diasporan African communities in the Americas and around the globe. Assumptions

should be tested regarding ethnicity, loss of language, cultural values, and collective memory. Several other

considerations might be added.

African diasporan communities are indelibly connected to slavery and the slave trade. Discussion of a slave trade raises enormous controversy too as to why it began, its function, and the distinctions between prisoners-of-war, people as spoils of war and property. Why did the TransAtlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas leave such a tortured paradoxical legacy linking

Atlantic relations between Europe, Africa and the Americas?

The fourth diasporic stream, however, is critical. Autobiographies written during that era provide

personal insights and might be used more extensively. A brief list includes Oluadah Equiano, Venture
Smith, Nancy Prince, Harriet Jacobs or Occramer Marycoo. Scholars might utilize slave narratives and autobiograpical works in French, Portuguese, Dutch, or Spanish.
Some courses do incorporate regional treatment of African Diaspora. This is another important aspect of understanding that these communities exist not only in the United States, but in Canada, Mexico,
Caribbean/ West Indies, Central and South America.
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Conferences and Courses <O:P</O:P
The African Studies Committee at Central Connecticut State University was a co-sponsor of the conference "Bridging the disjuncture between Continental and Diasporan Africans," November 1998. The conference featured presentations on esthetics, diasporan maroon societies, health and contemporary economic and cultural links between Africa and the Diaspora.
Advertisements for positions to teach the Diaspora appear in various journals. A position on The African diaspora,comparative slavery and the African Diaspora, History at Indiana University was advertised in (AHA, November 1997, pp. 58, 59). Another position on Modern Africa also stressed developing field in African Diaspora (New York University position advertised in AHA, September, 1998, p. 52).
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Atlantic History <O:P</O:P
In a working paper, Harvard University's Professor Bernard Bailyn,"The Idea of Atlantic History," provided the context for the concept of "Atlanticization." He explored the colonial period of Anglo-American history, the "new Atlantic community," the "Atlantic system" the Atlantic Charter. These updated versions of the concept "Atlanticization" emerged as an oppositional camp first to challenge fascist governments of World War II and to challenge the former Soviet Union and its satellite governments. Bailyn is director of International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, 1500-1800.
Scrutiny of Atlantic History reveals variations in Spanish imperial rule with its bureaucracy of governors, judges, clerics required to return to Spain and a colonial elite which limited access to political power of American-born Creole elites (Bernard Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," p. 17.) Spain's colonial holdings were Considerable and the cultural linguistic presence has been lasting in the Americas. Surveys of the Dutch, Portuguese,

French, Danish or other colonial empires also provide insights on distinctive and similar traits.

Books on Atlantic History tend to identify several themes in Atlantic History such as the migration of European population and its ecological consequences. Atlantic History is connected to related topics of the modern world system. The era covers the chronological period intersecting the Age of European Exploration of the Americas and the TransAtlantic slave trade and forces an examination of conceptual models of the "core-periphery" relationship involving Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Courses taught in various colleges and universities on Atlantic History include the following examples. "Maritime History & Practical Seamanship," with fourteen days aboard ship on the ship Bounty sailing from Boston Harbor, Summer 1999, is a survey of sea power in the Atlantic World and beyond during the early modern period in Europe and the Americas. "Reform and Revolution in the Atlantic World," "History of the Atlantic World, 1450-1800," "The Atlantic World in the Age of Empire," "Spain and the Atlantic World," and "Slavery and the Atlantic Basin" provide an idea of the multifaceted approach to studying Atlantic History.

Atlantic History has a number of dimensions, which connect to Diasporan History. Despite the complexity and violence of the slave system, African and European families became intertwined. Africans lost their family names, in most instances. New names and migratory patterns were connected to European movement throughout the Atlantic World.

What about uncoerced African migrations? Donald Wood, "Kru Migration to the West Indies," Journal of Caribbean Studies, pp. 266-282. Kru live between River Cess and Grand Cestos on the coast of Ducoh, contemporary Liberia. The Kru had not been enslaved and made the journey as authentic volunteers to the Caribbean 1840s and 1860s and worked on sugar estates, joined British navy merged with African diasporic communities in British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica. The US Navy also lists Kru seamen on registry and paid them pensions.

After the British passage of the General Emancipation Act of 1833, ending slavery, Africans arrived in the Caribbean/West Indies region as indentures. They became a part of the post-slavery
labor system which Maureen Warner-Lewis portrays in Guinea's Other Suns, The African Dynamic in Trinidad Culture (The Majority Press, Dover, MA, 1991).

The Atlantic experience of Africans also intersected the eighteenth century revolutions during the Enlightenment. In Senegal Africans in Rufusque, Goree, Dakar and Saint Louis sent cahiers to France during the 1789

French Revolution. In 1848, Senegal sent delegates to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris.

Atlantic societies in Africa such as Freetown, Sierra Leone and Monrovia, and Liberia were also influenced by the political republican liberalism of the era, but the preence of millions of slaves in the African Diaspora was a constant reminder that liberty was compromised across the Atlantic.

Atlantic History, however, poses a number of issues in understanding the Diasporan communities which emerged along the Atlantic seaboard in North and South America. Palmer questions the notion of "a Black Atlantic," a term used by Paul Gilroy as a synonym for the modern African diaspora. One problem is that the term excludes the Indian Ocean and part of the Atlantic basin. Palmer wondered whether the term conflates and homogenizes the unique experiences of persons of African descent in Canada, the United States, Brazil, and other parts of South America or the Caribbean. He asked, is there an oppositional White Atlantic? Is the term "Africology" useful as an analytical tool or does it imply "a kind of racial or ethnic essentialism which should be questioned (Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," pp. 25)?

Clearly explorations of Atlantic History and the African Diaspora have much to reveal about the

sequence of events which produced both. The connection between these two areas of inquiry, however, is the TransAtlantic Slave trade.

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The TransAtlantic Slave Trade <O:P</O:P

Scholars analyzed this topic in high tech fashion at Harvard University April 25-26, 1998. Using a "Statistical Package for Social Sciences," David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein compiled a partial record of TransAtlantic slave trade voyages. Between 1527 and 1866, perhaps 37,000 ships plied the slave trade between Africa and the Americas. For the nineteenth century, the fifteen "Reports of the Directors of the African Institution," published in London from 1811 to 1826, contain a variety of slave voyage data during the initial period when British diplomats were negotiating to end the transtlantic slave trade.

Some analysts have estimated that slave traders launched as many as 54,000 voyages. However, the DuBois Research Institute has data for 27,233 transatlantic slave voyages, 1527-1867, on the CD-ROM disk. The data set includes 22 maps.

Records list tonnage and ownership of ships, trading patterns, crew mortality, duration of voyages, age, gender, mortality, duration of voyages, age, gender, mortality and ethnicity of African captives.African agency is

uncovered. For example, the Database lists captives who died during revolt in the Middle Passage. Dramas abound: an insurrection on the British slave ship Thomas left a small crew to steer the ship back to Africa; the freeing of hundreds of Angolan children from between the 21" inch decks of a ship bound for Brazil; 600 African captives died in a gunpowder explosion on the British ship Pallas off the coast of Africa.

The DuBois database contains information on Job ben Suleiman, transported from Futa Jallon on the slave ship *Arabella* by Captain Pike; Samuel Crowthers, taken from the Yoruba kingdom

of Oyo on *the Esperanza Feliz*; and a young girl child from Senegambia transported July 1761 on *Phillis* by ship captain Peter Gwynn. The child's African name was not recorded. But her purchaser, John Wheatley named her after the slave ship. History knows her as Phillis Wheatley, the African muse.

Eltis, Richardson, Behrendt and Klein provide imputed variables (p.15). They write that "The imputed variables are derived directly from the data set, but are rarely compilations of raw data." The most apparent of the imputed variables are geographic. The 372 locations where slave ships were built, registered, or cleared for a slaving voyage are organized into just the fifty places or regions shown on the accompanying maps.

The numbers of captured Africans is in dispute. Paul Lovejoy's "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis," Journal of African History, 23 (1982), pp. 473-501, estimated that "367,000 slaves left Africa between 1450 and 1600," pp. 477-78.

African sources reveal a dimension of the trade. Abdoulaye Ly's La Compagnie du Senegal (Paris, 1993) lists 21 ships going to Senegal and concludes that 16 of these were slave ships; 8 brought African captives to France and 8 took African captives to the French West Indies; it is only possible to identify 7 of the ships.

Joseph Inikori, based at the University of Rochester in New York, has recently given "a preferred global figure of 15.4 million for the European slave trade." Adjusting for those carried to the offshore island and Europe, this implies 14.9 million were destined for the Americas (see Cahiers d'Itudes Africaines, 32 (1993), 686).

The Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, Virginia, hosted a sequel to the April 1998 workshop. The conference entitled, "Transatlantic Slaving and the African Diaspora: Using the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute Dataset of Slaving Voyages," September 11-13, 1998, took place Williamsburg. Conference Planners anticipated 280 participants. Seven hundred twenty arrived.

Presenters read 47 papers. They offered insights on the correlations of ethnicity. For example, "Ethnicity among Africans in North America" by Lorena S. Walsh, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Gwendolyn M. Hall, Professor of History Emerita, Rutgers University, offered a paper on "Ethnic Selectivity in the African Slave Trade to Louisiana: Comparing the DuBois Database with the Louisiana Slave Database." African scholars explored issues of demography and politics: ElisJe Soumonni, Universit, Nationale du Benin, Contonou, presented "Slave Trade and African Society, Politics, and Culture." Joseph Inikori, University of Rochester, read his work on "The Known, the Unknown and the Unknowable: Evidence and Evaluation of Evidence in the Measurement of the
Transatlantic Slave Trade."

A panel on Resistance and Memory chaired by Robert L. Hall of Northeastern University included the following papers: David Richardson, University of Hull,
"African Agency and Resistance on the African Coast" and Jane G. Landers, Vanderbilt University, "African Resistance in the Spanish Caribbean."

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Conclusion

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Key questions exist on public access to research. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences program CD-ROM of the DuBois Research Institute Database has been released. The
CD-ROM works best with a browser such as Netscape.

While this CD-ROM works on PCs, it has not been formatted to run on MacIntosh. Since many secondary schools have MacIntosh, this may affect accessibility of some students to the CD-ROM. Access to the Database by African scholars is also in question.

Other issues regarding a timetable for the end of slavery affect the accuracy of data on the TransAtlantic Slave trade. Slavery ended in Puerto Rico in 1873; in Cuba in 1884 and in Brazil in 1886. If the slave trade continued despite the British ban and the US ban by 1808, what might more thorough investigation reveal regarding the numbers of voyages
and captured Africans transported to the Americas?

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Africa Online

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by Haines Brown, CCSU History Department, emeritus

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It is increasingly evident that the African continent will leap past the costly struggle to upgrade its legacy means of communication, largely based on wire, to embrace the wirelesstransmission of both voice and data. It looks like it will bypass fiber altogether.

There are 14 million copper phone lines serving 800 million Africans. The U.S., in contrast, has 169 million lines for a quarter of that population. Because under neoliberal conditions capitalist investment must always maximize its return, a highly developed infrastructure, such as that of the West, discourages the adoption of new technologies unless there is a path leading from an existing infrastructure. Without as much capital tied up in infrastructure, and because of globalization Africa can start out with the newest technologies.

This is why Africa is enjoying new investments in satellite and cellular wireless communications that combine voice calls and data networking.

Major telcoms are already building big wireless network projects in many developing parts of the world, such as Siemens in China, Lucent in Peru, Nortel and others in the Balkans, Indonesia and Ethiopia.
It would be wrong to identify such technologies solely with Internet, for the immediate use is more for control systems and remote alarms, and for vertical applications such as banking, ATMs, point of sale terminals, and inventory tracking. However, where per capita income is too low to support services such as these found in the more developed world, leverage comes from petty enterprises such as the enormously popular local telephone centers. These have often expended to provide computer access to Internet. Thus 10% of phone lines in West Africa are used by telecenters, and there are projects afoot in Southern Africa, with local initiatives for distance learning and medical teleconferencing. It is for these reasons that people are eying Nigeria as having the greatest potential.

Sankofa vs. Beloved<O:P</O:P

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Like Moses, Haile Gerima and Toni Morrison understand that freedom means more than getting the people out of slavery. For Moses and his people this meant homeless wandering (perhaps literally, certainly spiritually) for forty yearsÄlong enough (in those days) for the generation born in slavery to die. It included many harsh tests of faith, and lessons in Mosaic law and morality. It also allowed forty opportunities to practice the Passover injunction, part of the price of liberation, that each generation annually re-enact the people's history of enslavement as if we had been there ourselves, so that we never forget.
Gerima begins Sankofa with a similar demand as the voice over the drumming calls upon the spirits of "stolen Africans" to claim their stories of both suffering and rebellion. Gerima sends African American model Mona on a spiritual journey, not across the desert, but through time, to a pre-emancipation Louisiana plantation, like Moses, asking Mona to experience her people's history as if she were there.
On her journey, Mona becomes the enslaved Shola,working in the plantation owner's house. She loves and admires Nunu and Shango, an African and a West Indian, who do know another way. Through these two characters especially, Gerima demonstrates that connection to African roots provides both concrete skills and spiritual/intellectual strength crucial to resistance. Nunu brings language, stories, powers and rituals from her pre-enslavement life in Africa. Shango is a healer and a herbalist with a

profound understanding of the value, and the price of freedom. Connection to African roots also shows Shola/Mona an alternative community as Shango and Nunu introduce her to the free people who live in the hills and whose lives are focused on the needs and traditions of Africans in America, rather than the needs and culture of the plantation owners.

In addition, Gerima reminds us over and over of the power of the mother/child connection, and the horror and grief that ensue when that connection is severed or corrupted. He reminds us that Christian European culture also acknowledges this vital link through the image of the Virgin Mary and child Jesus which haunts Nunu's corrupted son, Joe. Gerima seems to be calling people to connect not only literally to their mothers, but also to Mother Africa, as he emphasizes the power of this dyad.

Through Nunu and Shango, Shola/Mona begins to acknowledge the injustice of her own situation, and to see the possibility of change. For her, and for Gerima, the wellspring of such understanding is the establishment of a link to her ancestral home. Gerima drives home the dual message that connection to the past illuminates the present, and that failure to make such a connection makes us hapless victims of it (as Shola is victimized by the plantation owner, and Mona by the photograpaher).

Toni Morrison's Beloved also addresses issues of enslavement and liberation, and of the past and its power in our lives. The central issue of the novel is the formerly enslaved Sethe's determination to kill her own children rather than see them returned to enslavement.

Within this story, Morrison weaves three powerful themes. The first of these is that it is the fact of enslavement, not just its specific conditions, however brutal or innocuous they may be, that makes it abhorrent. It is Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who brings this point home as she reviews her life from her deathbed. She recalls that denial of self, of dignity, of self-determination, and the inability even to name oneself or one's children were the constants, and the deepest insults of enslavement. These are its basic truths. Brutality is only one of the ways these insults are reinforced.

Baby Suggs also voices Morrison's second theme. In her forest temple, Baby Suggs reconnects the spiritually wounded of her community to their own human beauty and preciousness, to their collective strength, and to the natural world. These are all connections which the daily experiences of enslavement worked to sever. Baby Suggs reminds her congregation that isolation and self-hatred are toxic residues of the past, which must be purged before the people will be truly free.

In contrast to Sankofa, however, in which connection to the past brings clarity and liberation, the past in Beloved threatens to smother Sethe and

drive everyone she loves away from her. It comes to her first in the form of the ghost, and then a physical incarnation of Beloved, the one baby Sethe succeeded in killing when the slavers came to recapture her. The ghost incarnate gradually takes charge of Sethe's every moment, thought and gesture, driving away her surviving sons, her lover, her sanity.

Only Sethe's youngest daughter, Denver, remains, and it is through her that the final theme of the story is exposed. In these two stories, then, the past is much more than what-happened-when. It is a dynamic force whose power over us must be recognized as well as controlled. It demands homage as the maker of the ground on which we walk today, but we must take care not to let it rule our present and devour our future.

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