



BRILL

African Slavery in Documentary Films *Why Now?*

Francesca Declich

University of Urbino Carlo Bo
francesca.declich@uniurb.it

Marie Rodet

SOAS, University of London
mr28@soas.ac.uk

The last two decades have witnessed much scholarly debate around discursive and non-discursive legacies of African slavery, as well as a growing interest in memories of slavery from the African continent.¹ At the same time, an increas-

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- 1 A large body of publications has emerged on slavery in the African continent, including among others: Martin A. Klein, “Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery,” *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 215; Edward A. Alpers, “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World,” *African Studies Review* 43 (1) (2000): 83–99; Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Eric E. Hahonou and Baz Lecocq, “Introduction: Exploring Post-Slavery in Contemporary Africa,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 181–192; Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, Martin A. Klein, *African Slaves, African Masters. Politics, Memories, Social Life* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2017); Alice Bellagamba. “Yesterday and today. Studying African slavery, the Slave Trade and their Legacies through Oral Sources,” in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, Martin A. Klein, eds., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade. Vol 2: Sources and Methods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 174–197; Alice Bellagamba. “Living in the shadows of slavery”, *OPEN DEMOCRACY* (2016) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/alice-bellagamba/living-in-shadows-of-slavery>, accessed on 10 November 2019; Marie Rodet, “Escaping Slavery and Building Diasporic Communities in French Soudan and Senegal, ca. 1880–1949,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 48, no. 2 (2015): 363–386; Marie Rodet, “Listening to the History of Those Who Don’t Forget,” *History in Africa*, 40, no. 1 (2013): 27–29; Francesca Declich. “‘A free Woman Could Marry a Slave because of Hunger’. Memories of Life in Slavery along the Northern Mozambique Coast,” in Bellagamba, Greene, and Klein, eds., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, 175–200; Francesca Declich. “‘Gendered Narratives,’ History, and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara,” *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 93–122; Francesca Declich, “Shifting memories and forced migrations: the Somali Zigula migration to Tanzania,” *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 88, no. 3 (2018): 539–559; Nicholas

ing amount of video material has been produced giving a voice to enslaved populations and their descendants from Africa and the global diaspora. This has included the production of documentaries as well as fiction films based on historical facts.²

As part of this movement, the *Centre international de recherches sur les esclavages* (CIRES/ France) in collaboration with the *Laboratório de história oral e imagem*, Federal University of Fluminense (LABHOI Brazil) and *Centre interuniversitaire d'études sur les lettres, les arts et les traditions* de l'Université de Laval (CELAT/ Canada) have been involved since 2008 in running a traveling documentary film festival on slavery entitled "Festival de la vidéo de recherche sur les traites, les esclavages et leurs héritages," which has been hosted by a number of universities and cinemas across the world (France, UK, Austria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, etc.). Some of the issues raised in the debates following those screenings revolved around the question of why scholars should make films on slavery or to what extent the audio-visual medium in research on this topic could be used by researchers even though they may not be trained as professional film makers.³ Furthermore, the screening of some of those films and documentaries at SOAS since 2012, has shown that the spate of such films in the last decade, presented to academic and non-academic audiences alike, inevitably raises difficult epistemological questions on ethics, selectivity and positionality.⁴

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- Argenti and Ute Röschenhaler. "Introduction: Between Cameroon and Cuba: Youth, Slave Trades and Translocal Memoryscapes." *Social Anthropology* 14 (1) (2006), 33–47; Valerio Colasio. "Legacies of slavery in a former slave-reservoir: the case of the Guéra region," in Catherine Armstrong and Jaya Priyadarshini, eds., *Slavery Past, Present and Future*, (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016); Marco Gardini, "L'activisme politique des descendants d'esclaves à Antananarivo: les héritages de Zoam," *Politique Africaine* 140 (2015): 23–40; Benedetta Rossi, "Without History? Interrogating Slave Memories in Ader (Niger)," in Bellagamba, Greene, and Klein, eds., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, 536–554.
- 2 It has been especially the case for fiction films, with the production of a number of Hollywood blockbusters and TV dramas in the past decade, focusing on the North Transatlantic Slave Trade and North American Slavery, with for example: *Django Unchained* (2012); *12 Years A Slave* (2013); *Lincoln* (2013); *The Book of Negroes* (2014); *The Birth of a Nation* (2016); *Roots* (2016); *Underground* (2016–2017); *Harriet* (2019).
 - 3 Marina Rougeon. "Introduction: Des films pour la recherche sur les esclavages et leurs héritages," in Marina Rougeon and Patrick Deshayes, eds., *Montrer les esclavages et leurs héritages: Films et regards de chercheurs*, (Lyon: PUL, 2016).
 - 4 The films presented were: *Slavery routes*. Dir. Daniel Cattier, Juan Gélas, Fanny Glissant. 2018 (4 × 52min); *Body Games. Capoeira and Ancestry (Jogo de Corpo. Capoeira e Ancestralidade)*. Dir. Richard Pakleppa, Matthias Röhrig Assunção and Cinézio Peçanha (Mestre Cobra Mansa). 2013 (87min); *Ghosts of Amistad—In the Footsteps of the Rebels*. Dir. Tony Buba. 2014 (56min); *Other Africas: Unearthing 'Afro' Memories in Rio de Janeiro*. Dir. André Cicalo. 2016

The aim of this special issue is to discuss the implications of the increasing use of such visuals on the legacies and moralities of African slavery. The purpose is to analyse how the uses of video material impact on and interact with experiences of citizenship, nationality, and mobilization in contemporary Africa and beyond. Issues such as identities, marginalization, integration or assimilation also form part of the discussion. All the papers presented in this thematic issue clearly demonstrate that audio-visual media are much more than simple tools to support documentation and research. Filming allows forms of intercommunication and transformative processes at levels that are otherwise impossible through academic writing.

1 Researcher and Films: Between Authorship and Reality

Twenty years ago, David MacDougall argued the case for, and showed the characteristics of, a filmic tool for research purposes involving fieldwork: while writing leads to generalization, filming allows us to dwell on those details that images describe, or even cannot conceal; the visible and audible aspects of knowledge are different from the conceptual and discursive dimension and making films can convey emotional facets as well as other kinds of knowledge that are not available to the written word.⁵ Of course this does not mean that filming is objective. The complex links between film and reality have long been discussed in film studies, notably the authorial role of the filmmaker and the extent to which this authorial role should interfere with the realities observed.

Since 1960 the cinematographic trend of *Cinéma vérité*, of which the French anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin were crucial exponents, has suggested that, through certain methodological choices, by including contents of daily life, films could represent reality authentically. The prob-

(22min); *Mor Sahib—The Saint crocodile*. Dir. Till Passow. 2012 (20min); *Voices of the Sidis. Ancestral Links*. Dir. Beheroze Shroff. 2006 (26min); *They Are We*. Dir. Emma Christopher. 2014 (77min); *Mémoire promise (Promised Memories)*. Dir. Gaetano Ciarcia & Jean-Christophe Monferran. 2013 (76min); *Indian Ocean Memories and African Migrants*. Dir. Shihan de Silva. 2014 (40min); *The Diambourou: Slavery and Emancipation in Kayes—Mali*. Dir. Marie Rodet. 2014 (23min); *A Hidden Guarantee: Identity and Gule Wamkulu between Mozambique and Somalia*. Dir. Francesca Declich. 2008 (19 min); *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Traditions and Building Community*. Dir. Beheroze Shroff. 2010 (53min); *A Present Past: Afro-Brazilian Memories in Rio de Janeiro*. Hebe Mattos & Martha Abreu. 2012 (43min); *Ebony Goddess: Queen of Ilé Aiyé*. Dir. Carolina Moraes-Liu. 2012 (20min); *Yesterday's Slaves: Democracy and Ethnicity in Benin*. Dir. by Eric Komlavi Hahonou & Camilla Strandsbjerg. 2011 (29min).

5 David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

lem lay in overcoming the opposition between fiction and documentary films by making “totally authentic cinema, true as a documentary but with contents of a fiction film, namely contents of individual real life.”⁶ Harnessing the new technology which provided lighter video camera equipment, the trend would be more adequately referred to as “direct cinema”—as suggested by filmmaker Mario Ruspoli, meaning a sort of cinematography that would intervene by capturing the images in the very moment that the event to be communicated occurred.⁷ Yet, the illusion of objectivity given by the lightweight camera equipment, which suggested that one could film people “doing precisely what they would be doing if the camera were not there,”⁸ was later challenged by the idea of observational filming in which it is clear that the “illusion of authorial invisibility could lead to false interpretation.”⁹ In 1972 and 1975 the term “observational cinema” made its appearance in discussions about certain kinds of documentaries;¹⁰ the term represented a break with an earlier approach in which audio-visual tools were used to record social and cultural practices to be later analyzed according to foreign conceptual frameworks.¹¹ In fact a different approach was being applied by anthropologists like Robert Gardner whose films stemmed from months of ethnographic fieldwork and aimed at comprehending local aesthetics and creating an artistic product enmeshed with them, using a cinematic language completely distinct from a written one.¹²

Thus, in anthropology, debates on objectivity and reflexivity of filming have arisen since the earliest stages of the use of audio-visual equipment. Following

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- 6 Edgar Morin in Goffredo Fofi, Morando Morandini, and Gianni Volpi, *Storia del cinema Vol 3, Dalle “Nouvelles Vagues” ai nostri giorni* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988), 343.
- 7 Flavio De Bernardinis, “Cinéma Vérité,” in *Enciclopedia del Cinema vol. 2* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2003). http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/cinema-verite_%28Enciclopedia-del-Cinema%29/, accessed 29/12/2019.
- 8 Walter Goldschmidt. “Ethnographic Film: Definition and Exegesis,” *PIEF Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (1972): 1.
- 9 David MacDougall. “Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 415.
- 10 The first to use it was anthropologist Roger Sandall in 1972 in the British journal *Sight and Sound* while a second occurrence by Colin Young appeared in 1975. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, “Rethinking Observational Cinema,” *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 539.
- 11 The most well-known representative of that approach was the project developed by Margaret Mead together with Gregory Beatson, for instance in *Childhood rivalry in Bali and New Guinea*. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz. *Observational Cinema. Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 3–4. Grimshaw and Ravetz. “Rethinking Observational Cinema,” 539.
- 12 From this perspective, the most significant of his films is certainly *Dead birds*. Grimshaw and Ravetz, *Observational Cinema*, 4.

the trend of *Cinéma vérité*, the filming experiences of the anthropologists mirrored those of cinematic journalism in which the video camera was always with journalists regardless of the events recorded and the personalities involved. Observational filmmakers like Richard Leacock, Donn Alan Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles, Roman Kroitor, Wolf Koenig, Robert Drew and others had funded a movement “towards an unmediated documentation of people as they lived their lives”¹³ and the Drew Associates from 1959 to 1963 produced about thirty films with synchronized sound recording made during the shooting. Since the 1960s these approaches to filming have been used in political and militant cinema.

The debate around authorship and whose voice is really projected in a fiction or documentary film certainly does not exhaust the arguments concerning audio-visual media in the research field.¹⁴ Jean Rouch himself, with his hundred plus, mostly ethnographic films, produced an incredibly substantial quantity of material for discussion. One way he liked to use the video camera was not as a “passive recording instrument” but an “active agent of investigation” which provokes an interaction and helps to ask probing questions about the world.¹⁵ A more recent development in film and ethnography has focused on the sensory aspect and how it interacts with the way knowledge is produced.¹⁶ Films impinge on such kinds of knowledge production by presenting bodies, colors, and sounds that incite the part of the process of knowing which elicits emotions, hence the centrality of embodied knowledge and the bodies of emotions elicited during filmmaking.¹⁷

13 Peter Loizos, *Innovation in Ethnographic Film. From Innocence to Self-Consciousness 1955–1985* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1993), 99–100.

14 Jay Ruby, “Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology and Film.” *Semiotica* 3, nos. 1–2 (1980): 153–179.

15 Loizos, *Innovation in Ethnographic Film*, 46.

16 See for instance: Sarah Pink, *Sensory Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2009); Christina Lammer, “Healing Mirrors: Body Arts and Ethnographic Methodologies,” in Sara Pink, ed., *Advances in Visual Methodology* (London: Sage, 2012); John Levack Drever, “Sounding Dartmoor: A case study on the soundscapes of rural England at the opening of the 21st Century.” *World Forum for Acoustic Ecology* (2002); Steve Feld and Donald Brenneis, “Doing Anthropology in Sound.” *American Ethnologist* 31 no. 4 (2004): 461–474.

17 David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

2 Filmmaking, Emotion and the History of Slavery

Emotions are central to films on slavery as they attempt to retrieve and share the traumatic experiences of the enslaved, the memories and legacies of which are still living histories for Afro-descendants around the world. This constant re-enactment of the suffering of black bodies through films on slavery can even become an emotional burden for Afro-descendants as black actors are mostly to be seen in “slavery movies.”¹⁸

Films are produced together by the subjects, the filmmaker and the audience; it is a participatory process in which the production of knowledge becomes relational.¹⁹ Anthropologist Lucien Castaing-Taylor suggests that for MacDougall film is a “form of commensality with the world which involves all, filmmakers, audience and subjects—more than a communicative act.”²⁰ The ways films are received are thus central to the film experience, as films exist to be watched.

In a framework inhabited by multiple debates and actors, including anthropologists, filmmakers and journalists, historians of Africa and the Diaspora and scholars of oral history have also joined the forum. While anthropologists have been debating those issues for as long as they have been able to use a camera in their fieldwork, historians have been much more focused on the use of films produced by professional filmmakers as primary or secondary sources in both research and teaching, rather than as an alternative to the infamous historical monograph.²¹ The reluctance of historians to appropriate the film medium is probably linked to the different set of skills which are required, not only in terms of technical audio-visual skills for film, but also, because the way the narration is constructed, the techniques and resources for narration differ. Indeed, “telling history in prose and telling history on film” are differ-

18 Kara Brown, “I’m So Damn Tired of Slave Movies,” *Jezebel*. <https://jezebel.com/im-so-damn-tired-of-slave-movies-1755250873>, accessed 27 December 2019.

19 MacDougall, “Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise,” 422.

20 Felice, Tiragallo, “Recensione di David MacDougall. *Cinema Transculturale*, introduction by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, traduzione Rossella Ragazzi (Nuoro: Edizioni ISRE, 2015), 1–340,” *ANUAC* 7, no. 1 (2018): 255–258.

21 See for example: Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006); Marnie Hugues-Warrington, *History goes to the Movies. Studying History on Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *The History on Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Alan S. Marcus, Scott Alan Metzger, Richard J. Paxton, and Jeremy D. Stoddard, *Teaching History with Film. Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu, *A Blackwell Companion to Historical Film* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

ent. This is especially so as the film medium obviously integrates sound and images as part of the narration, and this, as already mentioned, can generate a wide spectrum of emotions and so potentially magnify both the historical imagination and experimentation, something which positivist-leaning historians might not feel comfortable with.²² As highlighted by Hahonou, compared with academic writing, films extend sensorial experiences by adding moving images and audio to the narrative, but also by conveying strong emotional contents.²³ They capture emotions on screen which help to reach wider audiences compared with usual academic publications. Films use a large range of techniques “to get a story across” and make the audience empathize with and/or identify themselves with the protagonists and/or the story. In the case of historical documentary and fiction films, every technical choice can impact the historical narrative by putting more weight on one aspect or another: sound, selected protagonists, location, lighting, framing, editing, etc. That brings us back to the initial debate in anthropology about reality and creativity in film. In the case of historical fiction films, issues of accuracy and faithfulness to the sources of the past are often of central concern to historians;²⁴ a similar debate is also to be found between history and literature. The “fictive” crafting in historical fiction films might appear more obvious but it is actually at play in a similar way in both the historical monograph and the documentary film. In both cases non-informed readers/viewers can be overwhelmed by the convincing techniques of historical narration, preventing them from exercising their critical judgement. The power of film to raise, elicit, accompany and manipulate emotional feeling is a crucial element that helps to analyze the role that fiction or documentary films can play as media of information and communication on slavery nowadays, but it also conveys misleading information.

If the focus in history has been mainly on fiction films and their use in the classroom, the specificity of films on slavery has hardly been discussed, with the exception of Nathalie Zemon Davis’ *Slaves on Screen* and a number of OP by historians about US fiction films on slavery released since 2012.²⁵ Indeed,

22 Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen. Film and Historical Vision* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), xi.

23 Eric Komlavi Hahonou, “Film et texte, émotion et cognition” *Esclavages & Post-esclavages* [Online], 1 (2019), published 20 November 2019. <http://journals.openedition.org/slavery/431>, accessed 25 November 2019.

24 Robert Brent Toplin, “The Filmmaker as Historian.” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec. 1988): 1210–1227; Robert A. Rosenstone. “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec. 1988): 1173–1185.

25 See also: Bettina M. Carbonell. “The Syntax of Objects and the Representation of History:

in 2013 a very public debate arose over two films representing aspects of pre-abolition slavery in the United States, *Lincoln*, by Stephen Spielberg, and *Django Unchained*, by Quentin Tarantino. In the former, Lincoln is depicted to ensure that the 13th amendment to the Constitution of the United States gets passed, while in the latter the protagonist is a slave, a black man whose activities are represented in the very violent manner habitual to the director. They show almost diametrically opposite ways to elicit emotional feelings in presenting the past of slavery in the US.²⁶ The way in which they raise awareness about the discrimination still existing towards African-American in the United States is debatable, and has indeed been debated; they dwell on stereotypes that can go far beyond issues of political correctness: the polite and “civilized” manners of Lincoln in fighting against slavery as compared to what might even be described as the disrespectful way the slaves’ world is violently represented by Tarantino.²⁷ The power of the medium is such that one is led to believe that the historical information transmitted is correct. Information accumulates as new shared memory within the audience, regardless of historical inaccuracies or even the “historical aberration” that may be conveyed.²⁸

A third example of this problem is the film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), by Steve McQueen, in which the extreme violence shown in great detail has been criticized for “turning slavery into a ‘horror show,’” for the “absence of heroes and resistance”, and for “sentimentality and going for weeping instead of constructive outrage.”²⁹ Indeed, the ways the camera has been used in this film, many close-ups on details of violent actions, captures the audience’s attention through scenes of extreme brutality, in which, moreover, the slave protagonist’s

Speaking of ‘Slavery in New York,’ *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (May 2009): 122–137; Rudyard J. Alcocer, Kristen Block and Dawn Duke, *Celluloid Chains. Slavery in the Americas through Film* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2018).

- 26 Manuel Barcia. “Race and slavery: A look at ‘Lincoln’ and ‘Django Unchained,’” *Aljazeera* (17 February 2013). https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/201321162722505664.html?utm_content=automate&utm_campaign=Triall6&utm_source=NewSocialFlow, accessed on 24 November 2019.
- 27 Film director Spike Lee described *Django Unchained* as disrespectful to his ancestors. Jessica Derschovitz, “Spike Lee: ‘Django Unchained’ is ‘disrespectful,’” *CBS News* (24 December 2012) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/spike-lee-django-unchained-is-disrespectful/>, accessed on 29 November 2019.
- 28 Willie Osterweil. “The good white folks of the Academy,” *Aljazeera* (15 January 2014) <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/1/the-good-white-folks-of-the-academy.html>, accessed on 10 December 2019.
- 29 Katarina Hedrén, “The debate about realism and violence in ‘12 Years a Slave,’” *Africa is a Country* (18 February 2014) <https://africasacountry.com/2014/02/the-debate-about-the-violence-in-12-years-a-slave>, accessed on 10 December 2019.

mates seem to always side with the master. This inevitably shapes feelings in the audience against the violence embedded in slavery, while almost never offering historical information. However made, films on these issues create emotional divides as the audience is prompted to side emotionally with some of the characters. The emotions raised are added to shared memories but can also be managed or manipulated politically.

Fiction films, though, may create new forms of consciousness even when they are not historically accurate, while books based on well documented historical information and informed by substantial archival oral historical research may have much less fortune and remain relegated to specialized audiences, scholars and libraries.

A different perspective is offered by the film from the novel by Alex Haley, *Roots*. The novel recounts the true story of Haley's ancestors, since the time when one of them, Kunta Kinte, was kidnapped in West Africa in 1767, sold and sent to Maryland as a slave. The generational saga based on historical evidence is romanticized for filmic purposes but keeps all the strength of a real historical account, a story which Alex Haley had been documenting for years before writing the novel, presented in biographical form. 2016 saw a remake of the television mini-series *Roots*, based on the homonymous novel previously adapted for a TV series in 1977. In this new version, the screenplay of the poignant story of Haley's ancestors was backed by solid studies into the history of slavery, dramatized the Mandinka protagonist and his partner's resistance to slavery.³⁰ The film was simultaneously screened in the US from 30th May to 2nd June 2016 on History Channel, Lifetime and the A&E Network, on Memorial Day. The day dedicated to the memory of all deceased American soldiers, crucially symbolic for the construction of the American nation, was thus imbued with extra symbolic meaning. The TV series provoked strong emotions, as witnessed by Erica Armstrong Dunbar who admitted having wept while watching episode two and who envisaged being emotionally exhausted by the end of the series—despite having taught the history of slavery for years.³¹ Scholars who write and lecture on slavery cannot afford to underestimate the power of the visual media in producing lasting emotional impressions on the viewer, neither should they ignore the potent interaction between emotions and memory.

30 Erica Armstrong Dunbar, "The Shame Is Not Ours': *Roots*, Episode 1," *Process. A blog for American History* (30 May 2016) <http://www.processhistory.org/roots-episode-1/>, accessed on 11 November 2019.

31 Erica Armstrong Dunbar, "Never Let Them Put the Chains on Your Mind': *Roots*, Episode 2," *Process. A blog for American History* (31 May 2016) <http://www.processhistory.org/roots-episode-1/>, accessed 11 November 2019.

It is in the interstices between the two different forms of raising awareness and providing knowledge, fiction films and scholarly literature, that the renewed interest of historians and anthropologists of slavery in producing research documentaries can be located: documentaries which, while acting powerfully at a visual level—thus obviously engaging the emotions of the audience—also provide accurate historical information and may present oral historical testimonies.

3 Why Do Researchers on African Slavery and Its Legacies Increasingly Use Film?

Crucial to this growing interest in putting research about slavery onto film, either documentary or fiction, is the awareness that witnesses are ageing and disappearing. In fact, in many African countries, many of those who lived when slavery existed have already passed away, depending on when abolition started to take effect. Many of the oral testimonies that can be gathered now are memories transmitted by grandparents and rarely parents. Furthermore, scholars are urged to communicate to a wider audience the results of their research which, most of the time in Africa, is not translated and disseminated in history manuals for the younger generations. The educational book market in Africa is not as developed as in Europe or the US. Instead, visual media may help to reconnect memories of slavery while other forms of unfreedom and exploitation similar to slavery emerge as transnational phenomena in the modern world.³²

Yet, notwithstanding the importance of the issue, there is a dearth of films on slavery in Africa, either fiction or documentaries, made by African directors. There are admittedly a few fiction films, but almost no documentaries with the exception of *Asientos* by François Woukoache (1995) or Ibrahima Thioub, Abderrahmane Ngaïde and Ibrahima Seck's film *Endam Bilaali: Rénégocié les identités en situation post-esclavagiste* (2014).³³ It is impossible to analyze all the

32 See, for instance, Gardini's research: Marco Gardini, "Malagasy domestic workers: from slavery to exploitation and further emancipation?" *OPEN DEMOCRACY* (2016) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/marco-gardini/malagasy-domestic-workers-from-slavery-to-exploitation-and-further-emanc>, accessed on 10 December 2019.

33 A few African fiction films dealing with the issue of slavery are *Soleil O*. Dir. Med Hondo (1967); *Ceddo*. Dir. Ousmane Sembène (1976); *Adanggaman*. Dir. Roger Gnoan M'Bala (2000). *Africultures*. "Une réflexion sur le pouvoir. Entretien d'Olivier Barlet avec Roger Gnoan M'Bala." Paris, juillet 1999. In *La traite: un tabou en Afrique?* Article N°: 957 (1999) <http://africultures.com/une-reflexion-sur-le-pouvoir-957/>, accessed on 12 November 2019. See also the TV docudrama *Bois d'ébène*. Dir. Moussa Touré (2017).

social conditions that led African filmmakers from the different African countries to avoid this subject. Many African countries retain the vivid legacy of a social stratification that dismisses the descendants of those who were slaves, stigmatizing them and relegating them to the more menial jobs; thus, it seems less interesting to put the issue on public screens as it is often taboo. And yet, for some people, in certain contexts, breaking the silence may mean no longer having access to the network involved in the entire range of dependency dynamics which still, in cases of emergency, provides support for survival; a sort of welfare that the states mostly do not offer in Africa.

A series of questions therefore animate this special issue: Why is it important to put histories of slavery on film and how can historians as well as anthropologists of slavery use this medium fruitfully? How has the use of film informed research on slavery and its legacies? To what extent are scholarly films on slavery and its legacies specific? How do we film about such a topic? To what extent does the film medium open up new perspectives on research into neglected actors of history? And more generally, what does the film medium bring that is new to the conversation about history, memory and politics?

The contributors to this special issue have worked on film, documenting slavery and its legacies in different contexts (Brazil, India, West Africa and East Africa) and with different approaches. Although from different geographical contexts and perspectives, their reflections tackle common issues. Each of the articles included in this thematic issue responds in its own terms to the above questions.

4 The Contributions to the Special Issue

Hebe Mattos, Martha Abreu and Isabel Castro describe the production of a set of four films as a process started initially by making a movie from the book *Memories of Captivity*, a project which evolved through the very fact of eliciting interviews and memories and attending dance performances in several research projects that involved filming as a crucial research element.³⁴ The narratives of one of the films stemmed from the principal findings of the research carried out on the story of the last generation of Africans to arrive

34 The four films were released as a DVD collection *Passados Presentes* in 2011 (www.labhoi.uff.br/passadospresentes). Ana Maria Lugão Rios and Hebe Maria Mattos, *Memórias do Cativo. Família, Trabalho e Cidadania no Pós Abolição* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005).

in the coffee-growing regions of Brazil's southeast. Filming became a way to highlight "questions and hypotheses that emerged from research discoveries". Interviews videoed and recorded in 2007, 180 hours, were put together to form an audio-visual archive indexed by subject and made available for research. In other words, Mattos, Abreu and Castro's video research was in line with the Brazilian attempt to promote a new awareness among the Afro-descendant population by creating material suitable for the teaching of ethno-racial relations and of the Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture, in tune with the 2004 National Curriculum.

Beheroze Shroff's video production about the Indian Sidis consists of four documentaries: *Voices of the Sidis: "Were're Indian and African"*; *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links*; *Voices of the Sidis: The Tradition of Fakirs*; *Sidis of Gujarat: Maintaining Tradition Building Community*. Each describes different aspects of Indian Sidis' heritage but all recording oral histories through the memories of Sidi members of Gujarat's community, "opening up a dialogue on the past" of the West Coast of India and Gujarat. Shroff examines both the social and economic concerns of the Sidi community and her own filmic journey in her attempts to represent Sidis on film.

The article by Francesca Declich reports how she came to produce a documentary film about slavery, *The Hidden Guarantee: Gule Wamkulu between Somalia and Mozambique*, which enables us to explain why so many different dance traditions were present before 1990 in a small territory in Somalia along the Juba River. In Declich's article it is apparent that working on films and slavery was an urge that stemmed from the fieldwork and from the will of the actors involved in her research; the subjects concerned were eager for video recordings to preserve those vestiges of the past which would have otherwise gone undocumented. The researcher became then the mediator who would help fulfil that need. Moreover, it was also during the research process in Mattos, Abreu and Castro's works that the need arose to record the song traditions of some *kilombola* communities that had gone unnoticed, the *calango*. It helped in codifying and constructing an identity as Afro-descendants which, once recognized, allowed them to retain the territory which they had already settled for generations.

In the same way, it was when confronted with the unsatisfactory rendering in writing of her research experience in Kayes that Marie Rodet decided to explore alternative media, such as documentary film, which offered a more richly textured way of presenting her findings. In 2014, she released *The Diambourou: Slavery and Emancipation in Kayes—Mali*. Rodet recorded histories of enslavement and liberation as told by the descendants of formerly enslaved populations in Kayes, voices that had never been heard in the public sphere in

Mali beyond the boundaries of those communities. She used film not only to respond to the ongoing historiographical debate on Slavery in the West African Sahel but also as a strategic tool to raise awareness of the history of internal slavery in Mali and sensitize the younger generations to fight against enduring forms of exploitation and discrimination experienced by communities with ascribed “slave status”.

Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya has written an article about Afro-Sri Lankans whose music heritage she documented through two films: *Creole Cultures in the Indian Ocean* and *A Lost African Diaspora*. Her article highlights the significance of film in making Asians of African ancestry visible and giving them a space to reflect not only on their history and heritage, but also their future.

Indeed, several articles in this thematic section highlight how the several production phases of slavery documentaries are transformative processes in which knowledge is produced, shared, but is also instrumental in fostering a positive new awareness. As highlighted by Paulo Freire, a process of constructing awareness, “conscientização,” through new cognitive skills, may enable people to fight jointly for liberation.³⁵

In her article, Shroff describes the strong interest kindled by the screening of her documentaries about the Indian Sidis to audiences in the United States. Mattos, Abreu and Castro’s work has obvious political implications in the Brazilian nation where black identities are being built through the relatively recent process of recognition of *kilombola* territories. In creating a setting where *calango* dances could be filmed, new songs were improvised during the performance which showed clearly how memories can be recalled actively through music and dance and how the cultural archive stored in music and dance may be re-activated in certain conditions. Many actors were galvanized by the process of recollecting interviews and memories. According to Declich, working with audio-visuals on issues of slavery has many implications: it fixes memories and dances which are otherwise liable to prove evanescent or, in the case of certain dances, prohibited; it is a means of archiving contents that can be shared across time and geographical spaces, and it may raise awareness to the extent of serving as a catalyst for action.³⁶ The audiences who watched Shroff’s films in the United States seemed ready to mobilize in aid of the cause,

35 Empowerment through awareness is a concept tackled by Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Paz e Terra, 1970).

36 Among the scholars of this methodology see, for instance, Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. “Reflexiones sobre democracia y participación.” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 48 (3) (1986), 7–14.

while those in India were debating about the role a film could play in helping the community. The screenings of Rodet's film not only increased awareness but also created a legitimate space for contemporary African activists to unite in their fight against descent-based slavery. De Silva describes how her films have empowered the Afro-Sri Lankan community by allowing their voice to be heard and offering visibility to their heritage, especially their music and dance, which led to subsequent remunerated international performances, notably in South Africa.

Most of the authors found that the audio-visual medium informed their research to the extent of becoming an integral part or even a principal part of it. Declich found that the ethnographic footage of some traditional dances whose video documentation was keenly requested by her fieldwork partners was to prove a leitmotif informing research work carried out over several years and in several continents. It allowed communication between actors of older and newer diasporas, the former forcibly removed through slavery, the latter through war.

Rodet's filming and later film screening allowed her to continue her research by enabling her to collect additional, spontaneously shared oral data as both the filming and the screening offered, de facto, unexpected new openings for expression to the populations concerned.

Apart for their initial movie, which was meant to illustrate the book *Memoires of Captivity*, also for Mattos, Abreu and Castro the film medium became an integral part of research as the fieldwork progressed. However, in the course of making the first film, the audio-visual tool almost became driver for some fieldwork activities which both resulted in fresh discoveries and stimulated discussion with the subjects of the research. That is how, for instance, it was decided to organize a dance group in which, surprisingly, new words were improvised and elicited in a song; thus, new meanings were ascribed by the performers to slavery.

The Brazilian contributors ended up facing a challenge similar to that of Shroff in India: a substantial part of their research consisted in recording oral history through the memories of living persons in the hope of compiling a database of primary sources before the witnesses became too old to transmit them. Thus, video-recording living testimonies of slavery became an integral part of their research work.

While it is obviously important to collect the reminiscences of the older generation while they are still available, it is questionable the extent to which edited movies that collect a series of precious testimonies in narrative form can be considered historical "primary sources" at all. The process of editing, the choice of action, sounds, voices, narrative structures, the cuts to be made

for the final product are an authorial exercise and the result of inevitable interpretation by the researcher, historian, anthropologist, author or authors.

De Silva's filming through recurrent visits strengthened her bonds with the community, also enhanced through their shared mother-tongue, Sinhala. It thus offered her privileged access to information which in turn reinforced her research.

As the audio-visual medium is becoming progressively more important in the creation of shared memories about slavery, the authors have all wondered why, in their case, it was crucial to put the histories of slavery on film. For Rodet, it was a unique opportunity for the descendants of formerly enslaved populations in Kayes to tell a powerful, revisionist history of extraordinary human endurance in surviving slavery, and to tell it themselves, directly to the camera, so as to reach a wide range of audiences, including a skeptical academic one, before the last generation of those in possession of such historical knowledge passed away.

In the case of Declich, putting histories of slavery on film extended the audience for the results of her research to non-academic, less literate people and to varied socio-economic strata of the population. Filming certain dances was the principal means of connecting people from far away countries (Somalia and Mozambique) and discussing common origins. On the other hand, documenting traditional dances chimed with traditional wisdom in east Africa and the Horn according to which, as there exist numerous layers of dependency, one is never really a lost slave until one's descendants have erased all memory and awareness of their origins. Thus, the performance of certain dances and inclusion in certain ceremonial groups are considered a living expression of that awareness.

In Brazil, as suggested by Mattos, Abreu and Castro's work, producing video recordings of interviews concerning slavery and creating an accessible data base with them also provides educational material to reflect on ethnic and racial relations in the country and material for teaching the history of slavery there. Moreover, broadening the audience for the discussion about slavery may help to address the issue of releasing the Afro-descendants from the enduring legacy of stigmatization that still afflicts the descendants of enslaved populations in Brazil.

Filming the Sidis celebrations constitutes a process of ransoming the traditions that are so important to those Indians, but which may well disappear if people do not commit themselves to their preservation. Maintaining traditions is all the more difficult as many of those Sidis are poor: performing dances for touristic or preservation purposes is not profitable enough and can even become a burden for their livelihood. Thus, Shroff felt that the effort of

producing films can help the Sidis to represent themselves not only as Gujarati-speaking Indians of African descent, but also as “an integral part of the nation,” which would in turn “create an empathy for their social and economic situation”.

The importance of giving voice to the voiceless resounds in the article written by De Silva. Indeed, the filmmaker, by exercising empathy with the community member, can find a way of giving voice to neglected actors of history through a particularly powerful medium. The article written by Shroff describes the dilemma of attempting to give voice to the voiceless groups of Sidis while being herself a devotee of the ancestral saint Bava Gor, thus being both insider and outsider in the field.

Yet, the extent to which the voiceless perspective can be channelled through the film varies according to the different experiences and methods used. In this thematic issue it was not possible to include articles reflecting on the participatory production of films or documentaries on slavery. Those kinds of filming involve specifically oriented projects in which it is necessary to identify which layer of participation is possible or desirable to include. The idea of applying participatory research methods in research activities on vulnerable people, despite enthusiasm for the potential to foster empowerment, has encountered criticism. For instance, as suggested by Hoechner, “research with stigmatized groups compound the political and ethical challenges of ‘participation.’”³⁷ Among the major concerns is safety, as lack of social power is what makes stigmatized people vulnerable. The public disclosure of a group or individual’s recent past of slavery may induce shame and a desire for concealment. The editing of a filmic product is always the result of choices which would need specific logistical arrangements and can take a very long time to be done collectively. The editing of a filmic product is always the result of choices which, were they to be made really collectively, would require specific logistical arrangements and take a considerable time. Participatory filmmaking is a cultural project on its own that implies specific financial investments and community activities, and is an experience omitted from this thematic issue. Although audio-visual media have become widespread through the use of mobile phones, the production of fully completed films or film documentaries remains very restricted. The fiction or documentary film has often a limited number of official authors

37 Hannah Hoechner, “Participatory Filmmaking with Qur’anic Students in Kano, Nigeria: ‘Speak good about us or keep quiet!’” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 18, no. 6 (2015): 635–649; Avril Buchanan and Michael Murray, “Using participatory video to challenge the stigma of mental illness: a case study,” *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion* 14, no. 1 (2012): 35–43.

whatever the range of interaction with the subjects of the film, either close and embedded as for Robert Gardner³⁸ in Niger for *Deep Hearts* or a more distant one. Thus, whosever's voice is heard in the movies, the role and the intentions of the trained historian or anthropologist or filmmaker as mediator of what is expressed are still central for the authors of the articles presented in this number.

In the experience of the authors of these articles, screening films on slavery in Africa and in the places of the African diaspora has provoked a range of responses. Several people among Rodet's film audience could not conceal their emotion at the sight of her documentary, caught between pride and shame, especially as some viewers heard about the history of their ancestors for the first time, as told on film by their relatives or community elders who had since passed away. Declich's onlookers' attention was caught by the dancing of people who had since died and whom they considered their founding lineage leaders, and this also aroused deep feeling. Declich found it more important to use separate video shots to discuss with actors than screening an entire documentary concerning slavery. The documentary narrative form should possibly be adapted for a non-literate audience; discussion of separate video shots, was also a way of returning the research data to the people from whom it had been gathered.

A different experience was reported by Shroff who, when screening her documentary in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, elicited a discussion within the audience about issues of community empowerment and the outreach of their rich musical culture. The group of the Indian Sidis face the dilemma of having to preserve their traditions by reproducing them for touristic purposes which, at some point, may pose a problem of authenticity.

In Brazil, Mattos, Abreu and Castro have gone well beyond screening the video in the communities; several of the films are stored on the web and can be used for didactic purposes worldwide. The issue of whether or not those films can be considered historical "primary sources," is transcended by the importance of finally having educational material on the social history of the Afro-descendants from their perspectives: oral histories that had never been granted expression in Brazil to the extent witnessed between 2002 and 2016. Gathering oral historical sources, and using the audio-visual medium, in this case, tied in with the policies of the Brazilian state that for years had promoted positive action to raise the populations of African descent on the social scale since they had always suffered from racist discrimination in Brazil. In the case of de Silva's

38 *Deep Hearts*. Dir. Robert Gardner. 1980 (58min).

films, their screening sparked so much interest from officials that they solicited and sponsored new performances by the Afro-Sri Lankan music group in Sri Lanka and abroad.

This special issue does not pretend to cover all the complex interactions between film, slavery, politics and memory in Africa and the Diaspora. Far from it, especially as certain film genres such as fiction, animation, experimental, participatory, and docufiction had to be left out so as to concentrate on documentaries made by scholars. Although scholarly documentaries on slavery have limited production budgets and usually fail to reach big audiences, they remain a crucial strategic tool to ensure that scholarship on slavery and its legacies, as well as neglected voices and other slavery topics, reach new audiences, thereby possibly raising awareness and encouraging the fight against exploitation and discrimination in all its forms, including contemporary forms of slavery.

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