Title: Scenes of Subjection: Slavery, the Black Female Body, and the Uses of Sexual Violence in Haile Gerima’s Sankofa

Abstract: In Haile Gerima’s Sankofa (1993), a film that envisions the horrors of plantation system slavery, sexual violence is a central and repetitive trope. Disturbing and disruptive, in Sankofa, sexual violence is shaped as a dehumanizing experience, a site of subjection, and yet nonetheless, motivation for resistance. In this presentation, I examine how Gerima employs sexual violence as a filmic strategy to expose the brutality of slavery and its aftermath, as well as, to illustrate the magnitude of Black tenacity in the face of domination. While cinematic versions of the white male/slave master’s violation of the Black female body continue to circulate as a dangerously problematic image, I argue that Gerima’s film reenacts the terrible banality of slave sexual exploitation and significantly performs a conscious objectification in order to assert a liberatory narrative of Black agency and transformation. If Gerima’s Sankofa is, in the words of scholar Mbaye Cham, “a compelling rewrite of slavery from a Pan-African perspective,” what does it mean that sexual violence is the central trope for his filmic manifestation?

Bio: Z’étoile Imma is Assistant Professor of English and Research and Teaching Faculty in the Gender Studies Program. Her work explores gender and sexuality in contemporary Anglophone African and African Diaspora literature, film, and new media. Dr. Imma has published essays on postcolonial feminisms, gender, and representation in African texts including “‘Just Ask the Scientists’: Troubling the ‘Venus Hottentot’ and Scientific Racism in Bessie Head’s Maru and Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy” included in the edited collection: Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman (Palgrave Macmillan 2011). Her current project examines love, space, and masculinities in African feminist fiction and film.