

SANKOFA: ECHOES FROM HOME

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ABSTRACT

This essay film follows a recently arrived student from Ghana navigating displacement in Toronto, using the renaming of Sankofa Square as a point of inquiry into memory, migration, and belonging. Drawing on the Akan philosophy of Sankofa, “to return and retrieve”, the film moves between personal reflection, urban observation, and cultural and historical dialogue to explore what it means for an African philosophy to be embedded within one of the city’s most contested public spaces.

Through a non-linear structure that combines voiceover, interviews, and symbolic imagery, the film traces the transformation of Sankofa from a culturally grounded symbol into a named urban site, foregrounding the tensions between representation, translation, and absence.

Positioning the recent migrant experience as both subject and lens, the film becomes an act of listening and reflection, asking what it means to carry memory across borders and how histories are negotiated within contemporary urban life.

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INTRODUCTION

This support paper accompanies a short documentary film that emerges at the intersection of migration, cultural memory, and the politics of public space. It is grounded in my lived experience as a recently arrived migrant from Ghana, navigating Toronto as both a site of aspiration and disorientation. The film takes as its central point of inquiry the renaming of Yonge–Dundas Square to Sankofa Square, using this as an entry point to explore cultural memory and belonging in contemporary urban Toronto.

Place naming is never a neutral gesture. Scholars have demonstrated that the naming and renaming of public spaces function as exercises of power, shaping collective memory by legitimizing certain histories while marginalizing others (Azaryahu 2011; Giraut 2022). In cities marked by colonial legacies and ongoing struggles over recognition, renaming operates simultaneously as an act of repair and a site of contestation. The transformation of Yonge–Dundas Square, long associated with colonial figures and histories of violence, into Sankofa Square must therefore be understood not simply as symbolic change, but as a politically charged intervention into Toronto’s memoryscape (Till 2005).

Formally, the project adopts the essay film as its guiding methodology. As Laura Rascaroli argues, the essay film is distinguished by its capacity to think through images, voice, and structure, privileging subjectivity, reflection, and uncertainty over narrative closure (Rascaroli 2017). This film does not aim to provide definitive answers about Sankofa Square; rather, it stages an inquiry that unfolds through personal narration, encounters, and associative visual

logic. My voiceover runs throughout the film, not as authoritative commentary, but as a thinking presence questioning, revising, and grappling with meaning in real time.

The personal voice is central to this approach. As both narrator and on-screen presence, I function as the film's narrative protagonist, guiding viewers through my process of arrival, discovery, and reflection. This positioning aligns with traditions of diasporic and Black essayistic cinema, particularly the work of filmmakers such as John Akomfrah and Raoul Peck, whose films mobilize memory and subjective narration to interrogate national histories and cultural identity (Akomfrah 2013; Peck 2016). The essayistic mode allows the film to hold contradictions between celebration and critique, belonging and displacement, without resolving them prematurely.

At its core, this project asks: what does it mean for an African philosophy of remembrance to be placed at the center of one of Canada's most visible and contested urban spaces? For me, Sankofa Square initially registers as a moment of recognition, a Ghanaian word, an Akan philosophy, returned to me in a foreign city. Yet this recognition is quickly complicated by the realization that my relationship to Sankofa differs from that of Black Canadians (Canadian citizens who have ancestry from any of the black racial groups of Africa) and Indigenous communities whose histories of resistance and survival are rooted in this land across generations. The film, therefore, moves between personal reflection and collective history, foregrounding questions of positionality and responsibility.

By combining personal narration, symbolic imagery and critical voices, the documentary positions Sankofa Square not as a fixed solution to historical erasure, but as an invitation to ongoing reckoning. In doing so, the film aligns with scholarship that views memory as an active, contested process, one that unfolds across time, space, and community, rather than being resolved through singular symbolic acts (Till 2005; Giraut 2022).

Why Make This Film?

This film emerges from a state of personal displacement and disorientation. As a Ghanaian newly arrived in Toronto as a graduate student, my plans, academic, professional, and personal, began to unravel. Financial constraints placed my thesis project, a major academic milestone, in jeopardy. At the same time, this was my first prolonged separation from home and family. The distance brought with it a growing sense of doubt: the fear of having made a mistake by pursuing a dream that might not materialize, coupled with the pressure of encountering new possibilities that demanded long-term decisions about migration. The city presented itself as a site of opportunity and uncertainty simultaneously, and the weight of navigating both became overwhelming.

Toronto is widely understood as a multicultural city, with a visible Ghanaian community and a broader Black diasporic presence. Yet despite this familiarity, my encounter with Sankofa Square was unexpected and unsettling. Seeing Sankofa, an Akan philosophy of remembrance, embedded within one of the city's most prominent civic spaces was not simply a moment of cultural recognition. It was a point of friction. The encounter opened a line of inquiry, one that reframed

my personal disorientation as an opportunity for meaning-making. What began as a crisis of feasibility became a conceptual pivot.

The decision to make this film is grounded in the recognition that public symbols are not neutral. Renaming is often framed as a corrective gesture, a means of addressing historical harm through language and representation. Yet such gestures also risk simplification and abstraction. Sankofa, rooted in Akan epistemology, enters Toronto not as a bird, proverb, or visual philosophy, but as a name. This transformation raises critical questions about what is preserved, what is altered, and what is rendered invisible when cultural symbols migrate across geographies and institutional frameworks.

My positionality within this inquiry is marked by uncertainty. I am both a cultural inheritor of Sankofa and a recent migrant encountering its diasporic reconfiguration in an unfamiliar civic context. I do not approach Sankofa Square from a position of authority, but from one of ambivalence, drawn to the recognition it represents, yet unsettled by what appears absent or unresolved. Making this film becomes a way to hold that ambivalence rather than resolve it prematurely.

Ultimately, this film is made because Sankofa itself demands it. If Sankofa insists on looking back in order to move forward, then I felt compelled to ask what Toronto is looking back to and what it hopes to carry forward. Understanding what Sankofa means in this context became inseparable from my own questions of belonging. In this sense, both Sankofa and I occupy the

position of migrants, negotiating translation, recognition, and survival. By tracing Sankofa's presence in the city, I seek insight into whether, and how, I might belong here as well.

Making this film thus becomes an act of listening: a refusal to accept symbolic gestures at face value, and an invitation to consider how remembrance might be practiced with care, humility, and openness. It is not an attempt to define Sankofa for the city, but to remain with the questions it raises, about memory, migration, and the ethics of public meaning-making.

SANKOFA, ADINKRA, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Sankofa emerges from the Adinkra symbolic system of the Akan people of present-day Ghana.

Adinkra symbols function as an ideographic mode of communication, embedding philosophical principles, moral instruction, and communal values into visual form (Rattray 1927; Willis 1998).

Traditionally inscribed on cloth, architecture, and ritual objects, these symbols operate not merely as decorative motifs but as carriers of ancestral knowledge, social memory, and ethical guidance.

The term Adinkra itself carries significant cultural and philosophical weight. The word “Adinkra” is commonly translated as “farewell” or “goodbye,” historically associated with funerary contexts among the Akan. Adinkra symbols were traditionally stamped onto cloth worn during mourning rituals, marking moments of transition, remembrance, and departure. In this sense, Adinkra is not merely a system of visual signs, but a language deeply embedded in processes of loss, continuity, and ancestral connection (Willis 1998). Within this system, Sankofa occupies a particularly significant position as both a symbol and a philosophy concerned with the ethics of remembrance.

Visually, Sankofa is most commonly represented by a bird turning its head backward to retrieve an egg, though it also appears in a more abstract, heart-shaped form. In both iterations, the symbol conveys the same conceptual imperative: it is not taboo to revisit the past in order to recover what has been forgotten. Within Akan epistemology, there is a rejection of linear narratives of progress that frame the past as obsolete or burdensome. Instead, it advocates for a

cyclical understanding of time, in which memory remains an active and essential component of ethical continuity and social responsibility, and this is what Sankofa embodies (Asante 2007).

Cultural memory within Akan philosophy is not archival in the Western sense of static preservation but performative and embodied. Knowledge is transmitted through proverbs, symbols, rituals, and oral tradition, continually activated in the present (Rattray 1927). Adinkra symbols function as mnemonic devices that invite interpretation rather than closure. Their meanings are deliberately open-ended, shifting according to context, usage, and historical moment. This interpretive flexibility is essential to understanding how Sankofa operates both within Ghana and across diasporic spaces.

In diasporic contexts, Sankofa has taken on expanded meanings, particularly within Black Atlantic and Afro-diasporic cultural discourse. The symbol has been mobilized as a framework for historical recovery, resistance, and cultural affirmation, especially in relation to the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and displacement (Gilroy 1993). Within African American, Caribbean, and broader diasporic communities, Sankofa often signifies a return to African epistemologies as a means of confronting historical erasure and reclaiming suppressed narratives. This diasporic circulation, however, also introduces questions of translation and adaptation (Temple 2010).

The diasporic circulation of Sankofa is further evidenced in its institutional and artistic uptake beyond the African continent. In the United Kingdom, the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, established in the 1980s, adopted the term as a guiding framework for Black British visual practice. Associated with figures such as John Akomfrah and Isaac Julien, the collective's work

engaged with memory, diaspora, and postcolonial identity through experimental, essayistic forms. The work of Sankofa and related collectives challenged dominant cinematic conventions while foregrounding the representation of the Black subject within both mainstream and alternative media contexts. Their practice positioned Sankofa not only as a cultural reference but as a critical and methodological framework for engaging history, diaspora, and visual form (Fusco 1988).

Similarly, in the United States, Sankofa-based cultural and educational initiatives in Washington, DC, including the Sankofa Film Institute and related institutions, mobilize Sankofa as a framework for cultural education, community engagement, and diasporic connection. Through programming that foregrounds African and African diasporic histories, the institute extends Sankofa's emphasis on retrieval and continuity into pedagogical and community-based contexts. In both instances, Sankofa operates as a transnational concept that moves across artistic, intellectual, and institutional spaces, adapting to new historical conditions while retaining its core philosophical imperative (Sankofa Film Institute 2026; Sankofa Video Books & Café 2026).

A key cinematic articulation of this diasporic return appears in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993), which mobilizes the philosophy not as metaphor but as narrative method. Gerima's film collapses temporal distance between contemporary Black subjectivity and the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, insisting that return or remembrance is neither nostalgic nor optional but ethically urgent. Sankofa here becomes a disruptive act of remembrance that resists closure, aligning with broader Black Atlantic approaches to memory as confrontation rather than reconciliation (Sharpe 2016). Gerima's work establishes an important precedent for

understanding Sankofa as an active methodology rather than a static symbol, an approach that informs this film's own essayistic inquiry.

The movement of Sankofa from Akan cultural contexts into global circulation demonstrates how symbols migrate and accrue new layers of meaning. While this mobility underscores the resilience and relevance of Adinkra philosophy, it also raises concerns about appropriation, simplification, and institutional deployment. When Sankofa is invoked within state-sanctioned or municipal frameworks, such as the renaming of Yonge–Dundas Square, it enters a different symbolic economy governed by public policy, multicultural discourse, and the politics of recognition (Giraut 2022).

Within this film, Sankofa is approached not as a stable or universally legible symbol, but as a contested site of meaning. The absence of the Sankofa bird in the official Sankofa Square logo becomes a focal point for this inquiry. The removal of the bird's body, leaving only the name, signals a shift from visual philosophy to textual abstraction. This absence invites reflection on what is lost, or transformed, when a symbol is detached from its form. Scholars of memory and monumentality have noted that public symbols often gain legitimacy through visibility and institutional framing while simultaneously muting the histories they claim to represent (Till 2005; Dwyer and Alderman 2008).

At the same time, Adinkra symbols themselves are not static within Ghana. Contemporary artists, designers, and communities continue to reinterpret and generate new symbols in response to changing social realities. For instance, six new Adinkra symbols have been unveiled in honor of

Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the king of the Asante Kingdom (Fuseini, 2025). Sankofa itself exists in multiple visual forms, all rooted in the same philosophical premise. This ongoing evolution complicates any singular claim to authenticity and suggests that adaptability is intrinsic to Adinkra symbolism rather than a departure from it (Willis 1998).

By situating the film within both Akan epistemology and diasporic circulation, it frames cultural memory as dynamic, relational, and unfinished. Sankofa becomes less a symbol to be decoded than a method of inquiry, one that asks how societies remember, who controls memory in public space, and how the past is mobilized to imagine futures.

SANKOFA SQUARE IN TORONTO

Urban space is not merely a physical terrain but a site where power, memory, and identity are continuously negotiated. The naming and renaming of public places function as acts of symbolic governance, shaping how histories are remembered, forgotten, or contested within the civic imagination (Azaryahu 2011). In this sense, the transformation of Yonge–Dundas Square into Sankofa Square must be understood as a deliberate intervention into Toronto’s symbolic landscape, one that seeks to reorient public memory while simultaneously exposing the tensions inherent in such gestures.

Yonge–Dundas Square has long occupied a paradoxical position within Toronto. As one of the city’s most visible public spaces, it operates as a site of spectacle, commerce, and transit, while also bearing the weight of colonial naming practices. Henry Dundas, after whom the square was partially named, has been historically linked to policies that delayed the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade within the British Empire, resulting in the prolonged enslavement of millions of Africans (Mullen 2020; Newton 2020). The retention of such names in public space reflects what scholars describe as normalized colonial memory, in which imperial figures are commemorated without sustained critical engagement with their legacies (Till 2005).

Renaming initiatives, therefore, are often framed as corrective measures, efforts to address historical harm through symbolic redress. However, as critical geographers and memory scholars have noted, renaming does not simply overwrite the past; it produces layered memoryscapes in which old and new meanings coexist, often uneasily (Dwyer and Alderman 2008). The renaming of Yonge–Dundas Square to Sankofa Square introduces an African diasporic philosophy of

remembrance into a space previously marked by colonial commemoration, creating a charged juxtaposition between histories of oppression and aspirations toward inclusivity.

This juxtaposition forms part of the film's inquiry. Sankofa, as discussed in the previous section, is a philosophy that demands an ethical return to the past in order to move forward. Yet when embedded within a municipal renaming process, the symbol enters a framework governed by institutional language, bureaucratic procedure, and public consensus. Giraut (2022) argues that such acts of place renaming are often constrained by the need to balance recognition with political palatability, resulting in outcomes that may gesture toward justice without fully engaging its structural dimensions.

The contestation surrounding Sankofa Square illustrates this tension. While some view the name as a meaningful acknowledgment of Black history and diasporic presence in Toronto, others question its appropriateness, legibility, or relevance within a Canadian context. These debates reveal how public memory is unevenly distributed and how certain symbols, particularly those originating outside dominant national narratives, are subjected to heightened scrutiny. As scholars of monumentality observe, symbols introduced into public space are rarely neutral; they are interpreted through existing power relations and cultural hierarchies (Young 1993; Till 2005).

Importantly, the film situates these debates within lived experience. As a recent African migrant, my initial encounter with Sankofa Square is marked by recognition and nostalgia. Yet this response is complicated by an awareness that my relationship to the square differs from that of Black Canadians whose histories of resistance and survival are rooted in this land, as well as

Indigenous communities for whom place naming is inseparable from ongoing struggles against settler colonial erasure. The film does not collapse these positionalities but holds them in tension, reflecting what scholars describe as the relational politics of memory in settler societies (Maddrell 2016).

By foregrounding Sankofa Square as both a symbolic achievement and a site of unresolved tension, the film resists celebratory closure. Understanding that renaming alone may not address the deeper structural inequities that shape urban life, such gestures risk functioning as what some scholars term symbolic substitution, where representation stands in for material change (Alderman and Inwood 2013). The renaming thus becomes not an endpoint, but a provocation, an invitation to consider what forms of remembrance are necessary, for whom, and at what cost.

MEMORY AND MIGRATION

Memory does not remain fixed to a single geography. As people move, memory moves with them, shaped, translated, and reconfigured across space and time. Scholars of diaspora and cultural memory have emphasized that memory is not merely inherited but continually produced through movement, encounter, and adaptation (Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993). Within migratory contexts, memory becomes mobile, carried in bodies, practices, symbols, and narratives that must negotiate new social and political landscapes.

For diasporic subjects, cultural memory operates as both anchor and fracture. It provides continuity in the face of displacement while also undergoing transformation as it encounters unfamiliar contexts. This process does not result in simple preservation or loss, but in what Stuart Hall describes as a positioning of identity, one that is constantly becoming rather than returning to a stable origin (Hall 1990). In this sense, memory in diaspora is not a retrieval of an intact past, but an active process of reinterpretation shaped by present conditions.

Symbols play a central role in this process. As cultural forms travel, they accumulate new meanings and political resonances. Sankofa's circulation across the Black Atlantic exemplifies this dynamic. Originally embedded within Akan philosophical and visual systems, Sankofa has been rearticulated in diasporic contexts as a framework for historical recovery, resistance, and cultural affirmation (Gilroy 1993). Its invocation in contexts shaped by enslavement and colonial rupture positions Sankofa not only as a reminder of origin but as a tool for survival and ethical reckoning.

Yet this mobility also exposes symbols to contestation. When symbols move across cultural and institutional boundaries, their meanings are subject to reinterpretation, simplification, or instrumentalization. Scholars caution that diasporic circulation can risk flattening complex epistemologies into easily consumable signifiers, particularly within multicultural or state-sponsored frameworks (Bhabha 1994). The challenge, then, lies in maintaining the ethical depth of such symbols while allowing for their inevitable transformation.

Within this film, Sankofa is approached as a philosophy in motion rather than a static emblem. Its appearance in Toronto, embedded in the renaming of a major urban square, signals a moment where diasporic memory intersects with municipal power. The film treats this intersection not as a resolution, but as a site of inquiry. Sankofa's movement from Ghana to Toronto mirrors the filmmaker's own migration, foregrounding how memory is carried, reshaped, and sometimes unsettled in the process of arrival.

The absence of the Sankofa bird in the square's official logo further underscores this tension. This absence is not framed as a loss alone, but as an indication that symbols, like people, undergo mutation in transit. As scholars of cultural memory note, migration often produces hybrid memory forms that reflect both continuity and rupture (Erl1 2011). Sankofa's evolving representations, both within Ghana and across the diaspora, suggest that adaptability is not a betrayal of tradition but a condition of its survival.

By framing Sankofa as a philosophy in motion, the film aligns with scholarship that understands memory as relational and processual. Memory is not simply what is carried from the past, but

what is actively made meaningful in the present. In this way, Sankofa Square becomes less a destination than a method, an ongoing practice of return, reinterpretation, and ethical engagement shaped by migration and global movement.

THE ESSAY FILM AS METHOD

This project is grounded in the essay film, a mode of filmmaking that privileges thinking over illustrating, inquiry over exposition, and subjectivity over narrative closure. Rather than using images to confirm predetermined arguments, the essay film operates as a space of exploration in which meaning emerges through the interaction of voice, image, sound, and structure (Rascaroli 2017). This approach is central to the film's engagement with memory, migration, and public space, allowing it to remain open, reflexive, and politically attentive.

Laura Rascaroli describes the essay film as a form that thinks aloud, inviting viewers into a process of reasoning rather than presenting them with authoritative conclusions (Rascaroli 2017). In this tradition, the film does not seek to resolve the tensions surrounding Sankofa Square, but to dwell within them. The renaming of the square becomes not a subject to be explained, but a subject to be thought through, one that unfolds through association, repetition, and fragmentation. This refusal of closure aligns with the film's broader ethical stance: that acts of remembrance, particularly in contested public spaces, must remain open to critique and reinterpretation.

First-person narration plays a crucial role in this process. The voiceover runs throughout the film, functioning as a reflective and interrogative presence rather than a didactic guide. As scholars of the essay film note, the "I" in essayistic cinema is not confessional but relational, positioning the filmmaker as both subject and analyst (Corrigan 2011). In this project, my voice does not claim authority over Sankofa's meaning in Toronto and even in Ghana; instead, it marks uncertainty, hesitation, and revision. The narration becomes a site where personal experience intersects with

historical inquiry, allowing subjective perception to operate as a legitimate mode of knowledge production.

Voiceover in this context is also explicitly political. By articulating questions of belonging, positionality, and memory from the standpoint of a recent African migrant, the film foregrounds how knowledge is shaped by location and movement. The voiceover resists neutrality, acknowledging that all engagements with public memory are situated and partial. This aligns with traditions of Black essayistic filmmaking, particularly the work of John Akomfrah, whose film mobilizes voice and archive to interrogate the afterlives of colonialism and migration without offering narrative resolution (Akomfrah 2013).

Crucially, the essay film allows for contradiction. Moments of recognition and celebration coexist with doubt and critique; symbolic affirmation is held alongside questions of insufficiency. By refusing a singular interpretive frame, the film invites viewers to participate in meaning-making rather than consume a fixed message.

In adopting the essay film as method, this project positions itself within a lineage of cinematic works that treat form as a mode of thought. The film's structure reflects the argument that memory is neither linear nor complete. Just as Sankofa insists on the necessity of return, the essay film insists on revisiting, rethinking, and remaining unsettled. In doing so, the film embraces uncertainty as an ethical stance.

CREATIVE APPROACH

Positionality and Ethics

This project is grounded in an explicit acknowledgment of positionality. As both filmmaker and subject, I occupy a dual role that shapes the film's narrative, ethical orientation, and creative approach. My perspective is that of a Ghanaian migrant newly arrived in Toronto, simultaneously an insider to the cultural philosophy of Sankofa and an outsider to the longer histories of Black and Indigenous presence on this land. Recognizing this positionality is not incidental to the project; it is central to its ethical framework.

Scholars of documentary practice have long emphasized that the filmmaker's presence is never neutral. First-person documentary and essayistic cinema, in particular, foreground subjectivity as a site of knowledge production rather than a limitation to be concealed (Renov 2004; Nichols 2017). By placing myself within the frame and maintaining a continuous voiceover throughout the film, I do not claim authority over the histories the film engages. Instead, I allow the visual to roll without the interruption of voice, allowing uncertainty, curiosity, and reflexivity.

Speaking from within the African diaspora carries specific ethical responsibilities. While Sankofa originates within Akan philosophy, its circulation across diasporic and institutional contexts means that no single subject can claim ownership over its meaning. As a Ghanaian filmmaker, I approach Sankofa not as a cultural artifact to be explained for an external audience, but as a living philosophy that continues to evolve. At the same time, I remain attentive to the risk of over-identification, of assuming cultural proximity equates to interpretive authority. This

tension informs the film's refusal to define Sankofa conclusively, instead allowing meaning to emerge through dialogue, encounter, and juxtaposition.

The film's engagement with Sankofa Square further complicates this ethical terrain. As a recent migrant, my initial sense of recognition upon encountering the name must be situated alongside the lived experiences of Black Canadians and Indigenous communities whose relationships to land, memory, and survival are shaped by generations of struggle within Canada. Scholars of memory ethics argue that acts of remembrance must account for asymmetries of power and historical inheritance, particularly in settler colonial contexts (Simon 2014; Tuck and Yang 2012). The film, therefore, treats Sankofa Square not as a personal discovery alone, but as a shared and contested site where multiple histories intersect.

Responsibility to cultural symbols is another key ethical concern. Symbols such as Sankofa carry layered meanings that extend beyond visual representation. Their use in public space demands careful consideration of context, intention, and consequence. The film addresses this responsibility by foregrounding the absence of the Sankofa bird in the square's official logo, using this absence as a prompt for critical reflection rather than accusation. By acknowledging that Adinkra symbols are themselves evolving, the project gives the necessary respect to the course of the movement to rename while maintaining respect for its origins and the philosophies they embody.

Methodologically, the film enacts what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as speaking nearby rather than speaking about (Trinh 1991). Rather than positioning itself as a definitive account of

Sankofa Square, the film remains adjacent to its subject, listening, questioning, and remaining open to other voices. This ethical stance is reinforced through the inclusion of additional voices, whose perspectives expand the film's inquiry.

Ultimately, this project treats positionality not as a limitation but as a methodological resource. By foregrounding my location within diaspora, migration, and cultural inheritance, the film embraces responsibility, reflexivity, and humility as guiding principles. In doing so, it seeks to engage Sankofa not as a static symbol of the past, but as an ethical practice oriented toward ongoing dialogue, care, and accountability.

Nana Adinkra as Symbolic Figure

Nana Adinkra functions as a symbolic figure through whom the film visualizes cultural memory, continuity, and spirituality. He is conceived not as a fictional character or explanatory device, but as a cinematic presence that operates at the intersection of realism and abstraction. His body exists materially within the frame, yet his function is conceptual: he embodies the collective memory of Adinkra philosophy and the ancestral knowledge it carries. He represents what is familiar to me but also my displacement, the spirit that has gone ahead to prepare my path for safe passage.

Nana Adinkra is depicted with a realistic physical presence, an embodied figure occupying real spaces within Toronto, while his narrative role remains deliberately indeterminate. This duality allows him to operate as an essayistic figure: one who thinks through presence rather than plot. Except for just one instance at the end of the film, he does not speak, explain, or intervene in

events. Instead, his meaning emerges through repetition, positioning, and relational proximity to the filmmaker's journey. His silence preserves the symbolic openness central to the film's essayistic method.

Costume plays a crucial role in establishing Nana Adinkra's symbolic weight. Draped in kente cloth, a saturated, colourful cloth. The vibrancy of the cloth functions as a visual disruption, an embodied memory that refuses assimilation into the greys of the urban landscape. Kente, historically associated with status, ceremony, and communication of values, operates here as a mobile signifier of cultural continuity, carried across geographic and temporal boundaries. The costume thus renders Nana Adinkra immediately legible as a bearer of meaning without requiring verbal exposition.

Importantly, Nana Adinkra does not resolve the film's central questions. His final gesture, a quiet nod exchanged at Sankofa Square, offers acknowledgment rather than closure. The final word of the film, more of a grapple, is authored as if it were something Nana Adinkra himself would say. This functions as the film's ethical and philosophical hinge rather than a point of narrative closure. Through this, the renaming of Sankofa Square is framed not as a completed act of redress but as the beginning of an ongoing responsibility. The epilogue holds pride and vulnerability in tension, presenting cultural visibility as both honour and exposure, and rejecting static notions of tradition in favour of adaptability as a condition of survival. By invoking migration through the metaphor of a child crossing oceans, the epilogue situates Sankofa and the filmmaker within diasporic uncertainty, raising questions about intergenerational recognition and continuity.

Ultimately, Sankofa is articulated not as a fixed symbol but as a demanding practice, one that requires listening, action, and sustained engagement with the past in order to move forward ethically. Nana Adinkra stands not as an authority who defines Sankofa, but as a witness to its transformation, affirming that cultural memory survives not through preservation alone, but through adaptation.

Interviews

Interviews in this project function as contextual anchors that situate the film's inquiry within broader cultural, historical, and ethical frameworks. As a Ghanaian newly arrived in Toronto, my encounter with Sankofa Square felt at once grounding and surreal. However, I quickly came to recognize that my personal connection to Sankofa represents only one perspective within a much wider set of histories and lived experiences. The film therefore, expands beyond my individual viewpoint by placing my essayistic narration in dialogue with voices whose positionalities intersect with, but also exceed, my own.

This approach acknowledges that the experience of a newly arrived African migrant is not identical to that of Black Canadians whose histories are shaped by slavery, settlement, and structural anti-Black racism within Canada, nor to that of Indigenous peoples whose relationship to land predates the colonial city itself. Each interviewee is thus positioned as a voice in conversation with the film, contributing insight.

The interview with Nana Kwaku Dua, the Asante Amamerehene (Chief of Culture) of Toronto, provides cultural and philosophical grounding in Akan traditions and Adinkra symbolism.

Speaking from within the Ghanaian diaspora, Nana Kwaku Dua articulates Sankofa not as a static emblem but as a living ethical practice concerned with responsibility, correction, and continuity. His contribution bridges geographic distance between Ghana and Toronto while reinforcing Sankofa as a philosophy that adapts across space without losing its moral core.

Professor Melanie Newton, a historian specializing in Caribbean and Atlantic World histories and a co-chair of the Recognition Review Community Advisory Committee, offers critical historical grounding for understanding the politics of renaming Sankofa Square. Her reflections situate the renaming within longer histories of enslavement, colonial violence, and racialized governance. Importantly, her presence in the film operates on two levels: as a scholar engaged in the renaming process and as a Black Canadian whose insights illuminate why symbolic interventions in public space remain politically charged and necessary. Her contribution frames renaming not as a symbolic endpoint but as an entry point into deeper structural reckoning.

Elder Catherine Tàmmaro, a seated Spotted Turtle Clan FaithKeeper and co-chair of the Recognition Review Community Advisory Committee, introduces an Indigenous perspective that fundamentally reframes the film's inquiry. Rather than approaching Sankofa Square as an isolated gesture of inclusion, her reflections foreground the question of land and ongoing settler colonialism. Her presence in the film reminds the viewer that acts of remembrance and renaming unfold on Indigenous land with its own histories of erasure, resilience, and continuity. By engaging with Sankofa from this positionality, Elder Tàmmaro complicates the symbol's diasporic circulation, situating it within a broader ethical landscape of belonging, responsibility, and coexistence.

Collectively, the interviews do not resolve the film's central questions but deepen them. Their voices operate as points of orientation that expand the film's conceptual terrain while preserving its essayistic openness.

Visual Strategy

The visual strategy of this film is designed to function not merely as illustration, but as a parallel mode of thinking. Image, duration, framing, and texture operate alongside narration to produce meaning. The film's visual language is intentionally restrained, privileging stillness, spatial awareness, and contrast in order to foreground affective experience and inquiry.

The exterior spaces of York University serve as the film's initial emotional landscape. Shot during the winter academic break, the campus appears emptied of social activity, revealing its architecture as dominant and impersonal. Wide frames and static compositions emphasize scale and distance, situating the human figure as small within vast concrete environments. This visual choice aligns with scholarship on cinematic space, which argues that architecture and landscape can function as expressive agents of mood, memory, and power rather than neutral backdrops (Bruno 2002). The prolonged duration of this scene allows the cold and silence to settle, visually articulating the protagonist's sense of dislocation and suspended belonging.

Winter stillness is central to this strategy. Overcast skies produce diffuse, low-contrast lighting that flattens the image, reinforcing emotional numbness and temporal suspension. The camera rarely moves in these early sequences; when it does, movement is slow and deliberate. This formal restraint mirrors the internal state expressed through narration, where uncertainty and

reflection replace narrative urgency. In this way, the film adopts what Laura Rascaroli describes as an essayistic visual mode, one that privileges contemplation over action and invites the viewer into a shared process of thought (Rascaroli 2017).

In contrast, the trip to downtown Toronto and the Ghanaian memory sequences are marked by a distinct visual shift. These scenes employ more camera movement, a warmer color palette, increased saturation, and a heightened attention to texture, fabric, and symbolic structure. These sequences are not presented as flashbacks in a conventional sense, but as sensory returns, fragments of home that interrupt linear time.

Across these visual strategies, contrast operates as a guiding principle: stillness against movement, cold against warmth. Together, the visual language allows the image to think alongside the narration and invites the viewer into a reflective encounter with place and memory.

Narration and Sound

Narration and sound function as the film's primary connective tissue, binding disparate spaces, temporalities, and visual registers into a cohesive, essayistic structure. Rather than serving an explanatory function, sound operates as a reflective and affective layer that guides the viewer through the film's inquiry.

The film employs a continuous first-person voiceover, positioning narration as an active mode of thinking rather than a descriptive supplement to the image. This strategy aligns with the essay film tradition, in which the voice does not assert authority but instead expresses uncertainty,

questioning, and self-reflexivity (Rascaroli 2017). The voiceover is deliberately intimate and restrained, delivered in a measured cadence that mirrors the film's visual stillness. By sustaining a consistent narrational presence, the film foregrounds subjectivity as a method, making the narrator's positionality explicit and central to the work's conceptual framework.

The continuous voiceover also enables fluid movement between Toronto and Ghana memory sequences. Instead of marking transitions through titles or expository cues, the narration carries thought across spaces and temporalities. In this way, the voice functions simultaneously as guide and inquiry, holding together moments that might otherwise appear fragmented.

The narration is intentionally poetic and fragmented. This choice reflects the nature of memory itself, which emerges in partial, associative, and often unresolved forms. Fragments of thought, observation, and reflection are allowed to coexist without being fully explained, creating space for ambiguity and interpretation. Through this approach, narration becomes less about delivering information and more about evoking a lived, reflective process, one that mirrors the film's exploration of displacement, remembrance, and return.

Silence and ambient sound are treated as equally significant narrative elements. Extended passages rely on environmental audio, footsteps on concrete/snow, wind moving through open spaces, and the dense sonic texture of downtown Toronto. These sounds anchor the film in specific locations while also emphasizing absence, isolation, and scale. Silence, in particular, is used strategically to create moments of pause and reflection, allowing images to resonate without verbal mediation.

Music in the film functions as a textural undercurrent, operating in a complementary register that supports the film's reflective tone and essayistic structure. It is used sparingly, allowing voiceover, ambient sound, and silence to carry a significant portion of the film's sonic register.

The musical progression mirrors the film's movement through space and inquiry. In the opening sequences, the score remains minimal and slow, aligning with the stillness, isolation, and suspended temporality experienced by the narrator. As the film transitions toward downtown Toronto, the music subtly shifts in texture and rhythm. In this way, music contributes to a felt sense of geographical and emotional transition rather than functioning as a narrative cue.

A more pronounced musical shift occurs during the transition from Toronto to Accra. Here, the genre, instrumentation, and rhythmic structure change entirely, drawing from musical traditions specific to Ghana. This shift situates memory and place sonically, reinforcing the movement between geographies.

Music primarily accompanies the voiceover and observational sequences, reinforcing the film's contemplative pace and interiority. During interview sections, however, the score recedes and disappears altogether, allowing the film to breathe and foreground the voices of the participants without interference. This withdrawal emphasizes listening as both an aesthetic and ethical choice.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND SCENE PROGRESSION

The film's narrative structure is intentionally non-linear yet carefully sequenced, drawing from the essay film tradition in which meaning emerges through association, accumulation, and reflection rather than causal progression (Rascaroli 2017). The film unfolds across three interconnected phases: arrival and alienation, encounter and recognition, and reflection and transformation. This act-like progression provides coherence without imposing closure, allowing the film to think through place, memory, and migration rather than resolve them.

The opening movement situates the narrator as the protagonist, newly arrived. The film begins with a memory sequence that sets the contrast for what's to come. It then continues from the narrator's apartment window, overlooking the Toronto skyline on a winter morning. This distant exterior view establishes the city as something observed before it is entered. It is followed by solitary interior moments within the apartment, emphasizing isolation and suspension. These interior shots reinforce the condition of being physically present in the city while remaining emotionally unanchored.

Only after this interior grounding does the film move outward into the exterior spaces of York University's campus during vacation. This phase is marked by wide frames, static compositions, and prolonged duration, emphasizing spatial distance and emotional suspension. The winter landscape, empty plazas and brutalist concrete function as an emotional geography that externalizes the narrator's sense of disorientation. The continuous voiceover during this section does not explain the images but runs parallel to them, offering interior reflection in contrast to the exterior indifference of the environment.

Nana Adinkra's first appearance occurs within this phase, subtly destabilizing the film's realist register and introducing its symbolic dimension. His presence signals that memory and ancestry are already at work within the present, even before they are consciously recognized by the narrator.

The second movement begins with the narrator's transition into downtown Toronto and culminates in the encounter with Sankofa Square. Visually, this shift is articulated through increased motion, denser soundscapes, and a brighter, more saturated urban palette. Streetcars, crowds, and reflective surfaces introduce sensory density, marking a departure from the controlled stillness of the campus.

The encounter with Sankofa Square functions as a moment of recognition rather than revelation. The Ghanaian word "Sankofa" appears not as new information but as the return of something already known, now displaced and recontextualized. This recognition is rendered through pauses, dissolves, and the narrator's slowed movement around the square, allowing the symbolic weight of the name to register before it is interrogated.

The subsequent movement deepens the inquiry by interweaving memory sequences from Ghana with imagery from Toronto. These transitions are marked stylistically: warmer colour palettes and textural close-ups distinguish the Ghanaian sequences from Toronto. Memory is thus positioned not as flashback but as a parallel temporal register that coexists with the present.

Through this interweaving, transformation is articulated as a gradual reorientation rather than a decisive change. When the film returns to Toronto, the shift is subtle and internal, registered through altered perception rather than explicit declaration.

Interviews with Nana Kwaku Dua, Professor Melanie Newton, and Elder Tàmmaro are integrated strategically to support the narrator's inquiry. Their appearances are measured and purposeful, functioning as contextual anchors rather than narrative drivers. In most instances, their voices are heard over images of space rather than their own bodies, emphasizing that their contributions situate the discourse without dominating it.

Graphical illustrations of the Adinkra collective are introduced to immerse the viewer in Adinkra cosmology and to situate Sankofa within a broader symbolic system. During this phase, the absence of the Sankofa bird becomes perceptible, particularly during the contributions of Professor Newton and Elder Tàmmaro, not through verbal critique but through visual scrutiny. Lingering shots of signage, logos, and architectural markers invite the viewer to notice what is missing rather than having the absence announced outright.

The final phase returns to reflection and transformation. The narrator and Nana Adinkra re-enter the frame, now informed by what has been encountered, questioned, and heard. Sankofa Square is not presented as a completed gesture, but as an ongoing practice that demands listening, attentiveness, and responsibility. The film thus concludes in alignment with its essayistic logic, open-ended, reflective, and oriented toward continued engagement rather than closure.

How Was It Done?

This film emerged through a series of lived experiences that unfolded both before and after the formal conception of the project. Rather than following a linear development process, the film evolved through what might be described as accumulative encounters, personal, spatial, and cultural moments that later informed specific scenes, aesthetic decisions, and structural choices.

Shortly after arriving in Toronto, I entered my apartment on the York University campus. As I wheeled in my luggage, I instinctively moved toward the window. From there, the city's skyline stood in view, distant, expansive, and quietly imposing. I took a photograph in that moment, not yet knowing that this image would later form part of the conceptual and visual opening of the film. In retrospect, this gesture marked an early impulse to frame my relationship with the city through distance and observation.

As the initial excitement of relocation subsided, feelings of homesickness and emotional dislocation began to surface. These feelings manifested most vividly through recurring dreams involving loved ones and familiar places in Ghana, which I usually visit. In several of these dreams, my parents spoke to me directly. These nocturnal experiences influenced the film's treatment of memory, not as a flashback device, but as a parallel register that coexists with the present. The Ghanaian memory sequences in the film draw from this sense of porous temporality, where emotional truth outweighs strict realism.

My sense of isolation intensified during the winter break, when the campus emptied and routine dissolved. I took long walks across areas of the university I had not previously inhabited.

Although many of these spaces were architecturally striking, they were also marked by absence. The scale of the environment, combined with winter stillness, heightened a feeling of disorientation. At times, despite being physically alone, I felt a presence, non-threatening, observational, and ambiguous. These moments informed the introduction of Nana Adinkra as a symbolic figure who inhabits the film's liminal spaces between the visible and the felt. During these walks, I often took photographs, some of which later informed framing and composition choices.

A pivotal moment occurred when I reconnected with an old friend from Ghana who had been living in Toronto for several years. Over coffee, we spoke about migration, nostalgia, and the negotiations of belonging. During this conversation, he revealed that Yonge–Dundas Square had been renamed Sankofa Square. Despite my awareness of Toronto's multicultural character and its sizable African and Caribbean communities, encountering an Akan philosophical concept embedded in one of the city's most visible public spaces was both grounding and unsettling. This revelation marked the conceptual turning point of the project.

Shortly thereafter, a course assignment led me to the 401 Richmond Building, a creative arts hub in downtown Toronto. While moving through its galleries, I encountered an installation by Ghanaian artist Kwesi Adabie featuring Adinkra symbols. The work elicited a profound sense of recognition. In that moment, the gallery became a memoryscape, an intimate portal where Ghanaian epistemologies surfaced within a Canadian context. This encounter echoed my experience at Sankofa Square and reinforced the film's central inquiry into how cultural symbols migrate, transform, and re-anchor meaning across geographies.

When I decided to pivot from my initial thesis concept to this project, it became clear that many of these experiences would directly shape the film's creative direction. During development, certain events fell away as the scope of the project narrowed to what was conceptually and logistically feasible. Given the time-bound nature of the MFA program, the film was necessarily produced during the winter term of 2025–2026, which introduced both aesthetic constraints and opportunities. The winter environment ultimately became an expressive element of the film rather than an obstacle to be overcome.

Production was carried out with a minimal crew consisting of myself as producer-director, a cinematographer, and a production assistant. Weather conditions posed ongoing challenges, affecting shoot schedules and aesthetic decisions. While a primary cinema camera was used for most of the production, moments of solo exploration, particularly downtown and around Sankofa Square, were captured using a mobile device capable of recording in 4K. These images were later integrated into the film.

The Ghanaian sequences presented a different set of challenges. Although detailed shot lists and scene descriptions were prepared, directing remotely required additional reshoots to align the footage with the film's aesthetic and emotional demands. Convincing my parents to appear on camera was a significant ethical and emotional decision. Their participation involved reenacting familiar domestic routines, such as a typical Sunday morning before church or attending a traditional ceremony. These scenes were approached not as dramatizations but as gestures toward visual truth, allowing lived experience, memory, and performance to overlap.

Initially, archival footage, particularly material from the 1992 Yonge Street uprising, was intended to be integrated into the film. During post-production, however, it became evident that these images did not align organically with the film's visual language. Rather than forcing their inclusion, the decision was made to exclude them.

Conversely, I was able to film the unveiling ceremony of Sankofa Square, an event that does not belong to the film's present narrative moment. This material was therefore treated as archival footage and visually marked with a 4:3 frame to clearly signal a temporal shift. Importantly, it functions as historical reference rather than as memory, allowing viewers to distinguish between lived recollection and documented past.

CONCLUSION: BECOMING SANKOFA

This project set out to explore what it means for an African philosophy of remembrance to be situated within one of Canada's most visible and contested public spaces. Through a first-person essay film grounded in diasporic experience, the work unfolds as a process of meaning-making, bringing into dialogue the lived experience of a recently arrived Ghanaian migrant, the philosophy of Sankofa, and its translation into the urban landscape of Toronto.

The film's final movement operates as both a narrative culmination and a methodological statement. Rather than offering resolution, it sustains the narrator's internal tensions, between honour and vulnerability, tradition and adaptation, visibility and uncertainty. The declaration that the square "stands" while the story remains "unfolding" reinforces the film's refusal of closure. Renaming is not presented as a completed act of repair, but as the beginning of an ongoing ethical responsibility.

Central to this reflection is the recognition that cultural visibility carries inherent risk. To be named in public space is to be opened to interpretation, simplification, and contestation. Within the context of Sankofa Square, this tension becomes particularly pronounced. While the renaming signifies an important gesture of recognition for Black and diasporic communities, the absence, what the film frames as the symbolic decapitation of the Sankofa bird, raises critical concerns. Sankofa is not merely a word but an embodied philosophy rooted in visual and cultural form; its abstraction into name alone risks detaching it from the epistemological framework that gives it meaning.

This unresolved tension leads to a central question: can a reimagined or absent symbol adequately carry the weight of its original philosophy? The film does not attempt to resolve this question, but instead reframes absence itself as a site of inquiry, inviting sustained attention rather than premature closure.

The project further reveals that renaming operates simultaneously as an act of historical redress and a site of limitation. As articulated by Melanie J. Newton, names are never neutral; they encode histories of power, violence, and ideology. The removal of Henry Dundas signals an attempt to confront colonial legacies and reorient public memory. Yet, as the film demonstrates, particularly through the reflections of Nana Kwaku Dua, symbolic gestures risk becoming reductive when severed from their cultural, philosophical, and visual grounding.

Ultimately, Sankofa becomes both the subject and the method of the film. The work performs Sankofa by moving between past and present, Ghana and Toronto, and personal reflection and public history. By ending without resolution, the project aligns with the logic of the essay film, leaving space for continued dialogue and interpretation. It invites audiences to sit with the demands of Sankofa and to consider how public acts of remembrance might shape more responsible futures.

Through this work, the film contributes to ongoing conversations on symbolic politics and diasporic consciousness, while remaining grounded in emotional truth, critical reflection, and formal experimentation.

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