



Essay Review

DREAMWORKING AMISTAD:
REPRESENTING SLAVERY, REVOLT,
AND FREEDOM IN AMERICA, 1839 AND 1997

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Amistad. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Produced by Steven Spielberg, Debbie Allen, and Colin Wilson. Screenplay by David Franzoni. With Morgan Freeman, Anthony Hopkins, Djimon Hounsou, and Matthew McConaughey. DreamWorks Pictures. 1997.

“Whoever tells the best story wins.”

—Anthony Hopkins as John Quincy Adams

Once again *Amistad* is plowing into the American consciousness. Much as it did over one hundred fifty years ago, the vessel and the story it carried are forcing us to grapple with haunting, violent, otherworldly images of a history that we keep at a distance but that fascinates us nonetheless. Over the last year or two, several historical accounts have been re-published and novelizations of the episode issued. At least three television documentaries have aired, and magazine articles have abounded. A lyric opera has been staged. And, of course, at the center of all of this cultural energy, Steven Spielberg’s DreamWorks Pictures has released *Amistad*, a major motion picture that is garnering praise both as a movie and as an act of history making. Cinque—or at any rate the actor portraying Cinque—has even appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*: from newsstands and supermarket checkout counters, he has fixed us in his gaze, demanding that we ask ourselves “Should Americans Apologize?”¹

Powerful forces are at work here. The DreamWorks production has certainly caused a surge of public interest. Multimillion-dollar media ventures will do that. But I doubt that publicity alone can fully account for the extraordinary sense of national significance, of historical moment, that *Amistad* has acquired. Nor, of course, does it explain what put the project into production in the first place. No, something more than a publicity campaign is under way. It is the story itself that

¹*Newsweek*, 8 December 1997. The actor is Djimon Hounsou.

is resonating. We are using this historical episode to probe deep and painful wounds in search of a healing that must ultimately be mythic if it cannot be strictly historical.



On 27 August 1839, in the custody of a U.S. surveying brig, a battered coastal schooner, *La Amistad*, limped into New London carrying an even more battered band of blacks, Africans, and a few white men, Spaniards who claimed to be the blacks' owners and survivors of a bloody shipboard slave revolt. Before the week was out, a dramatized version of the event was staged in New York City, even though authorities had yet to talk to the Africans, then held in the New Haven jail. Nobody understood their language, nor even knew what language they spoke. New Yorkers' anxieties and appetite for spectacle had already been whetted, however, by several weeks' worth of reports that a "supposed pirate, Slaver or Flying Dutchman" was prowling local waters, manned by a savage-looking crew of black men.² Catching the pitch of public excitement, the managers of the Bowery Theater slapped together *The Black Schooner*. Part melodrama, part minstrel show, the Bowery Theater's version of the *Amistad* revolt freely embellished the Spaniards' story: the second act introduced a fictional wife for the *Amistad's* captain, made her "the Captive of Zemba Cingues," then went on (the playbill luridly promised) to depict "Her terrible doom—The timely rescue—Cudjo forced to surrender his intended victim." *The Black Schooner* played to packed houses.³

It was just the beginning. Over the coming months, as details of the revolt emerged, an antebellum media circus crowded around the Africans. Images and narratives of the revolt flooded into Americans' homes in the form of pamphlets, penny press reportage, engravings, and lithographs. Casts were taken of the Africans' heads for phrenological analysis and then again for a touring wax-museum exhibit. A

²*New York Morning Herald*, 24 August 1839.

³Playbill, 4 September 1839, Bowery Theater (New York), Playbill Collection, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge Massachusetts. Electronic copies of this and other documents cited in this review are available on-line as part of *Exploring "Amistad": Race and the Boundaries of Freedom in Antebellum Maritime America*, <http://amistad.mysticseaport.org>.

135-foot mural of the revolt, painted and sent forth, unfurled the story of the captain's murder before audiences up and down the northeastern seaboard. Back in New Haven jail-keepers charged admission to the throngs of curious visitors peering into cell windows, eager for glimpses of the exotic captives.⁴

This avid, predatory attention soon focused in on the man Americans called "Cinque." A Mende, whose actual name is more accurately rendered as Sengbe Pieh, he had led the revolt aboard the *Amistad* and captained the schooner into American waters. He claimed to have been a peaceful rice farmer before being captured and sold into slavery; his enemies hinted darkly that he had been a slaver himself. In any event, he clearly had the heart of a warrior and a charisma that struck everyone who saw him. In the arena of American public opinion, he took on a complex, multifaceted persona. To slaveowners he became a bloodthirsty bogeyman. To Euroamericans persuading themselves that blacks were racially inferior, he became a bestial jungle creature. To romantics he seemed a noble savage. Abolitionists held him up as an icon of freedom. And for African-American abolitionists in particular, he became a symbol of black manhood and African heritage.

Meanwhile, the drama of the *Amistad* unfolded in other American arenas. A team of New York abolitionists led by Lewis Tappan formed the Amistad Committee to defend the Africans' freedom in the courts. With the assistance of interpreters, the committee pieced together the Africans' version of the story and vigorously publicized it. They had been captured in Africa and suffered a brutal middle passage to Cuba—brutal and, it quickly became clear, illegal, since Spain (which held Cuba as a colony) had entered into treaties outlawing the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, other reform-minded Yankees, led by Yale Professor Benjamin Griswold, established an impromptu schoolhouse and missionary station in the New Haven jail to teach the Africans English, reading, and the Gospel. Thereby did they become the subjects of an ambitious social experiment intended to

⁴Eleanor Alexander surveys the antebellum media coverage in "A Portrait of Cinque," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 49 (Winter 1984): 30–51. See also Bernard F. Reilly, Jr.'s "The Art of the Antislavery Movement," in *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston*, ed. Donald M. Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, published for the Boston Athenaeum, 1993), esp. pp. 57–59. Maggie Montesinos Sale offers a rigorous cultural analysis of American representations of the *Amistad* revolt in *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

demonstrate to skeptical white Americans that such people were capable of being “civilized” without being enslaved.⁵

The Africans and their revolt thus became the stuff of both low and high culture—history that played itself out not only in courtrooms, cabinet meetings, and diplomatic negotiations but also in the broader, more fluid realm of American popular understanding. Americans were terrified, or inspired, or enraged, or titillated. But they were never less than moved. The “Black Schooner,” it turned out, carried an intangible but profoundly unsettling cargo: images, or the raw material of images, of the slave trade in all its wrenching horror, of Africa and Africans, of bloody slave revolt and black freedom—carried them and off-loaded them in a nation where the concepts underlying the images were already highly charged.



The *Amistad* incident was a remarkable event and a complex media sensation then, in 1839, and it remains so today. For the images and underlying issues are still potent, still unsettling, still, in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, highly charged. We are violently thrust into a violent world: the film opens in the midst of a storm at sea, with the Africans' revolt, and then, as Americans try to unlock Cinque's story, the story line works itself toward an extended flashback of the Africans' middle passage. In portraying both the revolt that liberates the Africans and then the slave trade that first ensnared them, *Amistad* unleashes haunting, painful pictures. Over the first part of the movie, at least, Spielberg refuses to let us get comfortable with the history.

Similarly unsettling is the film's faithfulness to the profound cultural differences that divide the Africans from their American captors and benefactors. The black men speak Mende, which the film usually translates in subtitles but occasionally does not. The device is mimetic: we have to work to understand the Africans, and sometimes understanding breaks down. Indeed, the heart of the movie—bound on one side by the revolt and the other by Adams's peroration before the Supreme Court—is composed essentially of a string of encounters

⁵The best source on the abolitionists' legal campaign, and indeed on the *Amistad* revolt itself, is Howard Jones's *Mutiny on the "Amistad": The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; republished 1997). For a report from Griswold on the Africans' progress, see John W. Barber, *A History of the "Amistad" Captives . . .* (New Haven, 1840).

with the Africans and, more particularly, with Cinque. Even when imprisoned, Cinque holds centerstage, visited by Americans, each in his turn, who struggle to come to terms with him: first Theodore Joadson, then Roger Baldwin, then John Quincy Adams, and always, implicitly, the movie's viewer.

Spielberg's choice to stress the violence saturating the history as well as the cultural differences dividing its central players may have as much to do with racial politics and multicultural identity in America circa 1997 as in 1839. Still, on these historic issues, the film strikes me as essentially accurate and, indeed, fundamental to the history. DreamWorks catches something ineffable about antebellum America and the way the *Amistad* revolt collided with it. As Cinque, actor Djimon Hounsou seems distinctly tailored to a generation that is also consuming/creating gangster rap, Michael Jordan, and Nelson Mandela. And yet, withal, he also distinctly embodies both Sengbe Pieh and "Cinque."

Which is not to say that *Amistad* does not take cinematic license. DreamWorks dreams up the figure of the African-American abolitionist Theodore Joadson, badly misrepresents both Lewis Tappan and Roger Baldwin, describes Lomboko as a slave castle (it was really a collection of huts, warehouses, and stockades), puts Van Buren on a train campaigning and even kissing babies, sends Secretary of State John Forsyth up to Connecticut to attend the district court trial, empanels a jury for this first round of legal proceedings (no jury was ever involved), has the president actually remove a judge from the case, and so on. But at least some of these choices, while strictly inaccurate, do capture elements of the actual history or coalesce them. If Joadson is fictional, the African-American community he stands for was very real—and vitally engaged in the *Amistad* case. If Van Buren never campaigned from the back of a train, he was, nonetheless, the first American president to address the public on election issues. And if he did not actually remove a judge in the case, he did try to circumvent the judicial process more subtly for political reasons alone.

Amistad veers more seriously off course, however, as it approaches its conclusion and tries to settle what it has so powerfully unsettled. Particularly as the figure of John Quincy Adams joins Cinque on centerstage, the film becomes increasingly ahistorical. Spielberg has Adams invite Cinque to the ex-president's house, where African and founding father's son exchange wisdom and prepare for the Supreme Court. Before the Court, as *Amistad* reaches its cinematic climax, the ex-president makes a moving, five-minute speech invoking both

Cinque's ancestors and our own—that is, our founding fathers, present as busts lined up behind him—to “give us the courage to do what is right” and face “the last battle of the American Revolution.” The Court responds, the Africans are freed, and in a final rush of heartwarming images (Cinque looking into the rising sun; a British naval vessel bombarding a slave castle and freeing hundreds of Africans; the Civil War), *Amistad* suggests that Cinque and his compatriots have somehow managed to set in motion the destruction of American slavery.

The actual history unfolded quite differently. Adams did meet Cinque, but in jail, not in his house. Adams recorded his impressions in his diary as consisting of “Negro face, fleace and form, but varying in shades of color from ebon black to dingy Brown—one or two of them almost mulatto bright.” Several of the Africans read to the ex-president from the New Testament—“very indifferently,” he thought. Adams did allow that “Cinque and Grabow, the two chief conspirators, have very remarkable countenances.” But there was no meeting of the minds in that encounter.⁶

Adams's performance before the Supreme Court was also quite unlike that portrayed by Anthony Hopkins. His address comprised, principally, a long, bitter attack on Van Buren's handling of the episode and an equally detailed discussion of another case, the *Antelope* decision. In any event, his words had little effect. The Supreme Court's ruling ultimately hinged more on a technicality than an indictment of slavery. Had the Spanish government managed to prove that the Africans had been “lawfully held as slaves under the laws of Spain,” Justice Joseph Story decreed, the U.S. would have been obligated by commercial treaties between the two nations to return the black men to Cuba to face trial as murderers and pirates. As moral victory, the *Amistad* case was muted at best.

It is not difficult to understand why we want the uplifting ending for this story that *Amistad* has created. As a vehicle for dramatizing the larger story of American slavery and freedom, the DreamWorks film is undeniably compelling. With its story of revolt, it fulfills our need, still deeply felt, to witness and vicariously participate in the overthrow of slavery. With its subsequent trial, we watch ourselves ceremoniously, legally affirming and upholding that right to revolt. Freedom comes from the Africans themselves—appropriate, given the politics of slavery and race in the late twentieth century—but re-

⁶John Quincy Adams, Diary, 17 November 1840, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

ceives the imprimatur of the nation and a ghostly nod of approbation from the founding fathers. To craft that image, that sense of what the *Amistad* revolt meant, however, the movie regrettably has to reach beyond the history it engages; this history is simply not as workable as our dreams want it to be. *Amistad* engraves powerful images on the national psyche. In its unblinking effort to imagine the experience of the middle passage, the film oversteps the usual boundaries of popular culture to perform a painful national service. If this is the film's lasting legacy, it is a profoundly important accomplishment and a fine tribute to the spirits of both Sengbe Pieh and John Quincy Adams. But it ultimately compels the people who made it to cross from historical waters into mythic ones.

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