

It's Time to Face the Whole Truth About the Atlantic Slave Trade

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“Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”

Aldous Huxley, *Proper Studies*, 1927

On June 21, 2007, the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* began an 18-month “Atlantic Freedom Tour” to retrace the route of the Atlantic slave trade. Owned and operated by AMISTAD America, Inc., the recreated *Amistad* will visit ports in Canada, England, the United States and West Africa to commemorate the story of the 1839 *Amistad* revolt and to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the international slave trade in England (1807) and the U.S. (1808). AMISTAD America is an educational organization committed to:

improved relationships between races and cultures by acknowledging our common experiences and encouraging dialogue that is based upon respect. ... the re-created *Amistad*...serves as a floating classroom, icon and as a monument to the millions of souls that were broken or lost as a result of the insidious Transatlantic Slave Trade. The vessel offers an important message for all Americans about our collective history and future.¹

The AMISTAD America website stresses the need to educate the public about the history of slavery “through common experiences and dialogue.” By “confronting the past” and promoting “reconciliation and social healing” the *Amistad*’s Atlantic Freedom Tour aims to help all people work toward “transforming the future.”

However, confronting the history of the Atlantic slave trade requires more than a sentence acknowledging that the *Amistad* prisoners “had been captured in Africa by Africans who sold them to European slave traders.” Website readers must understand that this terrible traffic in millions of human beings had been, as affirmed by the PBS *Africans in America* series, a joint venture: “During this era, Africans and Europeans stood together as equals, companions in commerce and profit. Kings exchanged respectful letters across color lines and addressed each other as colleagues. Natives of the two continents were tied into a common economy.”²

Incomplete depictions of the Atlantic slave trade are, in fact, quite common. My 2003 study of 49 state U.S. history standards revealed that not one of these guides to classroom content even mentioned the key role of Africans in supplying the Atlantic slave trade.³ In Africa itself, however, the slave trade is remembered quite differently. Nigerians, for example, explicitly teach about their own role in the trade:

Where did the supply of slaves come from? First, the Portuguese themselves kidnapped some Africans. But the bulk of the supply came from the Nigerians. These Nigerian middlemen moved to the interior where they captured other Nigerians who belonged to other communities. The middlemen also purchased many of the slaves from the people in the interior Many Nigerian middlemen began to depend totally on the slave trade and neglected every other business and occupation. The result was that when the trade was abolished [by England in 1807] these Nigerians began to protest. As years went by and the trade collapsed such Nigerians lost their sources of income and became impoverished.⁴

In Ghana, politician and educator Samuel Sulemana Fuseini has acknowledged that his Asante ancestors accumulated their great wealth by abducting, capturing, and kidnapping Africans and selling them as slaves. Likewise, Ghanaian diplomat Kofi Awoonor has written: “I believe there is a great psychic shadow over Africa, and it has much to do with our guilt and denial of our role in the slave trade. We too are blameworthy in what was essentially one of the most heinous crimes in human history.”⁵

In 2000, at an observance attended by delegates from several European countries and the United States, officials from Benin publicized President Mathieu Kerekou’s apology for his country’s role in “selling fellow Africans by the millions to white slave traders.” “We cry for forgiveness and reconciliation,” said Luc Gnacadja, Benin’s minister of environment and housing. Cyrille Oguin, Benin’s ambassador to the United States, acknowledged, “We share in the responsibility for this terrible human tragedy.”⁶

A year later, Senegal’s president Abdoulaye Wade, “himself the descendant of generations of slave-owning [and slave-trading] African kings,” urged Europeans, Americans, and Africans to acknowledge publicly and teach openly about their shared responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade.⁷ Wade’s remarks came months after the release of *Adanggaman*, by Ivory Coast director Roger Gnoan M’bala, “the first African film to look at African involvement in the slave trade with the West.” “It’s up to us,” M’Bala insisted, “to talk about slavery, open the wounds of what we’ve always hidden and stop being puerile when we put responsibility on others In our own oral tradition, slavery is left out purposefully because Africans are ashamed when we confront slavery. Let’s wake up and look at ourselves through our own image.”⁸ “It is simply true,” declared Da Bourdia Leon of Burkina Faso’s Ministry of Culture and Art, “We need this kind of film to show our children this part of our history, that it happened among us. Although I feel sad, I think it is good that this kind of thing is being told today.”⁹

Several television productions of the last decade have acknowledged these facts: *Africans in America* (PBS, 1998), *Wonders of the African World* (PBS, 1999), and *The African Trade* (History Channel International, 2000). The latter begins with the visit by a group of African-Americans to the infamous slave castle and Door of No Return on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. “Appalled by the cruelties of the Europeans,” the narrator relates, “the visitors become curious as to how Africans fell into their hands.” Their African guide admits that “this history is difficult to tell and hard to believe” but pulls no punches about African complicity in kidnapping and selling millions of African people: “All the tribes were involved in the slave trade—no exemptions.” The African-Americans were staggered: “So we really can’t blame the Europeans,” one declares, “We sold our own. It takes two.” Another visitor declares, “That’s right—money and greed.” The program concludes that “white guilt can never be erased”—but cautions that it is also important to remember that “black participation lets no one off the hook.”

The historical record is incontrovertible—as documented in the PBS *Africans in America* series companion book:

The white man did not introduce slavery to Africa And by the fifteenth century, men with dark skin had become quite comfortable with the concept of man as property Long before the arrival of Europeans on West Africa’s coast, the two continents shared a common acceptance of slavery as an unavoidable and necessary—perhaps even desirable—fact of existence. The commerce between the two continents, as tragic as it would become, developed upon familiar territory. Slavery was not a twisted European manipulation, although Europe capitalized on a mutual understanding and greedily expanded the slave trade into what would become a horrific enterprise It was a thunder that had no sound. Tribe stalked tribe, and eventually more than 20 million Africans would be kidnapped in their own homeland.¹⁰

Historians estimate that ten million of these abducted Africans “never even made it to the slave ships. Most died on the march to the sea”—still chained, yoked, and shackled by their African captors—before they ever laid eyes on a white slave trader.¹¹ The survivors were either purchased by European slave dealers or “instantly beheaded” by the African traders “in sight of the [slave ship] captain” if they could not be sold.¹² Of course, the even more horrific and inhuman middle passage—the voyage of a European (and later American) slave ship from Africa to the Western Hemisphere—still lay before those who had survived the forced trek to the coast.

Failure to educate young Americans about the *whole* story of Atlantic slave trade threatens to divide our nation and undermine

our civic unity and belief in the historical legitimacy of our democratic institutions. Education in a democracy cannot promote half-truths about history without undermining the ideal of *e pluribus unum*—one from many—and substituting a divisive emphasis on many from one. The history of the slave trade proves that virtually everyone participated and profited—whites and blacks; Christians, Muslims, and Jews; Europeans, Africans, Americans, and Latin Americans. Once we recognize the shared historical responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade, we can turn our attention to “transforming the future” by eradicating its corrosive legacy.

No one is well served when “old myths of African barbarism” are replaced by “new myths of African innocence.”¹³ There are some encouraging signs. A recent middle school textbook, for example, tries to explain—

how Africans could have sold other Africans into slavery. The answer is that [African] slaveholders didn't think of themselves or their slaves as 'Africans.' Instead they thought of themselves as Edo or Songhai or members of another group. They thought of their slaves as foreigners or inferiors. In the same way, the Spanish, the French, and the English could massacre each other in bloody wars because they thought of themselves as Spanish, French, or English, rather than Europeans.¹⁴

Similar candor can also be found in a current college textbook co-authored by three African-American historians. Europeans and eventually Americans—

did not capture and enslave people themselves. Instead they purchased slaves from African traders [who]...restricted the Europeans to a few points on the coast, while the kingdoms raided the interior to supply the Europeans with slaves. ... The European traders provided the aggressors with firearms, but they did not instigate the wars. Instead they used the wars to enrich themselves. Sometimes African armies enslaved the inhabitants of conquered towns and villages. At other times, raiding parties captured isolated families or kidnapped individuals. As warfare spread to the interior, captives had to march for hundreds of miles to the coast where European traders awaited them. The raiders tied the captives together with rope or secured them with wooden yokes around their necks. It was a shocking experience, and many captives died from hunger, exhaustion, and exposure during the journey. Others killed themselves rather than submit to their fate, and the captors killed those who resisted.¹⁵

A concise version of this textbook prepared for a new required course on African-American history in Philadelphia high schools has retained all of this material—giving these students the opportunity to learn the full story of the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁶

It is also encouraging that the AMISTAD America Sankofa College Program courses to be offered during the *Amistad's* visits to Sierra Leone and Senegal include study of the “West African slave trade” and “African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade”—presumably to be discussed candidly and accurately. Only by facing the whole truth can we free ourselves from the burden of our shared, tragic past and reinvigorate our commitment to what AMISTAD America rightly calls, “our collective history and future.” As Martin Luther King, Jr. dared to dream at the 1963 March on Washington, we can then join hands and affirm together in the words of the African-American spiritual: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

NOTES

1 AMISTAD America website www.amistadamerica.org.

2 Charles Johnson, Patricia Smith, and the WGBH Series Research Team, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 7.

- 3 Sheldon M. Stern, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003). This report is available for downloading at www.edexcellence.net
- 4 Michael Omolewa, *CertificateHistory of Nigeria* (Lagos, Nigeria: Longman Group, 1991), 96–103, cited in Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward, *History Lessons: How Textbooks around the World Portray U.S. History* (New York: New Press, 2004), 79-83.
- 5 Johnson, et al., *Africans in America*, 2–3; Howard W. French, “On Slavery, Africans Say the Guilt Is Theirs, Too,” *New York Times*, 27 December 1994, A4.
- 6 “Benin Apologizes for Role in Slave Trade,” *Boston Globe*, 19 April 2000; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 29 June 2003.
- 7 Ellen Knickmeyer, “Senegal’s President Rejects Idea of Slavery Reparations,” *Boston Globe*, 30 August 2001, A27.
- 8 Brahim Ouadraego, “African Film Depicts Blacks Enslaving Blacks,” *Boston Globe*, 4 March 2001. The film won a grand prize at the film festival in Amiens, France, in November 2000.
- 9 Loren King, “A Disturbing Look at Betrayals of Slaves,” *Boston Globe*, 21 September 2001, C7.
- 10 Johnson, et al., *Africans in America*, 2, 5, 7; Seymour Drescher and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *A Historical Guide to World Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 370-375.
- 11 Johnson, et al., *Africans in America*, 7, 69–70.
- 12 Ibid.; Drescher and Engerman, *Historical Guide toWorld Slavery*, 34.
- 13 Jonathan Burack, “How Textbooks Obscure and Distort the History of Slavery,” *Textbook Letter* (November-December, 1992), 3. For a discussion of the Atlantic slave trade in American education and civic consciousness, see Sheldon M. Stern, “The Atlantic Slave Trade—the Full Story,” *Academic Questions*, Summer 2005, 16-34.
- 14 Mary Beth Klee, John Cribb & John Holdren, eds., *The Human Odyssey, The Modern World, 1400-1914*, vol. 2 (McLean, Virginia: K-12 Inc., 2005), 269-270.

15 Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey*, 2nd ed. , vol. one (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2005), 27, 30.

16 Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *African-American History* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 37–49.