

OUR VOICES

"AMISTAD: Should America Apologize for Slavery?"

Dr. Manning Marable

In recent weeks since the release of Steven Spielberg's new film, "Amistad," a major public debate has emerged about the continuing burden of slavery within the radicalized culture of America. Much as the televised depiction of slavery in Alex Haley's "Roots" two decades ago captures the public imagination, "Amistad" has generated new awareness and interest in America's "peculiar institution" of black bondage.

Spielberg's film focuses on actual historical event, the 1839 slave uprising aboard the Spanish ship, Amistad. Led by Cinque, the Africans seized control of the ship, which was ultimately captured by the US navy off Long Island. Abolitionists rallied to defend the legal rights of the imprisoned Africans. After a series of court hearings, the former slaves were freed by the US supreme court, and were permitted to return to Africa. In a general way, Spielberg keeps to these central facts, but tells the story in a manner that places white men, not African people, at the heart of the narrative. What is truly fascinating to Spielberg is the complex, ambivalent figure of former president John Quincy Adams, who agreed to defend the Amistad rebels before the Supreme Court.

Some critics of "Amistad" have attacked the series of historical distortions and fictional characters utilized by Spielberg, such as the black abolitionist character depicted by Morgan Freeman, or the scene where Adams entertains Cinque in his home, which never happened. To me, such concerns are not significant. Artists and filmmakers should have some literary license to dramatize real events. The larger questions should be concerned about should focus on the racial politics behind the contemporary discussion about slavery. As Newsweek

Magazine bluntly put it, "Should America Apologize for Slavery?... Long described as America's original sin, slavery is also our shadow: dogging our steps forward, projecting in black against the sunlight of democratic ideals."

There are so many problems and such deep-racism in the Newsweek sentence above, that it is difficult to know where to begin. Maybe the first point to be made is that virtually all people and civilizations have experienced enslavement. Thorough most history, slaves were not indentified by the color of their skin. Most Greeks who lived in ancient Athens, people we today would define

as white were slaves, Jew of course, experience long periods of bondage. The great majority of Europeans who settled this nation before 1800 arrived as indentured servants, forced to work for certain terms of year. These historical facts are important, because the point must be made that slavery was about economic exploitation, not just about color.

What was different about slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean was the construction of white supremacy—an ideology of privilege and power that rationalized black bondage. Legal slavery was outlawed more than 130 years ago, but the ideology of white racism is still powerful today.

The question, "Should America Apologize?", raises additional problems. Any apology involves two elements: the recognition that one person or party has offended a second party, and that there is an attempt to express regret and make amends. An apology without some compensation to the aggrieved party is an empty gesture, word uttered without meaning.

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During slavery, the slave masters classified people as quadroons and octoroons (persons with a quarter and an eighth of African blood in them, respectively). Though these acknowledgments may seem to hint to a greater level of consideration for people's ethnic background than that which we have today, this was not the case. These labels were created for the sole purpose of identifying who was more tainted with black blood than whom. It was this kind of thinking which was responsible for the notion that says, "If you're not white you're black."

However, in these modern times where an open mind is the key to successful interaction with one's fellowman, we cannot allow these archaic and insensitive views of thousands of racist planters and their families to dictate the way in which we look at ourselves. How often have we heard someone say, "My dog is a Labrador crossed with Doberman and ridge back" or any of the other various combinations of cross breeding among dogs

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John R. Douglas: Our Black History Month Hero

by Alysia R. Wilson

Last semester, I wrote an article entitled "Living On the Dock of the Bay." Originally, the article was written in sympathy for a man on this campus that I thought was homeless; however after speaking with him, I found out that he was not. My basis for thinking that he was homeless was the mere fact that I saw him digging through that trash cans on this campus everyday, in search of recyclable items. Rather than "dis" him, I decided to make myself a part of his life by bagging my own trash (i.e. cans and plastic bottles) and giving it to him. This was a good deed, but I wanted to know more about this man... his life, his struggles. I interviewed him.

John R. Douglas, a native of Jackson, Tennessee, is the man that I met. He is a man with the same hopes, dreams, and aspirations that we all have in life; but to many people, he is just a bum, a hoodlum, a thug. He faces the same struggles that we all, as African-Americans, face. However, those of us who choose to ignore him because we think

he is dirty or dangerous because of his appearance and his "profession" are missing out on a hero.

Mr. Douglas came to Fayetteville in 1958 as the Assistant Manager of Holiday Inn. With the help of a few young men, who had recently graduated from college, Mr. Douglas directed the opening of six Holiday Inn franchises along the east coast. After doing so, he let the men that he had trained take over the hotel management business, and he moved to Monterey, California. In sunny California, he worked as a plumber at Ft. Ord, until he was transferred to Ft. Bragg, where he would work for sixteen years. It was here that he decided to start recycling. This decision stemmed from his observations of the retired soldiers at Ft. Bragg and Ft. Ord who did so to pay for the expensive vehicles they had purchased.

Today, Mr. Douglas is still recycling and making a sufficient amount of money doing so. He is seventy-one years old with fifteen children; for sons, three of which are dead, and eleven daughters. From these children, he is the proud grandfather of eighty-two grand and great-grandchildren. During our interview, he mentioned two of his children that he is extremely proud of, saying, "[They are] independent and [they] never take back

seat to anyone or down." The children that he was speaking of are his daughter, who is the manager of a K-Mart in Richmond, California and his son, who is a retired Sergeant Major.

Mr. Douglas was seven when his father was killed. Since he did not know his mother, he was left to be raised by the white people for whom he worked. He began traveling (from Detroit to Chicago to Maryland and back) and establishing his own life at age nine. So, as you can see, he has had a hard life, but he has managed to make it through without going crazy. In this, John R. Douglas is a hero.

During Black History Month, we have a tendency to focus solely on historical figures. Though that is the general purpose of the month, we should take a moment to look at the heroes of today. These people aren't necessarily people that pave the way for future passage of laws or do things that change the world, rather they are simply people that do positive things in our communities. Mr. Douglas' recycling benefits our planet Earth; but his life, his struggles, and strength can benefit each of us individually.

This Black History Month, 1998, we should not only celebrate those that came before us, but also the strong broth-

ers and sisters that are around us, to include ourselves. After all, a generation is nothing without a past. Without a past, there is no present. A present with no direction or hope, can have no future.

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Robinson was offered and accepted the opportunity to meet with the university's legal counsel, Ms. Wanda L. Jenkins, to discuss her legal options. However, Robinson said that at this time she didn't know what her next course of action might be.

Although Hood Hall was one of the many buildings that benefitted from the \$6 million in dormitory renovations that were completed in 1995, and although its roof was identified as needing repairs, budget constraints forced administrators to prioritize the overall repairs made to the historic building.

Fixing the roof was given a lower priority (new air conditioning and upgrading the bathrooms came first), but because of this latest incident, the roof's priority status was heightened and placed on a timeline that should have it repaired this summer.

Bronco Pride!