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Teen Screen *Virtual* Presents: **Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels**

Teacher Guide

This document was created by Teen Screen Educators for the exclusive use by teachers whose students see Teen Screen *Virtual's* presentation of **Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels**.

Notes

Astute middle school and high school students often wonder, and sometimes ask teachers, “Why do we only learn about Black people when they were slaves or when they are being killed or being kept out of things or being saved by white people? Didn’t any Black people resist dominance by White people? Didn’t Black people DO anything before Martin Luther King came along?”

Astute teachers will recognize this angst, as our usual way of teaching U.S. history in our K-12 schools is devoid of, or skims too briefly over, initiatives and accomplishments of Black people, and such things as Black leadership during Reconstruction and the Harlem Renaissance. Certainly, the way we teach about the kidnapping of African people and their centuries-long enslavement in the United States could lead our children to believe that Harriet Tubman came out of nowhere and was the only enslaved person to fight back. Abraham Lincoln is taught as the person who ended slavery, with the aid of good white people. Our Black children are left with bruised souls, and all of our children with an existential misunderstanding of who and what real Black people are.

Studying the Amistad Rebellion, as presented by historian Marcus Rediker, is a way to begin to get a sense of real history, as it is the kidnapped Africans themselves who were the architects and builders of this historic series of events. Film is a powerful form of literacy, and one with which students are familiar and easily engaged. Thus, we suggest that teachers use **Ghosts of Amistad** as a teaching tool to encourage critical thinking skills, increase vocabulary, and provide impetus for thinking about, discussing, and writing about new perspectives on slavery.

Synopsis of the Film

Ghosts of Amistad is a documentary film by Tony Buba, inspired by Marcus Rediker’s book *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom*. Professor Rediker’s book is an unlikely but true story of a successful rebellion of enslaved men, women, and children who

were captured and transported across the world to be sold into slavery to build the Americas. **Ghosts of Amistad** chronicles the filmmaker's trip to Sierra Leone to visit the home villages of the African people who seized the slave schooner *Amistad* in 1839; to interview elders about local memory of the case; and to search for the long-lost ruins of Lomboko, the slave-trading factory where their cruel transatlantic voyage began. The film seeks to capture the knowledge of villagers, fishermen, and truck drivers in order to recover a lost "history from below" in the struggle against slavery.

Preparing to Show the Film

Historical Context

Short History of Africa. It is important for students to have an understanding of Africa, which, they may be surprised to learn, was rich with diverse and independent cultures making progress, like the rest of the world, in agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, and economic development. However, with an abrupt rise in demand for slaves in the 15th century, and a ready supply of human beings for trade, Africa's course was diverted. In addition to the actual loss of human labor, the exploding slave trade inhibited social and economic progress in the African regions most affected. The trade degraded political life, encouraged the continuation of slavery in Africa itself, and pitted communities against one another in the quest for captives who could be sold. When European nations finally turned from slavery and began inventing new means of production, they left behind African economies which had become dependent upon this system that not only curtailed productivity by selling off many of the fittest members of the community, but also created almost unparalleled conflict within the continent.

African Slave Trade. This film focusses on the slave trade from Western Africa to the Americas, and in particular, a group of diverse Africans captured and transported on a slave vessel from Africa to Cuba, then carried by the *Amistad* to New England.

Slavery, the treatment of human beings as property deprived of personal rights, has occurred in many forms throughout the world, but one institution stands out for both its global scale and its lasting legacy: the Atlantic slave trade that occurred from the late 15th to the mid 19th centuries forcibly brought more than 10 million Africans to the Americas. The crops grown in the new colonies—sugar cane, tobacco, and cotton—were labor-intensive, and there were not enough settlers, indentured servants, or indigenous Americans to cultivate the new land. The Europeans turned to Africa for a supply of workers. This was not new. Slavery was common in Europe and had existed for centuries, but a new world created a new, and huge, demand. When white captains came offering manufactured goods, weapons, and rum in exchange for slaves, African kings and merchants did not hesitate. They viewed the people they captured and sold not as fellow Africans, but as criminals, debtors, or prisoners of war from rival ("inferior") tribes. By selling them, kings enriched their own realms and strengthened them against neighboring enemies. Interestingly, the slave trade became an impetus for war amongst and

between neighboring African kingdoms in that European firearms were needed for defense, but the currency was kidnapped and enslaved human beings.

As for the enslaved Africans themselves, they faced unimaginable brutality. After being marched to temporary imprisonment in forts on the coast, shaved to prevent lice, and branded, they were loaded onto ships bound for the Americas. Historians estimate that 13.7 percent of them—or 1.5 million people—would never see land again. The ship captains crammed as many of the captives as possible below deck. The lack of sanitation caused many to die of disease; others were thrown overboard for being sick or as discipline; and some committed suicide to avoid suffering or death at the hands of white sailors. Those who survived were completely dehumanized, treated as mere cargo, often maimed or abused.

References. Students may be encouraged to engage in research to learn more about African History and, in particular, Sierra Leone, where the film takes place. A few examples of documents are listed here.

- A Short History of Africa: http://aero-comlab.stanford.edu/jameson/world_history/A_Short_History_of_Africa.pdf
- Africa before Transatlantic Enslavement: <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/history-of-slavery/africa-before-transatlantic-enslavement/>
- The Atlantic Slave Trade/Teaching Tolerance Resources and Learning Plans: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/the-atlantic-slave-trade-what-too-few-textbooks-told-you-0>
- Map of Sierra Leone and Quick Facts: <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/sierra-leone>

New Concepts Related to the Ghosts of Amistad Film

History from Below or People’s History. History is so much more complex and engaging than names and dates. When we study “history from below,” also called “a people’s history,” the traditional classroom history lesson is flipped. This alternative approach to history takes a look at events from the standpoint of the workers, not just the business owners; the soldiers, not just the generals; the invaded, not just the invaders; the victims, not just the perpetrators. In this study, we can see history more fully and accurately, students describe historical events as coming alive and being more impactful, and, importantly, we can see how people’s actions, as individuals and in groups, have shaped our society. This shift in focus brings the actions of traditionally marginalized groups, and people just like us, to the forefront, and lets us know that we all have the ability—and responsibility—to make change for the better.

The story of the *Amistad* rebellion represents an attempt to understand an historical event by examining “history from below.” In particular, historian Marcus Rediker and filmmaker Tony Buba pursue the individual stories of the captured Africans to learn how such a diverse group of people, who were from different kingdoms, who knew very little about one another, and who spoke different languages, came together on a terrible journey and made a pact to overthrow the crew and captains on a slave schooner.

References and Supplemental Material. Teachers and students are referred to the following websites to more fully understand the concept of “history from below.”

- Check in with the film’s website, currently under construction, for information and ideas about the film: <https://www.ghostsofamidstad.com/>
- We recommend that teachers and students watch the 30-minute Indie Film Forum interview with Marcus Rediker and Tony Buba: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmvv0VYD9tw>
- A good place for some introductory material on “history from below” and “a people’s history” is the Zinn Education Project, at <https://www.zinnedproject.org/why/>. Also see Marcus Rediker’s introduction at <https://overland.org.au/2019/02/history-from-below-a-reading-list-with-marcus-rediker/> and his “Poetics of History from Below,” <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2010/the-poetics-of-history-from-below>

Watching the Film

Armed with an understanding of African history and the African slave trade, along with the idea of “history from below,” students can consider the following as they watch **Ghosts of Amistad**.

- What did Professor Marcus Rediker and filmmaker Tony Buba hope to learn about the *Amistad* Rebellion by traveling to Sierra Leone? Why were the more traditional approaches to studying history, say looking at the accounts and documents available, considered to be insufficient? What do we really know about the people who were kidnapped from Africa and enslaved in the United States?
- Who were the enslaved Africans on the *Amistad*? Where did they come from? How were they captured and transported to the Americas? How do the current residents of this region think about slavery and the *Amistad* Rebellion?
- Why was the *Amistad* Rebellion an important event in the history of slavery in the U.S.?
- What did Professor Rediker and Mr. Buba hope to accomplish by presenting their quest for information in the form of a film?

- What did you learn from the film about Sierra Leone? How did the slave trade shape its development as an African country, and can the effects of slavery be felt still?

Post-Viewing Discussion and Writing Prompts

Knowledge and Impact

1. What did you learn from this film that you did not know before? How might this new knowledge help you understand history and inform your everyday life?
2. Why do we need to know about the slave trade and particularly about the experience of the enslaved Africans on the vessels? How did the Africans capture the *Amistad*? What skills did they have that they put to use to capture the ship? Was this rebellion an important part of U.S. history? Does knowing about it open us up to a different way of looking at the people we have known only as “slaves?” Did you know anything about this before we began this study of the film? Why do you think our history books don’t cover this? What should we do to change how our history is presented?
3. The rebels on the *Amistad* were captured, jailed, and tried in America. This was an extremely important event in American history of slavery. Why?
4. What are the reasons for approaching this history “from below?” In **Ghosts of Amistad**, the filmmakers said they wanted to “humanize” the Africans on the slave ship. Were they successful? They also found that the definition of “slavery” in Sierra Leone was a bit different from what we understand. How do the definitions differ? Is this significant for us/for the people of Sierra Leone?
5. What are some of the methods used by the filmmakers to understand the *Amistad* Rebellion? What surprised you about the data available and the conclusions drawn from that data? Professor Rediker stated: “Our conception of the archive is very narrow. There is a living human archive. . .” What did he mean by this?
6. Why did Professor Rediker and filmmaker Buba visit Sierra Leone? What were the obstacles to learning about the *Amistad* Rebellion on their visit to Sierra Leone? Do you think that coming from a wealthy country whose wealth was built on the backs of enslaved Africans—some from Sierra Leone—presented an obstacle to obtaining information? What did the filmmakers do to try to overcome this obstacle? Another impediment to learning the history is suggested in this quote: “In Africa, when an elder dies, a library burns down.” Can you give an example from the film of how this impeded the goals of the historian and filmmaker? Finally, Professor Rediker noted that “the

ghosts of slavery. . .(were) hanging over our heads.” What did he mean by that, and what were the implications for his efforts to understand the historical event?

Filmmaking

1. Professor Rediker’s work as a historian was informed by the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s. The hallmark of these movements was that they arose from the everyday people, and collectively, the people sought social and political change. Filmmaker Buba grew up in the Pittsburgh steel mill community and his work has focused on documenting the lives of and challenges faced by the individuals residing there. How have their backgrounds influenced their approach to uncovering and documenting the history of the *Amistad* Rebellion?
2. Professor Rediker wrote a book about the *Amistad* Rebellion. Why do you think he went on to create a film? In what ways would a book, a newspaper article, or other written work differ in presentation of the story? What would be lost and what would be gained by these approaches to documenting history?
3. **Ghosts of Amistad** documents the trip to Sierra Leone. We see the *process* of making the film. We see the film crew, their travel, and their frustrations. What do you think Professor Rediker and filmmaker Buba intend by including the *process* in their presentation?

Resources and Extension Activities

1. Did anything like this ever happen any other time? Did other captured African people fight back? Did anyone support them? Students can find more information through their own searches. One good starting point is the book by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). A review can be found at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jan/27/historybooks>.
2. Once in the United States, did enslaved people ever fight back? Why don’t we learn about them? This can be another good research project for students. A good start could be Louis Henry Gates’ article, “Did African American Slaves Rebel?” found here: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/did-african-american-slaves-rebel/>.
3. ELA teachers and others interested in historical fiction as a way to access history could recommend (high school level) such books as Sharon Ewell Foster’s two-volume novel, *Resurrection of Nat Turner* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), along with the author’s description of how and why she delved into the real history of this revolt of enslaved

people to correct the untruths that have been part of our history telling:

<https://theresurrectionofnattturner.com/category/the-truth-about-nat-turner/>.

4. To continue learning about the Amistad rebellion, students can be urged to read Marcus Rediker's book, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Penguin Books; 2012). Check out Professor Rediker's lectures on this book:
 - At the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?309978-1/the-amistad-rebellion>
 - At Brown University: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIcH1FpxnXg&t=2s>