

The Burden of Historical Representation: Race, Freedom, and “Educational” Hollywood Film

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When asked to describe a recent use of Hollywood film in her U.S. history class, one teacher responded, “I use *Glory* every year to reinforce the role of African Americans in American history.” Depending on this teacher’s specific classroom practices, this statement is both promising and problematic. On the promising side is the indication that the teacher is including the stories and roles of African Americans in her class. The teacher’s use of *Glory* (1989) also needs to be problematized, however, and forces us to ask several key questions. What else is being reinforced when films portray stories of groups traditionally marginalized in history? What are students learning about the history of African Americans and their role within U.S. history when films like *Glory* are used as part of the curriculum—and how does this align with one of the core goals of social studies—to develop citizens for a pluralistic democracy?

The teacher’s statement quoted above was representative of the responses collected as part of a recent survey of eighty-four Wisconsin and Connecticut U.S. history teachers.¹ In addition to the open-ended descriptions of classroom practice with film, we also asked the teachers to report which films they were using in their classes overall, how they were using the films as part of their instruction, and why they chose those films and methods. The two films identified as being used most often were the aforementioned *Glory*, a film about the all Black Massachusetts 54th regiment that fought during the U.S. Civil War, and *Amistad* (1997), a film about a group of African slaves who revolted against their captors aboard ship en route to a slave market and ended up fighting for freedom in the U.S. Court system during the 1830s. Both films were created by large studios with big name actors during the late 1980s through the 1990s, a period that saw a cultural and economic demand for stories and films about and for African-Americans.²

As the number of days of school is extremely limited, and the time it takes to view a feature length film significant, there is a large burden placed on these films and the manner in which they represent Africans and African Americans and their roles in the history of the United States. Of particular importance is how *Glory* and *Amistad* characterize the concept of freedom in relation to Africans and African Americans given freedom’s importance in the films’ narratives, its prominence in national and state U.S. history curriculum standards, and its status as a fundamental theme in the development of democracy and our nation.

Here we consider what students can learn about Africans and African Americans in U.S. history from viewing *Glory* and *Amistad*, with a particular focus on the themes of race, racism, and freedom.³ Building off of the survey data, literature from history and film studies, and a new look at the films, this analysis will examine how effectively these two films help to fill the gaps that traditionally exist in the U.S. history curriculum and challenge the dominant historical narrative through including the stories and perspectives of Africans and African Americans and their complex role in the history of the U.S. As part of our analysis we also address the larger issue of what role feature films should have in history classrooms, within the larger goals of social studies education, and explore specific pedagogical practices with film that might help teachers to better fulfill the standards of the burden of historical representation. *Glory* and *Amistad* have already undergone significant analysis and critique by historians, film critics, and others. Given the frequent use of these films in the classroom, we seek to draw from and build on this previous work and reflect on the films in the context of the secondary history classroom.

Teacher Practices, the Burden of Historical Representation, and Freedom

Fifty-two percent of the teachers who responded to the survey had used or use *Glory*, and 40% had used or use *Amistad*, which, as mentioned, were the two most frequently shown feature films among the teachers in our study.⁴ The majority of the teachers had their students view most or all of the films and regard the films as a way to teach subject matter and/or as a tool for helping students develop empathy and bring a time period to life.⁵ Table 1 below illustrates teacher responses about how they used the films.

**Table 1: Purpose for Classroom Use of *Glory* and *Amistad*
Percentage of Teachers, n = 84**

	<i>Glory</i>	<i>Amistad</i>
Students view most or all of film	75%	68%
Film used to teach subject matter	77%	65%
Film used as tool for helping students to develop empathy and bring a time period to life	89%	79%

Of the teachers in urban districts, which make up 23% of our sample and presumably include more students of color, 26% used *Glory* and 32% used *Amistad*. The numbers rise sharply in predominantly white suburban districts, which made up 39% of our sample, and where 76% of teachers used *Glory* and 46% used *Amistad*. Traditionally, representations of Africans and African Americans in U.S. history curriculum and textbooks are marginalized (Loewen). Thus, the viewing of these two films may constitute a major portion of what students, and especially the white suburban students, are learning about the role of Africans and African Americans in U.S. history. Clearly, there is a heavy burden placed on these two films in particular and how they represent the role of marginalized groups in history and the theme of freedom. Consequently, there is a heavy burden on how teachers incorporate these films into the curriculum.

Shohat and Stam argue that a “burden of representation” that is “at once religious, esthetic, political, and semiotic” exists whenever a marginalized or underrepresented group is portrayed in film (182), and it has a lasting impact on how people view the world and the groups that are represented, even if they know that the film’s portrayal isn’t accurate. Historical accuracy aside, an audience’s impression of a group is still shaped by how characters from the group are portrayed. Depending on the population of students and context of the viewing, these films could establish or reinforce racist notions of race, freedom, and

citizenship regarding a student’s own cultural group or that of marginalized groups. In the case of representing history in film, this burden requires that members of these underrepresented groups be portrayed in a way that allows the viewer to understand their points of view, history, and language.

This *burden of historical representation*, then, can be met in film through developing complex characters and rich personal stories that challenge traditional historical and film narratives, which have generally focused on Eurocentric history and appealed to white audiences. Meeting this burden should be preeminent for all students, regardless of race. This burden is difficult to meet as the desire for profits in Hollywood often prevails over the desire to tell the story through the eyes of all participants and not just those who are similar to the target audience. In addition, time constraints of films, in conjunction with profit motives, often produce compacted plots and composite characters, further limiting historical perspectives and complex stories (Rollins 1-8; O’Connor; D’sa). As we will show, however, films such as *Glory* and *Amistad* go further than most traditional texts in challenging long-established historical narratives and giving voice to the history of marginalized groups, but not without some dilemmas.

The concept of freedom is particularly relevant and important in considering the burden of historical representation faced by curriculum developers and teachers and of the burden placed on film. Freedom and the ways in which different groups gain, earn, or lose freedom is one of the most dominant themes in school-based and non-school representations of history and in the telling of our national story. Historian Eric Foner describes freedom as “fundamental to Americans sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation...[Freedom] is deeply imbedded in the documentary record of our history and the language of everyday life” (xiii). Freedom is central to the historical narratives of traditionally marginalized groups, such as African Americans, whose struggle for freedom is essential for understanding their past and their present. Therefore, we use freedom as one lens to examine how well *Glory* and *Amistad* meet the burden of representation. Whether considering issues of political freedom, economic freedom, personal freedom, or others types of freedom, no story in U.S. history is left untouched. From the American Revolution, slavery, and immigration to WWII, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Information Age, freedom is central to our historical narrative. It is particularly important to the secondary students we teach. After all, they are experiencing new freedoms and testing the boundaries of freedom throughout their adolescent years. They are also developing their conceptions of citizenship and democracy and what being a citizen entails.

In addition to the burden on films and filmmakers, history teachers also carry this burden of historical representation when selecting course materials and methods of instruction. Issues of race are traditionally invisible or marginalized in most history and social studies curricula and associated materials such as

textbooks (Loewen; Ladson-Billings 3-4). This is also true for much of the research in social studies education and educational research writ large (Ladson-Billings 4-8; Ladson-Billings and Tate 48-50). The difficulty in including underrepresented perspectives in high school classrooms can be traced back to the often poor selection of materials, a teacher’s lack of in-depth content knowledge, institutional pressures to teach a set curriculum or for a standardized test, and a teacher’s lack of understanding how to include multiple perspectives in history. Therefore, representations generally follow a more nationalistic story that includes marginalized groups as add-ons or underlings rather than as part of the central narrative (Ladson-Billings; Loewen). Similar to the burden of historical representation in films, this burden can be fulfilled in classrooms through the use of materials and pedagogy that promote the exploration of multiple points of view, including those of underrepresented groups, and that challenge dominant historical narratives through critical analysis and democratic deliberation. The goal for meeting the burden is synonymous with that of social studies education: to develop citizens for a democracy who work for the “common good” (Barton and Levstik).

Hollywood Films in History Classrooms

Portraying history through film, and especially Hollywood feature films, is difficult because of the tendency to fit historical stories into traditional generic film narratives, often leading to a compacted and simplified historical narrative. Hollywood films also tend to be made for a broad general audience, so the history of the majority of this audience, traditionally white and middle class, is emphasized, and dramatic liberty is taken with the story to make it more engaging and understandable for that audience. The end result is an audience that learns much of what they know about the past from viewing simplified, “whitewashed” (Shohatt and Stam 179) historical narratives that generally exclude or minimize the roles of marginalized peoples in the national story (Rollins; Toplin). This narrow approach to history is especially problematic as Hollywood films are being used more often in secondary history classrooms, and schools in general, because they are viewed by teachers as being engaging for students, and because they are more readily accessible than in the past, both financially and physically (Considine; Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Hobbs). In our study, 92.9 percent of the teachers reported using some portion of a feature film at least once a week. They also believe that students are more motivated when feature films are shown in the classroom (4.0 on a five-point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) and that students learn more when a feature film is shown (3.7/5).

Several studies show that students are learning about the past and about the roles of different groups in history from watching film (Seixas; Wineburg 234-245; Paxton and Meyerson; Marcus). These studies also report that students often exhibit confusion regarding Hollywood film as a legitimate historical source; the students in the studies had difficulty in understanding the nature of film as an accurate or real telling of the events versus as a representation or interpretation of the past with a distinct perspective. Students are viewing historically-based films both in and out of class. In one recent study, high school juniors reported seeing historically-based films frequently. For instance, a majority had seen *Forrest Gump* (86%), *Apollo 13* (80%), *Saving Private Ryan* (75%), *Pearl Harbor* (61%), and *Glory* (55%) (Marcus).

In addition to students, Americans in general are watching more films and television programs that depict historical events and are increasingly traveling to historically-themed landmarks, theme parks, and museums (Burgoyne; Rosenzweig). Much of this revitalization of American social memory took place during the 1980s and 1990s across many groups in the U.S. in the form of little-told stories about groups often neglected in American history. Films such as *Glory* and *Malcolm X* (1992), *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), and *Dances with Wolves* (1990) depicted stories in U.S. history about African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Native Americans, respectively. These films were told, at least to some degree, from the perspectives of the traditionally marginalized groups being portrayed and provided a more critical perspective than the history often being taught in classrooms. As films and television have become major sources for historical knowledge, and especially knowledge of historically marginalized groups, many scholars have argued that films need to be looked at as a different kind of historical source (Rosenstone) and that students need to be taught how to “read” film and television much like reading a written text (Rollins 246-269; Considine; O’Connor).

The analysis that follows will examine *Glory* and *Amistad* as representations and interpretations of the past, from the perspective of understanding the role of Africans and African Americans in U.S. history, particularly in relation to the theme of freedom in a democracy. How well do these films meet the burden of historical representation, and what does that mean about how students are learning about and understanding the past? Our purpose is not to duplicate the extensive and thorough scholarship already completed by historians but to examine this work through the lens of history-educators and classroom teachers. For example, how might students construct their ideas of what the U.S. was like in the past from these films? And, how do the perspectives of Africans and African Americans portrayed in the films enhance or diminish perspectives presented in other curricular materials? The films may alter key aspects of the historical narrative that may either promote or challenge traditional narratives of the nation and freedom and of the schools’ curriculum.

Glory and Amistad

In order to determine how well the burden of historical representation is being met, we analyze three main aspects of each film: 1) the film as a historical source, 2) the film's narrative and perspective, and 3) representations of race, racism, and freedom. These categories are not mutually exclusive and will overlap and build off of each other. Each category deals with identity—how a student might identify with the film and how the film's portrayal promotes specific identities of nation and freedom within or across ethnicities or cultures. Do these films promote a version of individuals and nation that is pluralistic and democratic, or do they reinforce the Eurocentric and nationalistic history so long promoted and taught in social studies classrooms? As Burgoyne aptly notes, some films may be able to “suggest that there are potentially many histories embedded in a given historical moment, histories that may be plural and conflicting, and that require different constructions of the national past” (10).

Film as a Historical Source

Renowned Civil War historian James MacPherson called *Glory* the “most powerful and historically accurate film ever made” (22). *Amistad* was described not only as being historically accurate, but it was also called a “superb history lesson” and “a superduper high school curriculum teaching aid” (Jeffrey 78). Both *Glory* and *Amistad* have undergone extensive analysis for their adherence to the historical record, and both have been shown to take dramatic liberty with that record (e.g. Burgoyne; Carnes; Davis; Rollins; Rosenstone). How accurate does a film have to be, and by what criteria, in order for it to be viewed in class? If a film raises important historical and social issues but has elements of fiction, where should a teacher draw the line when deciding to use it? Here we review several key aspects of this analysis that are particularly relevant for utilizing the films as a historical source in the classroom.

Both *Glory* and *Amistad* have many elements of fiction woven into their narratives and characters. While MacPherson praised *Glory* for its historical accuracy, he also noted that only one main character was based on a real person, regimental commander Robert Gould Shaw (22). In spite of the fact that there were many African American soldiers that could have been represented in the film, including two of Frederick Douglass's sons (MacPherson), the film relied on composite characters that represented the overall population of African Americans that served in the Union Army instead of the actual demographics of the 54th Massachusetts. For example, while few of the soldiers in the 54th were ex-slaves, several characters are depicted as such in *Glory* to help emphasize the empowerment of slaves in fighting for their freedom. These composite characters border on fitting stereotypes at times, with Tripp (Denzel Washington) as the angry escaped slave, Rawlins (Morgan Freeman) as the

wise “uncle” character, and Thomas (Andre Braugher) as the middle class freeman. The events portrayed in the film, other than the final scene in which half of the regiment is killed attacking Fort Wagner, are also largely fictional or have been altered for dramatic reasons.



Photo courtesy of Columbia TriStar/Photofest

Denzel Washington as the angry escaped slave turned soldier, Tripp. One of several African American composite characters in *Glory*.

Similarly, and despite the producers' claims of strict adherence to the historical record (Davis), many of the characters and events in *Amistad* have also been fictionalized or altered. The main white characters, Baldwin, who initially helps the Africans in court, and then former President John Quincy Adams, who presents the case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, were both altered for dramatic purposes (Davis 79-80). Baldwin's character is portrayed as a young and naïve property lawyer instead of the veteran abolitionist attorney that he really was. Adams, who is portrayed in the film as being reluctant to help the Africans, was actually involved in the case very early on and had supported abolitionist causes for quite some time. Morgan Freedman's character, the African American abolitionist Joadson, is a composite character much like the soldiers in *Glory*. The African characters, in order to create a more esthetically dramatic narrative, speak Mende throughout the film. While this use of language seems to add authenticity to the production, it neglects to inform the audience that not all of the Africans would likely have come from the same tribe and therefore would not necessarily be able to communicate with one another as portrayed. Also, by this time in the 19th century, many of the Mende and other West Africans would have had more knowledge of English than is portrayed in the film (Davis 85-88). These fictional changes are not due to a lack of understanding the history of the events, which are well documented, but to attract the audience that it desired (Davis).

So, do these inaccuracies cause the films to not fulfill the burden of representation when used in class? As with any historical source, a film carries one particular perspective or interpretation of an event. Depending on the goals of the teacher in using the film, the burden may be fulfilled through pedagogy and supplemental sources or perspectives in addition to the film. While it is assumed that Hollywood will alter aspects of the history for dramatic purposes, it is more important to assess *the effects of these changes*—do they add or detract from the larger historical, social, and, in the case of these films, racial issues represented in the history? Also, what can the films tell us about issues prevalent during the time of the film’s production?

While *Glory*’s main African American characters are fictionalized, this fictionalizing was done in order to incorporate a broader array of perspectives that would have been present at the time, just not all in the 54th. The larger problem with the characters in *Glory* is not that they were largely fictionalized but that the African American characters were not represented in the same depth as Shaw’s character was. This issue of depth will be discussed further in the next section. A teacher can supplement the film with diaries and letters written by the members of the 54th, which are easily accessible, in order to better meet the burden of historical representation. For example, the teachers in our study had students assess “the accuracy of the film as compared to other sources on the regiment and its role/main people” or used it as an introduction to an in depth research project on “the use of African-Americans by the North and South during the Civil War.”

In the case of *Amistad*, the dramatic altering of the Adams and Baldwin characters solely to add drama takes power away from the deeply-rooted and organized abolitionist movement that existed during the period of the Amistad case. The film’s portrayal of Southerners and abolitionists may also lead to the conclusion that they were most responsible for the looming Civil War, ignoring the social, cultural, and economic causes of that conflict. Likewise, portraying the Africans as being able to speak only Mende, while aesthetically interesting, does little to raise historical issues or empower the African characters, and in fact it makes the Africans seem more primitive as they appear to not have acquired the languages of those in power and with whom they traded. As a historical source, however, the teachers we surveyed believed that *Amistad* is powerful for its scenes of “the middle passage” and for telling at least parts of the story through the eyes of the Amistad Africans, which will also be discussed further in the next section.

If used in a classroom where history is taught as a series of unchanging events, there is the danger that students will take all that they see in the film as historical “truth.” As Paxton and Meyerson and Marcus found, students who are skeptical about films as historical sources will still often accept a portrayal as accurate when used unchallenged in a history class. Seixas had a similar finding among students who initially saw the film *Dances*

with Wolves as a “window into the past” before analyzing the representations and comparing them with another western genre film. When a film is used as a historical source, teachers need to consider the biases and inaccuracies of the film and deem it worthy or unworthy to broach the problems of popular media and historical interpretation, to teach students media literacy skills, or to raise larger social or historical issues in light of the inaccuracies a film might have. Depending on how they are used pedagogically, *Glory* and *Amistad* have the potential to raise issues of race and freedom in U.S. history well beyond the context of the events portrayed in the films.

Narrative and Perspective

In order to make a film successful, it must be attractive to a broad audience. This often means that the historical stories are adapted to fit successful Hollywood narrative genres, often simplifying the history instead of emphasizing the role of personal accounts or perspectives of the underrepresented groups or characters involved. Shohatt and Stam argue that we should pay special attention to how well developed characters of color are in comparison with white characters (182-191); in order to meet the burden of historical representation, individuals of underrepresented groups should be depicted in a multifaceted and in-depth way that humanizes their characters at the same level with white characters. In addition, there are also many issues that arise as students instill their own values and assumptions into the characters of the films, especially when the films are portraying events from the past (Smith).

In the case of *Glory*, which was created primarily from letters written by the film’s protagonist, Shaw, there may not have been a more complete or thorough source on which to base the film. This alone is problematic, however, as the film was billed as the story of the African Americans who fought for their freedom. As the letters were used as the primary source for the script, *Glory* relies heavily on Shaw as the heroic leader of the regiment whose duty it is to make these men into real soldiers who will get the opportunity to fight and show their abilities and courage. We follow Shaw, as the narrator, from the battle of Antietam to his death during the assault on Fort Wagner, which made the regiment famous and Shaw a martyr of sorts in abolitionist circles (Nathan 40). The film provides a few moments into the thoughts and stories of the main African American characters but not even close to the depth and insight we are given into Shaw’s. Overall, the film fits the common war genre narrative, overcoming issues among the ranks of soldiers and climaxing in a dramatic battle, which, in this case, leaves the main characters as martyrs in a war for freedom against the tyranny of slavery represented by a largely nameless and faceless Confederate army.

Unlike *Glory*’s use of one character to tell the story, *Amistad* uses multiple characters to tell different parts of the account. The

narrative presented in *Amistad* shifts between the point of view of Cinque, the main African character, and several of the white American characters, creating a somewhat disjointed story that spent a great deal of time focusing on the legal aspect of the case instead of broaching the topic of contemporary slavery and its aftereffects in U.S. history (although it does hint at the upcoming election and looming civil war). One reviewer argued that the producers of *Amistad* “devote more time to the American characters and the factions that either defend or manipulate the Africans” than they devote to the African characters themselves (Guthmann, par. 9). This lack of voice for the African characters is especially disappointing as the most powerful scenes are flashbacks showing Cinque in Africa and on the slave ship *Tecora*⁶ during the middle passage. Unfortunately these scenes make up too little of the film and are like the sidebars in history textbooks that highlight a person or event but remain separate from the overall narrative. What these sections do provide is added depth and complexity to the African characters through showing Cinque in his home village with his family before being captured as well as the brutality of the middle passage. The humanity created in these scenes is not used as an opportunity to condemn the complicity of America and its history of slavery, however, but is instead lost as but a footnote in a story that becomes embedded in property rights.

It is possible that these two films are shown most widely in largely white suburban schools because they both use white male protagonists to tell much of the story, and neither explicitly condemn the complicity of the U.S., both North and South, for its role in the slave trade and the benefits received from the institution of slavery. However, as noted earlier, when compared with the majority of big budget films, both *Glory* and *Amistad* go to far greater lengths than most films, and history textbooks, to both empower their black characters and to give them some voice in telling the story. Teachers could, therefore, also use the films to provide a sense of empowerment to students of color if they focus the viewing on the African and African American characters.

A teacher would have to go further, however, to truly fulfill the burden of historical representation. As an example, some of the teachers surveyed used the films to start off a research project on the role of African Americans in the Civil War or in addition to other accounts of the 54th Massachusetts or the middle passage. As both of these stories are well documented, there are ample opportunities to find firsthand accounts from the various individuals involved. Teachers may ask their students to attempt to recognize the perspectives of those involved to gain an understanding of their actions or decisions within the historical context and also to deliberate on whether these decisions were fair or democratic. Students could be engaged in taking the perspective of the films’ producers in order to understand the motivations for constructing the films the way they did. For example, students could discuss why co-producers Steven Spielberg and Debbi Allen chose to make a film about the *Amistad* Africans instead of other slave revolts that

occurred in the United States, such as the one led by Nat Turner, or the Underground Railroad system that helped slaves escape north. Films, because of their ability to show history through the eyes of its characters, are rich texts to analyze and discuss the multiple interpretations possible in history and why certain interpretations are favored in different contexts or mediums (i.e., popular media, schools, places of worship).

Representations of Race, Racism, and Freedom

Critical race theorists argue that racism pervades American institutions and is “endemic in American life” (Ladson-Billings and Tate 55). This means that filmmakers have racist values that may be conscious or subconscious and that the Hollywood film industry as an institution is structured in a way that is inherently racist (Yosso 53). There is ample research documenting the racist history of the Hollywood film industry (e.g., Bogle; Bernardi; Shohat and Stam), much of which is driven by the economic demands of producing films that will be popular and financially successful. In the film industry, the reliance on sources of financing and studios to produce and distribute films controls both who gets to make the films and how those films are constructed. That being said, Hollywood films have been produced at different times to consciously “change public attitudes toward matters of social or political importance” (Rollins 1). Reflecting public sentiment of the 1980s and 1990s, the producers of *Amistad* and *Glory* made an attempt to raise public awareness of historical racism and the role of Africans and African Americans, while also making entertaining films that would not affront white audiences.

Glory does much to reveal the various ways that race and racism could have affected the 54th both when training in the north and when fighting in the south. For example, it highlights northern racism through employing an Irish drill sergeant who slings racial epithets as he teaches the 54th how to march, causing Shaw’s second in command to comment, “You know, the Irish are not noted for their fondness for the coloreds.” When Tripp, one of the soldiers of the 54th, is about to be whipped for leaving camp to find new boots, his scarred back is revealed, highlighting how the regiment’s white officers did not understand the history of their soldiers and to remind the audience of the horrors of slavery.⁷ Once they find themselves on duty in the south, the men of the 54th are juxtaposed with another division of African-American soldiers from Kentucky, whose commander refers to them as “little monkey children.” This moment both illustrates the racism present in the Union Army and the public sentiment in general. It also shows how the soldiers of the 54th, under the leadership of Shaw, are able to overcome these stereotypes and prove that “they are men.” It also might lead students to believe the African American soldiers needed the help of their white officers in order to become “men” and earn their freedom, leading to a presump-

tion that the African American soldiers of the 54th were somehow inferior. The simplified notion emphasized in the film, that the war was fought primarily for the freedom of African Americans and the ending of slavery, is also evident in the tagline for the film, “Their innocence. Their heritage. Their lives. Nothing would be spared in the fight for their freedom.” This ignores other reasons the men may have joined the army and other issues involved in the Civil War besides freedom. This is particularly important given that, despite the film’s portrayal, the soldiers of the Massachusetts were primarily free men prior to joining the army.

For the Amistad Africans, freedom is something that had to be proven in a court of law. The film reveals little about slavery in the U.S., let alone condemns it, and instead makes it seem that the U.S. court system was truly just when it came to slavery. Again, as in *Glory*, the Africans are shown to need the help of white men to gain their freedom. In the beginning of the film, the Africans are shown revolting aboard the *la Amistad*, furiously attacking their Spanish captors with machetes. Cinque is shown in dark shadows and with close-ups that show both the fear of the voyage into slavery and the hatred for the Spanish slave traders. The aesthetics in lighting, framing, and mise-en-scène are used to portray the Africans’ changes as the film progresses. The end result is a visual narrative that emits a notion of progress for the Amistad Africans as they become more “civilized” because of the influence of the white American characters and in their reach for the American ideal of freedom. The end of the film shows the Africans in white robes, one holding a Christian bible, and chanting “give us our free” in court, with the American court system as the key to freedom. The idea that the American court system is just regarding slavery misrepresents the case in *Amistad*, which was about trade, and ignores later rulings such as the Dred Scott decision handed down only a decade later. The democratic United States, in the end of the film, gives the Amistad Africans their freedom and a ride back to their home in present day Sierra Leone. Unfortunately,

this same government wouldn’t legally free the millions of black slaves who resided in the U.S. for another thirty years, and that decision would not be settled in a court of law.

In terms of their representation of race and racism, both films go to some lengths to show how racism was present in the United States at the time, with *Glory* showing how people in the north held racist beliefs and *Amistad* providing some insight into the politics of slavery and the institutional racism present in the government. The notions of freedom follow much the same line as our national story of freedom through democracy and national progress. The focus is not on what might be seen as unjust but that in the end democracy will win over time and provide freedom for all that adhere to its values. This narrative of progress and freedom through democracy shares similarities with common historical narratives that occupy history textbooks and middle and high school history classrooms (Loewen; Barton and Levstik). While these stories can be powerful and can instill nationalistic pride, they often exclude marginalized groups from their rightful place in the story and place them instead as benefactors of the democratic United States government. It may well be that this balance amongst critical representations, entertainment, and lack of blame for slavery explains why teachers use these two films so frequently. Both films raise issues of race and racism in history beyond the scope of most mainstream textbooks but also fit within the overall national narrative of progress and freedom, they are entertaining, and they do not condemn the majority population for which the film was largely created.

While there is much to be critical of in the representations of race, racism, and freedom in these two films, it is also important to point out again that these films are representative of a very small category that focus on the histories of traditionally marginalized groups and that both have scenes and themes worthy of analysis and deliberation in history classrooms along with other historical sources. That being said, teachers must be wary of what impressions students will construct from watching the films without critically analyzing and discussing the representations of race, racism, and freedom. *Glory* and *Amistad* could also provide insight into present U.S. society and the challenges of discussing the history of race and slavery in our country. Instead of reinforcing the national narrative of progress, these films could be used to challenge the familiar and “help students examine or develop a new relationship with the past” (Rosenstone 11).

Meeting the Burden of Historical Representation

Amistad and *Glory* illustrate both the good and bad of what is occurring currently in Hollywood. The good is evidenced by big budget films that include groups of non-white characters who are fairly well-developed and whose narratives make attempts at raising some social awareness of the history of slavery and his-

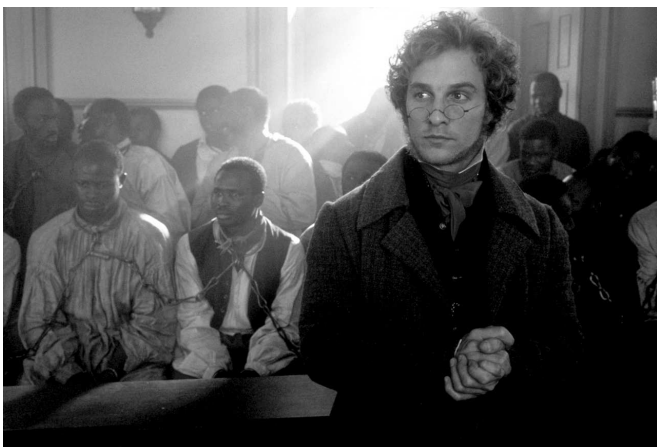


Photo courtesy of Dreamworks SKG/Photofest

Matthew McConaghey, in the foreground, as a lawyer in *Amistad* who fights for the Amistad Africans’ freedom.

torical racial oppression in the U.S. Conversely, these films also represent, to some degree, an extension of the status quo as the overall narratives align with traditional film storylines through following “white savior” characters who want to lead the black characters to freedom, respect, and manhood.

Ultimately, both films fail to meet the burden of historical representation when examined alone. The desire to achieve aesthetic realism and audience appeal for the films was weighted more heavily than historical accuracy and the perspectives and stories of the African/African-American characters. While the main white characters in the two films are based on actual people, almost all of the African American characters are composites of larger groups of people. It is positive to note that many critics from the popular press argued that the films should have been told from the point of view of the characters of color, highlighting a desire within one part of the entertainment industry for films from the perspectives of marginalized groups. Unfortunately, these two films not only hijack the stories of African Americans by telling them through white characters but also fail to raise larger issues about slavery and race in U.S. history. While *Glory* does a better job of illustrating the issues of race in society evident during the period of the Civil War, both of the films still dote toward the same “predominantly liberal American audience” that Shohat and Stam (25) describe by showing some of the horrors of slavery and racial relations but also keeping these issues somewhat decontextualized by presenting them out of an American context (*Amistad*) or placing the blame on specific groups of whites (i.e., the Southerners and Irish in *Glory*).

Both *Glory* and *Amistad* also align their overall narratives with the traditional national narrative of progress. Similar narrative themes of American history as a story of progress and a fight for freedom or respect are evident in many other historical films as well as history textbooks and curricula (Barton and Levstik). These are important themes to raise in class as many marginalized groups in the country have been convinced that, over time and with progress, all citizens will be treated equally in the United States despite evidence to the contrary in terms of unequal levels of salary, education, and health care. The national story of progress and desire to spread freedom is also prevalent in the current national discourse on the war on terrorism and foreign policy.

Glory and *Amistad* provide some glimpse of how powerful films can be in helping students better understand groups that have been traditionally marginalized through helping the students recognize and understand their perspectives. For the white suburban students, the goal is the development of a sense of empathy and application of their knowledge in future decision-making—hopefully away from the status quo and toward decisions for the common good. For students of color, these films may provide a sense of empowerment and pride in recognizing the role of people of color in the history of the United States as more than a sidebar or celebration of heroes and holidays.

Unfortunately, as neither of these films was a great financial success, there have been fewer attempts in past years by Hollywood to make history genre films from the point of view of marginalized groups. In the case of one recent film, *The Patriot* (2000) starring Mel Gibson (which 21% of the teachers in our survey used), the audience might be led to believe that there were few African-Americans at the time of the American Revolution, even in the southern colonies. This trend may be reversed as smaller film companies and other organizations have produced fiction and non-fiction films that show the perspectives of marginalized groups and promote anti-racist values. For example, *Sankofa* (1993), a film about the horrors of chattel slavery and set on a West Indian plantation, is told through the eyes of an African American character.



Courtesy of Author's Collection

Here, future social studies teachers practice applying the burden of historical representation through analyzing a scene from *Amistad*.

Implications for the Classroom

As illustrated in the analysis above, the films, if viewed in classes without accompanying discussion, analysis, and supplementary curricular materials, could promote naïve historical understandings in students regarding the events, especially when used to “reinforce the role of African-Americans in American history” as the teacher from the opening quote attempts to do. Also, when used without other historical sources or analysis, films are probably not the best tool for teaching the complex idea that many in the North were both anti-slavery and anti-Black. To avoid these naïve understandings, and to take advantage of the power of these films to place students in the perspective of Africans and African Americans, teachers must place their students in the position of historian, democratic citizen, and media critic, keeping a focus on how race, racism, and freedom are represented.⁸ This can be

done through structuring Socratic seminars, inquiry style lessons, or concept building activities that coincide with the film viewing but that utilize additional historical sources. Regardless of the instructional method, teachers should consider the following five guidelines when using *Glory*, *Amistad*, or other films that represent history in their classrooms:

1. Films should be one part of a larger analysis of historical topics, events, or concepts.
2. Identify and assess the main perspectives and themes of the film, beyond the general topic.
3. Consider how the film reflects the social and cultural values of the period in which it was produced.
4. Teach basic skills in and concepts of media literacy and film analysis.
5. Think about using shorter clips from the films to introduce specific perspectives or to raise issues in class.

Through pedagogy that promotes teaching students how to assess how well a film meets the burden of historical representation through analysis and democratic deliberation, students can form a more complex and diverse understanding of the great and multiple contributions of all groups who have played a part in U.S. history—and place them in a position to contribute to a future with a more just screenplay.⁹

Notes

- 1 The survey was conducted in the spring of 2004 and included a convenience sample of eighty-four U.S. history teachers in Connecticut and Wisconsin who were recruited via professional organizations, conferences, and contacts to department chairpersons. Because of the nature of the sample, some of the descriptive statistics about the amount of film use are likely to be slightly higher than the population of history teachers overall. See Jeremy Stoddard and Alan Marcus: “Based on a True Story: Using Hollywood Film in History Classes.” *Wisconsin Journal of the Social Studies* 4.1 (2005): 40-46 for a more extensive description of the study.
- 2 Other examples of Hollywood films bringing stories of African-Americans into the mainstream include *Malcolm X* (1992), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *The Color Purple* (1995), *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1997), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989).
- 3 See Appendix A for a full description of each film.
- 4 Other films frequently used by teachers include *Schindler’s List* (34.5%), *Saving Private Ryan* (31%), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (29.8%), and *Dances with Wolves* (25%).
- 5 See Appendix B for additional information about teacher practices with *Glory* and *Amistad*.
- 6 The Amistad Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean from West Africa on the Portuguese slave ship Tecora. They were then sold and transferred to the smaller la Amistad for transportation in the Caribbean.
- 7 This scene is especially interesting, as the Union Army had already banned flogging by the time being portrayed (Nathan).

- 8 A good example of using a form of critical media literacy with a focus on race is Tara Yosso’s article, “Critical Race: Challenging Deficit Discourse About Chicanas/os.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30.1 (2002): 52-62.
- 9 Thanks to Diana Hess, Thomas Levine, Melissa Tedrowe, Wayne Au, and Mary Beltran for providing helpful feedback on this manuscript.

Appendix A - Film Descriptions

Amistad

This is the story of a true 1839 revolt by West Africans on the Spanish slave ship la Amistad. The film includes their trial in America as well as flashbacks of their capture in Africa and the middle passage. Former President John Quincy Adams argues their case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, earning their freedom and transportation back to their homes in present day Sierra Leone.

Glory

Glory, based on a true story, tells the tale of the Massachusetts’ 54th regiment of black soldiers during the Civil War. The regiment is led by Colonel Shaw (Matthew Broderick). Also starring Denzel Washington, the film follows Shaw from the Battle of Antietam to his death at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, a battle that made the 54th famous but also resulted in the death of almost half of the regiment’s soldiers.

Appendix B - Survey Results

**Table B1: Reasons for Use of *Glory* and *Amistad*
Percentage of Teachers Reporting Each Use of Film
n = 84**

	To Develop Empathy	To Teach Subject Matter	As a Grabber	Other
<i>Glory</i>	89	77	41	7
<i>Amistad</i>	79	65	32	12

**Table B2: Percentage of Film Use by School Location
n = 84**

	Urban (23%)	Suburban (39%)	Rural (38%)
<i>Glory</i>	26	76	44
<i>Amistad</i>	32	46	41

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