

Where was the Amistad story before Spielberg?

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Steven Spielberg recently told an interviewer that he wouldn't have made the film Amistad if he couldn't tell it as the story of Joseph Cinque, the reputed leader of the shipboard slave revolt. He felt that the story would only make sense if moviegoers had someone they could identify with.

This approach points to a sad, but painful truth about African-American history. While there are scores of heroes and heroic acts in Black history, many African-Americans don't know about them. I don't exclude myself. I have written and researched numerous articles and several books on the Black experience, yet I was only faintly familiar with the Amistad story.

I remember that during the early 1970s, San Quentin prison activist, Ruchell Magee and Black ex-convict Donald DeFreeze, the leader of the ill-fated Symbionese Liberation Army, styled themselves as rebels and adopted the name of Cinque. Beyond that distant recollection the Amistad story seemed to me to be lost in the shadows of history.

This is inexcusable. The story is straightforward enough.

In 1839, 53 Black slaves were transported illegally from West Africa on a Spanish schooner from one Cuban port to another. Led by Cinque, the slaves revolted at mid-sea, commandeered the ship and attempted to sail it back to Africa. They never made it.

The ship floundered for two months at sea, was captured by a U.S. navy cruiser and towed to Connecticut. In a bitter two-year court battle, the case became a cause celebre for abolitionists, drew much national and international attention and stirred political intrigue and controversy. Eventually the Amistad captives were freed in a landmark Supreme Court decision and repatriated back to their African homeland.

But why did it take top gun Hollywood filmmaker Spielberg to make millions of Americans aware of this magnificent tale of triumph and heroism.

One answer is that Spielberg has the money and the muscle of Hollywood behind him. The other is that many Black scholars, activists, writers, filmmakers didn't do their job.

They failed to chronicle the events of the Amistad for generations of African-American students. Even many Afrocentrists, who have turned the study of Africa and Egypt into a

political fashion statement, have mostly ignored the Amistad story.

Despite the current hoopla over the film, there are still only three books on the Amistad saga, "Black Mutiny" by William Puffins, "Black Odyssey" by Mary Cables, and "Mutiny on the Amistad" by Howard Jones. Although these books have been hastily reissued to capitalize on the film, they were out of print for nearly a decade.

The public ignorance about the Amistad story tells just how much of African-American history has been lost, stolen, ignored and deliberately distorted. In the study guide for students accompanying the film Amistad producer Debbie Allen got it right, "Whether you're talking about art, or literature, or music, the real history has just been castrated — left out."

The Amistad story, of course, is only the tip of the rich Black historical iceberg in America.

Black inventors, explorers, scientists, architects and trade unionists helped construct the foundation of American industry. Black abolitionists, religious and civil rights leaders helped shape law, politics and ethics in America. Black artists, writers and musicians gave

America its most distinctive cultural art forms. This should be a point of pride and self-esteem for young African-Americans and Americans of all colors. Instead much of this is barely known by them.

My great fear is that the Amistad story again may be lost in the "tie-in" stampede to cash in on the heightened public interest and curiosity that the film has stimulated. This happened with Spike Lee's film on Malcolm X. Hordes of fast-buck artists blitzed the market with paraphernalia, t-shirts, caps and poorly researched books. They turned Malcolm the man, into a franchise. When the buzz died, so did public interest in Malcolm.

If the Amistad saga is reduced to loads of caps, t-shirts and images of super action heroes, it will do nothing to promote and everything to discourage serious on-going study of the case's importance to American history and the Black struggle.

Ignoring African-American history is bad enough, but commercializing or romanticizing it is even worse. Let's hope the Amistad story won't suffer that fate.

Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Assassination of the Black Male Image."

Read yourself to economic empowerment

By Harry C. Alford
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Special to Sentinel-Voice

Our sister, Oprah Winfrey, has brought new importance to the value of reading. I applaud her for this.

I have always understood reading and understanding our past and how it applies to our future as a fundamental necessity. My encouragement to all of you is: As you read on a continual basis, please be sure to include in your curriculum books that will affect your mindset.

Our mindset should be progressive and should be about economically empowering our communities. Our communities are not empowered because we have developed a class of leadership that doesn't have a clue in this area.

Most of our "spokespersons" and "leaders" (many of whom are self-appointed or white appointed) come from social work or pure political backgrounds. We need more advocates for economic development. The more of us who read relevant material, the more chances we have of true economic leaders evolving from our ranks.

All I think about is advocating economic empowerment for African-American communities throughout this nation. There are thousands of books to read. Many are bland and some are downright evil in their attempt to mold your opinion. I want to offer some of the best books I have read dealing with African-American economic

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empowerment.

The Black Power Imperative, by Theodore Cross, is a great primer on the subject of economic empowerment. A white economist who served in the Carter Administration tells how power, no matter who has it, is acquired and used.

Betrayal By Any Other Name, by Khalil Al Mansour, is an excellent expose of the Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois contrast. It also provides good history on how this nation officially has played on the minds of African-

Americans and have tried practically every mental trick to keep us off guard and exploited.

The Real Holocaust, by Gyasi A. Foluke, brilliantly illustrates the African-American experience in the Western Hemisphere.

Why Should White Guys Have All the Fun?, by Reginald F. Lewis and Blair S. Walker is the autobiography of one of America's greatest black entrepreneurs.

Freedom's Shore, by Russell Duncan, deals with the historical perspective of

Reconstruction and the "40 Acres and a Mule" betrayal. It also shows how America discriminates against African-Americans.

Nixon's Piano, by Kenneth O'Reilly, is a study of U.S. Presidents and how they formulated and implemented racial policies.

Black Labor, White Wealth, by Dr. Claude Anderson, preaches that until we become economically empowered we are at risk.

A Taste of Power, by Elaine Brown, is the historical portrayal of the original Black Panther Party as told by one of its founders.

My friends, the above list is

informative and valuable to those of you who want to know just "What's Going On?" There

are other books, but consider these a start. Your mind and future will benefit from them.




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