

Shared Values and Particular Identities in Anti-Racist Education

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In this essay, I would like to address some issues on educating about, and against, racism. Nationally prominent moral educators in the United States (such as those connected with the character education movement) have generally given race insufficient attention, considering that it is one of the pre-eminent moral issues of our national history. Perhaps this is because the issue is so *political*, and so politicized, and moral educators often search for larger principles and virtues that they regard as positioned above the political fray.

Yet we can not draw such a sharp division between morals and politics; race is an issue that is simultaneously moral and political. "Racism" in particular has become an inextricable part of our moral vocabulary. To call a remark, attitude, act, or institution "racist" is to condemn it morally. To call a person racist is to impugn his or her character; in that way to be accused of racism is analogous to being called cruel, dishonest, or unjust. To say that someone's motive for an action is racist is also to impugn her psychological make-up, although not necessarily something as deep as her character.

Yet is it not dangerous to go around accusing people and their actions of "racism?" Perhaps we are inviting an overuse of the term, thereby cheapening its moral. Yet this is a danger attending all moral education. We should be looking for moral education without *moralism*. Talking too much in school or families about cruelty, honesty, dishonesty, compassion can produce glazed-over looks, can fail to make contact with young people, can work against the very moral improvement and moral nurturance we aspire to. At the same time, some actions, some motives, some remarks *are* racist, and it is very important to teach young people what they are, how to avoid them, how to detect them in others, how to intervene to mitigate them and their effects. Whether one accomplishes these ends by a constant use of the *terminology* of racism is another matter. Yet this issue is not specific to the area of race but to any domain of moral education. How to convey the moral substance without abusing and cheapening the terminology is a standing challenge to all moral educators.

I am concerned also about movies. Film provides cultural imagery with power to educate and miseducate. It behooves us to scrutinize popular films for the moral messages they convey, should be conveying, and *should not* be conveying. I will focus on the acclaimed (if commercially unsuccessful) 1997 Stephen Spielberg film *Amistad*, about an 1839 uprising and mutiny on a slave ship, and the subsequent legal attempts to free the African mutineers, after they were tricked into landing in the United States.

First, some clarification about anti-racist education. Educating against racism is not only educating against *intolerance*, though that is unquestionably an important goal. "Tolerance" is too minimal to capture all of what we want from anti-racist

education; we tolerate what we do not like or do not feel comfortable with. But we should not rest content with race-based dislike and discomfort.

At least three other goals should guide anti-racist education. One is a reduction in racial prejudice, which includes reduction in the racial dislike just mentioned, as well as exploring, and exploding, demeaning, insulting, and hurtful racial stereotypes. A second is a commitment to racial justice — to recognizing patterns and structures of injustice and social misfortune, and to being motivated to do something about them. The racial injustice in question can be in the student's own school, neighborhood, city, or other venues of life. The goals of moral education in the racial arena must go beyond the reduction of students' prejudices, the purity of their motives and behavior as individuals, to embrace a concern for racial justice in the society around them and a willingness to act on that concern.

Third is the goal of racial harmony, understanding, and community. We want racial and ethnic groups not only to tolerate each other — to take a live and let live attitude — and to lack prejudice against one another, but to care about understanding one another, to appreciate the race-based differences in one another's experiences, to live out our sense of common humanity, and to seek to bring about a society and its subinstitutions in which different groups live harmoniously together.

Notice that I distinguish justice and community here. Harmony and understanding without justice threatens to preserve existing inequities through pretending they do not exist. President Clinton's racial dialogue initiative was deficient precisely in this regard, and it was reflected as well in the weakness of his national commission on race's recommendations in addressing systemic injustices. Yet on the other side, justice without community and understanding is still too minimal, too external, insufficiently appreciative of the manifold ties of shared and intertwining history and culture that bind all American racial and ethnic groups together.

Many teachers shy away from engaging with racial matters in their classrooms; parents often fear bringing these matters up with their children. The terrain is just too charged. Emotions run high, and we do not trust our ability to navigate. Some critics within and outside the world of education criticize anti-racist education for related reasons. It is divisive, they say. It reinforces and overplays differences between people. Dinesh D'Souza says it is based on relativism, and thus abandons the common and universal moral standards which any moral education requires.¹ It encourages rage and resentment, says Diane Ravitch.²

But we cannot abandon racism as a vital topic in our curricula, formal and informal. Racial justice remains an urgent task of our time; as one character in the film *Amistad*, says, of a different historical period but in a sentiment still applicable today, we still need to complete the American Revolution. I want to address some of the fears and criticisms of the critics and would-be supporters of anti-racist education with a sketch of a framework for thinking about anti-racist education in the context of racist institutions and practices, such as slavery and the slave trade. The framework involves an interplay between shared values on the one hand, and recognition of the particularity of racial identities on the other. Values in the racial domain — justice, empathy, tolerance, respect, community — are truly general,

shared, possibly even in some sense universal. Nevertheless, we must be sensitive to racial differences among our students, and the bearing of those differing identities on how to teach those values and on how we treat our students in the context of teaching them.

Let me illustrate this essential duality with examples from two areas, curriculum and pedagogy. My curricular example is inspired by a national educational and teacher training organization, Facing History and Ourselves. The organization has trained some 20,000 teachers in the United States and elsewhere in a moral education, critical thinking, and anti-racist curriculum and pedagogy, using Nazism and its Holocaust as a springboard.

I will use a modified version of Facing History's framework to talk about *Amistad* as a curricular resource for historically based anti-racist education. *Amistad* concerns a racist institution, namely the slave trade that brought twelve million Africans to the Americas over a period of three centuries. In teaching about racist systems, institutions, or practices it is useful to distinguish *four* distinct moral categories applying to the principal actors in the historical drama. The first are the *victims* of racism. In the setting of *Amistad*, these are the fifty-three Africans shipped by the Portuguese to Cuba from West Africa, representing more generally the millions ripped from their homelands and sold into slavery by various European powers. The idea of "victims" tends to have a bad name these days. But one can hardly think in a morally coherent fashion about slavery, segregation, the Holocaust, and systemic racial discrimination of any kind without talking about "victims," the sufferers of injustice.

The *perpetrators* constitute a second category. In the film, perpetrators are exemplified in the queen of Spain, who owns the ship, the two Spanish crew members who lay claim to the Africans after purchasing them from the Portuguese in Cuba, and the slave traders in Cuba. For the film's primarily U.S. audience, I believe that these figures are also meant to stand in for U.S. slave owners as well — and more generally slavery as a social system of oppression — though in fact the film says virtually nothing about American slavery. (The film also shows Africans originally capturing one of the ship's African passengers to sell him to the Europeans. In this sense other Africans are included in the perpetrating group as well, though in a secondary capacity.)

In the third category is *resisters*. Resisters are those among a victimized group who actively resist their victimization. In the film this resistance is very dramatic. The film begins with an extraordinarily powerful image of Cinque, who becomes the unofficial leader of the slave group, unhinging his shackles and leading the Africans in an uprising against the ship's crew. Resistance can take a variety of forms. During slavery, escape through the Underground Railroad was a form of resistance. Even slaves "puttin' on the massa" so to speak — that is, pretending to go along with the slave order while carving out a space for their own cultural and family lives — can be seen as a form of resistance. Another 1997 film, *Nightjohn*, portrays an escaped slave returning to the South in order to teach other slaves to read, which is yet a further form of resistance. This film, made by the black independent filmmaker

Charles Burnett, was given a special award in 1997 by the National Society of Film Critics and is an absolutely superb tool for teaching, as it shows slaves' incredible courage, even willingness to risk death, in order to learn to read.

Resistance exhibits victims in their human capacity, not merely as *sufferers* of an imposed victimization but as *agents* actively resisting that imposition. Resistance is the epitome of the exercise of moral agency in the face of suffering. In this regard *Amistad* falls regrettably short, as Jesse Lemisch argues forcefully in a recent article on the film. The film shows nothing of the planning and foresight — the human intelligence — that in fact went into the uprising. This omission deeply compromises a full portrayal of moral agency on the Africans' part.³

Victimization and suffering should be conveyed and portrayed in such a way as to elicit human compassion and a sense of dignity violated, which presume a sense of the viewer's human identification with the victim. *Amistad's* most powerful moments are of the Middle Passage, the extraordinary brutality, death, and degradation to which the slaves were subject on their transport to the Americas. However if *all* one sees is suffering, the compassion frequently turns to pity, in which the observer no longer identifies with the victim but stands emotionally apart from him or her. Suffering and agency together fill out the moral status of the victim of injustice; both are essential to moral and anti-racist education.

In the film *Amistad* only Cinqué among the Africans really emerges as a fully developed human character. But the Africans' dramatic act of resistance, though it involves murder, elicits this fuller moral response to their condition, because it reveals them as bearers of agency as well as sufferers of injustice.

The *fourth* category — alongside victim, perpetrator, and resister — is that of the *ally*. The ally is a member of a group other than the victim's group who comes to the aid of the victims. Of course not all victims are fortunate enough to secure allies. But Facing History, and I, see allies, when they exist, as crucial figures in moral development and moral education. Facing History's curriculum gives attention to Christians who came to the aid of Jews during the Holocaust. Allies are living proof that human beings are capable of caring about one another's plight across boundaries of race, religion, and social differences. Allies are often inspiring models of courage and moral excellence, risking much for a cause that benefits themselves in no tangible way. They are a significantly morally distinct group from resisters, who are defending *themselves* and *their own* people. Of course resisters can also be motivated by courage and altruism; although struggling on their own behalf, they may be equally moved by the plight of others, even if they share a bond of race or religion with those others. And both resisters and allies, despite their (often racially-informed) differences, act in the name of *shared* moral values, such as justice or freedom.

Especially in our current circumstances, where I at least find in my own students not only a good deal of general cynicism and disbelief in the possibility of disinterested altruistic concern, but an especial unwillingness to acknowledge or credit the efforts of people to assist those from racial or ethnic groups other than their own, the idea of an ally is particularly vital for moral education.

In the film *Amistad*, the allies of the Africans are the white Abolitionists, the young initially unprincipled but ultimately morally transformed young white real estate lawyer who volunteers his services to the Africans, and, most prominently in the film, John Quincy Adams, who pleads their case to the Supreme Court.

The categories of victim, perpetrator, resister, and ally show an obvious racial asymmetry when applied to cases of racial injustice, such as the *Amistad* affair. The victims and resisters are black Africans, the perpetrators and allies largely white. The racial identities of the students learning this material are likely to affect their responses, though no simplistic correlations should be assumed. In her book *Kwanzaa and Me*, Vivian Paley describes a black parent who is concerned about his child learning too much about slavery, because he does not want the negative dimensions of black experience overemphasized.⁴ Yet other blacks may feel that the study of slavery grants them an acknowledgment of the most significant historical dimension of their collective existence in the United States.

Neither of these reactions is available to the white student. White students may feel guilty about slavery; some of my students have reacted in this way. Others may react defensively — their ancestors may have come to this country after that period, or have had nothing to do with slavery even though contemporaries of it — and that defensiveness can get in the way of their opening themselves to the moral horror of slavery. Students who are neither white nor black may feel caught in between, the felt need to position themselves with respect to one of the identity groups interfering with the historical and moral lessons of the study of historically racist institutions.

Making these race-linked reactions a part of the very classroom conversation on the nature of slavery, or the slave trade, can be a valuable and even indispensable tool, especially but not only in the racially mixed classroom. Recently I taught a course with a substantial unit on slavery. It was important for creating a space for honest conversation on this topic that the black students felt that the white students really took in the horrors of slavery. Until at least some of the white students showed evidence of doing so, the black students were reticent to engage with them. So both historical understanding and ultimately interracial understanding was served by taking these racial differences as pedagogical desiderata. After this plateau had been reached in the class, the black students became much more open about their own disagreements, which were very substantial. Black students are often, and rightly, anxious lest their “dirty linen” be misused by whites against them. The entire pedagogical dynamic of creating the trust essential for a deeper exploration of the complex nature of racism in a mixed classroom is overlooked if one aspires to a fully race-neutral pedagogical approach. The particular racial identities are there, and need to be reckoned with in responsible moral education.

Attention to *resistance* should allow the worried black parent mentioned by Vivian Paley to feel at least somewhat more sanguine about the teaching of slavery. Blacks were never just passive, suffering slaves; they also resisted that condition, they showed courage and dignity, they declared that their suffering was not their own fault, and that it degraded not them but their oppressors. Similarly, attention to *allies*

provides a vital antidote to the trap of a debilitating white guilt and to the educationally resistant white defensiveness just mentioned. The ally exemplifies the honorable white person, and, one might say, an honorable way of *being white*, a worthy white role model.⁵

In this light it is worth looking in greater detail at the portrayal of the Africans' allies in *Amistad*. Historically by far the most significant of these were the Abolitionists. It was the Abolitionists who supplied lawyers and funds for legal defense and, ultimately, helped to raise money to send the freed Africans back to their homelands. Though not without its moral shortcomings, the Abolitionist movement is a moral movement of which Americans have reason to be proud. The movement had a distinct effect on the ending of slavery, a status reflected in the extensive attention given the Abolitionist movement's fight against slavery in the superb 1998 PBS series "Africans in America," about the African presence in the United States until the end of slavery.

Yet, by and large, portrayal of the Abolitionists in the film *Amistad* is quite unflattering. When seen as a group, often intentionally shot from the vantage point of the Africans in prison, they seem sanctimonious, unworldly, somewhat ridiculous. The most prominent white Abolitionist, Lewis Tappan, is a deeply problematic character — self-righteous, willing to turn the Africans into martyrs for the cause, even expressing racist attitudes. In real life, Tappan was a principled and admirable Abolitionist leader, facing death threats and mob violence for his vocal anti-slavery principles and activities.

I was told that one reason Tappan was portrayed as harboring racist sentiments was to make the historically accurate point that a white Abolitionist's opposing slavery did not mean he believed that blacks were equal to whites. In fact some white Abolitionists hated slavery, but did not care for blacks at all, and just wanted them to go back to Africa; they thought slavery was bad for white people, which, indeed, morally speaking it was. There was a wide range of opinion among Abolitionists about black-white equality, but I do wish that this important point could have been made in *Amistad* without feeding into the virtual wholesale discrediting and marginalizing of the importance of the Abolitionist movement itself. As the "Africans in America" series highlighted, many white Abolitionists were genuine racial egalitarians, a visionary position in historical context, and one for which they were scorned and often physically attacked by Northern whites.

The one Abolitionist character who emerges with some degree of dignity is the fictional black Abolitionist Theodore Joadson, played by Morgan Freeman. Merely portraying blacks as involved in the Abolitionist movement seemed to me an important contribution of the film. One peril of the ally concept is in reinforcing the idea that a victimized people, because of their benighted state, needs to be led by members of the dominant group. This is one reason the ally idea requires balancing by the resister idea. Blacks themselves were central to organizing and carrying out the Underground Railroad, the Civil Rights Movement, and other such movements for black equality. Blacks were a major and indispensable presence in the Abolitionist movement. Yet whites did play a significant role in all these struggles.

In one brief scene in the film, we see an Abolitionist headquarters bustling with activity in which blacks and whites are working together. On one level the black Abolitionists can be seen as resisters. After all they too are black, and some had once been slaves themselves, though Joadson is a wealthy and prominent citizen of New Haven. The film reinforces the importance of Joadson's racial identity when, in a visit to the slave ship's hull, he — but not his white Abolitionist companion — is overcome with emotion at what he grasps as the suffering of the slaves during their voyage. And, again, at the end of the film when Cinque is freed by the Supreme Court, he gives Joadson a totem or charm his wife had given him to help him in time of tribulation. "You are going to need this," Cinque says, alluding vaguely to the continuing racism of American society.

So, in regard to his distinctly black identity, Joadson proliferates the modes in which black resistance to slavery and the slave trade is portrayed. But in another way Joadson is much more like an ally than a pure resister. His life situation is as different from the Africans as night and day. He is a prominent and wealthy American who journeys to Congress and gains the ear of the ex-President John Quincy Adams, and who, for all one can see in the film, suffers no personal ill-effects of racism, though he is sensitive to its existence and firmly berates his friend Tappan for his manifestation of racism.

That blacks are thus seen in several roles carries a valuable anti-racist message that not all blacks were slaves, that blacks contributed in manifold ways to the building of America and to pressing it to realize its ideals. It also means that Joadson functions similarly to Tappan as an ally of the Africans.

Though the film does not encourage its viewers to dwell on the significance of Abolitionism as a morally impressive movement of blacks and whites working together, that fact illustrates a very important duality in the idea of the ally, reflecting the particular and universal poles of anti-racist education. In one regard the white Abolitionist is in an utterly different situation from the black slave whose slave plight he or she is seeking to abolish. The racial difference between them reflects an unbridgeable gulf of condition. As I said earlier, that gulf can press the identity buttons of our students so as to emphasize, not necessarily inappropriately but in a way that may pose pedagogical challenges, their own racial differences.

But in another sense black and white Abolitionists are comrades in struggle. There is something important that they share, namely moral ideals to which both are dedicated. Thus they share a certain moral identity, an identity rooted in shared values, shared devotion to a cause involving risk to both: the cause of freedom, of emancipation, of a devotion to justice, perhaps, as the film suggests, of a greater realization of the ideals of the American revolution. This universal aspect of the ally does not, or should not, overshadow the asymmetries, but it does qualify them. It reminds us that our particular racial identities do not preclude us from sharing a common moral identity as dedicated to certain shared ideals — any more than those identities preclude a concern for another human being across the racial divide.

Thus the duality of universal and particular poses strong pedagogical challenges to all educators, from parents to university professors. Yet these challenges can be

met. We must accept and make constructive use of the particular racial identities our students bring to our classrooms, and thereby find ways to serve the ends of moral education grounded in shared and general values.

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1. Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
 2. Diane Ravitch, "Pluralism vs. Particularism in American Education," *The Responsive Community* 1, no. 2 (1991): 32-45.
 3. Jesse Lemisch, "Black Agency in the *Amistad* Uprising: Or, You've Taken Our Cinqué and Gone," *Souls* (Winter 1997): 57-70.
 4. Vivian Gussin Paley, *Kwanzaa and Me: A Teacher's Story* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
 5. The notion and importance of the "white ally" in anti-racist education is articulated in Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Teaching White Students About Racism: The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope," *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 4 (1994): 462-76.