

ROOTS

ROOTS: NEW VISIONS FROM A NEW GENERATION





ROOTS: Through the Eyes of a New Generation

Sofia Abramsky-Sze

ROOTS: the basic cause, source, or origin of something. It is also the title of the historical series *ROOTS*, based on the book by Alex Haley. This series, which will air on the History Channel, traces the life story of one African, Haley's own ancestor. *ROOTS* is the story of a man named Kunta Kinte and the journey he took from little child to lovesick man to brave warrior to strong slave. It is a story about race and about how race plays into our judgement of the world. *ROOTS* is the tale of the life of an African in the 1700s: sold into bondage, enduring unimaginable horrors. Through *ROOTS*, we can see how a black man is treated differently than a white man. We can look at Kunta Kinte's treatment when he refuses to accept his new name (Toby). We can see every little detail of how skin color affects people. This is so important because racial problems are problems everywhere, and *ROOTS* captures that. It is powerful and embodies life lessons that everybody needs to know.

The first concept the show teaches is that of loyalty, and its counterpart, revenge. The pilot episode starts with two tribes, fighting on the day Kunta Kinte is born. One tribe hurts the son of the other tribe's chief, awakening a quest for revenge. The chief bides his time, waiting until Kunta Kinte is an adult, and then capturing him to sell into slavery. Some of his motivation is money, but most of the capture was the result of his thirst for revenge. He even tells Kunta Kinte that he hopes his father feels the pain he felt. This is important because it shows that revenge is a never-ending cycle, that the hatred just keeps spinning round and round. It also shows that revenge sweeps up innocents and leaves the people who are involved untouched to continue their battles. Revenge is a lose-lose game, and *ROOTS* helps everybody realize this. *ROOTS* teaches the parable "Forgive and Forget."

ROOTS also teaches about us: humanity. Or, rather, the worst of humanity. Many people are naive and think that the world is all fun. *ROOTS* shows that it is not. In the first episode, the true savagery of humanity is revealed in all its horror. This is shown in the betrayal, the death, the images of rotting flesh. Those who think that we are perfect or don't realize the horrible acts done by humanity will be unpleasantly surprised when they see *ROOTS*. It encapsulates the unimaginable horrors of slavery. Of course, people know that slavery exists, but that is different than seeing it. *ROOTS* shows the evils of humanity: how men can sell other men into bondage, savage beatings of one man by another. For example, when Kunta Kinte arrives in America, he asks "How long must I serve?" He receives no spoken answer, however there is a response: witnessing men being beaten and sold for the color of their skin like property, like sheeps or cows. The length of time Kunta Kinte must serve is life. This show perfectly captures how men and women can be evil, not to

themselves, but to each other, the contempt and feelings of superiority mixed in with the physical, emotional, mental, and social scars and struggles.

However, *ROOTS* also captures the best feature of humanity: hope. In telling Kunta Kinte's story, the creators add a line of underlying hope in every scene. Even though Kunta Kinte is torn away from his family, his life, everything he knows, he keeps hope. Although he sometimes feels as if death would be better than life, Kunta Kinte's hope always returns. This is remarkable because he has hope torn away from him time and time again, yet his indomitable spirit cannot be quenched. *ROOTS* teaches that even in the darkest of times, there will always be a spark of light, no matter how small.

But this is not just important to the past. Many people might think that since *ROOTS* starts in the 1700s, it is a purely historical narrative, which is incorrect. *ROOTS* is not only a story of the past, but one of human nature, which is not set in a specific time period, but is a never-ending cycle. And that's why *ROOTS* is important: to grasp the mistakes humanity has made in the past and try to avoid repeating them in the future. It is essential for today's youth, especially, to realize this because we will be running the world soon. In order to prevent mistakes, we must first understand them. *ROOTS* is an astounding way of doing that. One hundred and fifty years since the Civil War, and we are still hasty to judge people based on their skin color. Our mistakes are still our forebears' mistakes, although to lesser degrees. Today's youth, by watching *ROOTS*, can learn some of the mistakes humanity has made.

However, the creators use graphic details to tell this story, showing scenes like Kunta being whipped until his back is lacerated. If adults feel that this is too violent for their children (*ROOTS* is rated TV-14), they should tell them the underlying lessons nonetheless. Everybody should learn the essential lessons shown in *ROOTS*. To the adults who will watch this: by the end of the series, there will not be a single dry eye. Not only does *ROOTS* tell the story of slavery in a unique, heartbreaking, and incredibly moving way, but it does something extremely rare: it shows the world as it really is without sugar-coating it and also manages to capture moral concepts that will pierce the very center of a person's heart.

ROOTS and My Generation

Madison Johnson

I am an African American, sixteen-year-old female who has grown up in a predominantly white community my entire life. The journey of being comfortable with who I am and where I've come from has been very long and still continues. I remember one Easter when I was about seven, and my family and I watched the movie *ROOTS*. I was paying no attention, I thought it was boring, and I didn't see its importance. This series was not pushed on my generation to see, and because of that, few know what it is. Looking back at slavery may be hard for some to deal with but it's important that this story is told and heard from people of all ages, and races.

The remake of *ROOTS* is very personal to me for a couple of reasons. In the last two years, I've watched multiple incidents like the death of Freddie Gray, shooting of Mike Brown, and false arrest of Sandra Bland. Each reminded me of how badly African Americans are treated because of racism daily. Many of my white peers either think racism has nothing to do with skin color or that this is a brand new issue. *ROOTS* is another opportunity to illuminate and discuss slavery and the events that too many white people in my surroundings try to pretend never happened.

Growing up in a predominantly white community, I often got to observe the different ways white people react to uncomfortable situations regarding race. It is obvious that some care, some are trying to understand, and others either don't understand or don't want to. It's important to me that my white peers, like many white Americans, realize that slavery is THEIR history too. When they realize that much of that history impacts things that are happening now, maybe they won't just think we are just "angry" when we say Black lives matter, maybe they will realize that Black lives actually do matter. Once they acknowledge our humanity, I hope that they are willing to help fight for the solutions to these problems, and finally, see why change needs to happen.

The story of *ROOTS* and slavery speaks primarily to the issues of blacks and whites in America, but in our country many groups have faced oppression, and if we can start being honest about the history of slavery maybe we can be honest about theirs too. What is essential for this series to make a difference is for people in my generation to watch it and act upon it. We have huge voices right now to make the change we want to see. I hope that once some of my peers see *ROOTS* they will want to learn more about their own *ROOTS* as well as become more involved in adding their brilliance to solving the issues that face the world today. Finally, I hope people of all races will help others see the importance in having difficult conversations vs. ignoring real issues.

A huge problem is so few people really know about their history. Many of my peers who are white don't seem to care about black people's history, or see the importance. Some of them believe they know every fact of slavery and others don't know why we are talking

about it. Black people in my generation often want to know more but are only taught so much. We know the basics of Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King, but the teaching doesn't go much further than that. I recently attended the student diversity leadership conference and experienced community like I never have before with thousands of people who look like me, and go through what I go through. This community helped me open my eyes to new possibilities and I wanted to know more about my own history and want to help achieve a positive future.

I hope that *ROOTS* is able to remind African Americans of their resilience and strength. As a people, we survived hell. I don't think my generation truly gets how bad and how long slavery actually was. I don't think we realize what it did to us collectively. But if we could survive the trauma of slavery, we should be able to stick together in 2016. We need to continue to be strong, confident, and proud. I'm tired of hearing that fights are breaking out because of the "dark skin, light skin" comparisons, or who has the most material things on a housewives show. We have come so far and there's no point in dragging us down further.

ROOTS reminds us, as the country just celebrated 150 years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, that we've been out of slavery only half the amount of time we were in it. As a young person, I want to see the African American community get stronger socially, politically, and economically. But the story of *ROOTS* reminds me how far we've come despite racism, despite legal segregation, despite white supremacy, and even internal conflict caused from all of our trauma. See, knowing my *ROOTS* has helped me realize how great a people we are, and maybe watching this television series will be the start of many in my generation knowing the greatness they come from and will encourage them to be even greater.



ROOTS: Why Now?

Gabriel Hostin

Why is it important to tell the *ROOTS* story for my generation? So we can better understand our family history and more importantly, to better understand ourselves. Last year, I traveled with my mom, who is a journalist, to see the filming of *ROOTS* on a Louisiana plantation. I met the actors, directors, costume designers and producers of the movie. We watched a scene being filmed when Kizzy is taken from her parents and her home. It was awesome to see the actors working; it was an exciting and interesting experience. The scene we were watching was a very important and emotion-filled scene. It was filmed over and over again until the director thought it had just the right amount of emotion to show what the family went through. They must have filmed that scene for at least an hour.

As a kid growing up in New York, I had never been to a plantation and never thought as much about my family history of slavery. It was a little tough to stand there in the slave quarters imagining that someone in my own family had experienced this type of sadness in life. I still think about standing in that tiny room.

In the series *ROOTS*, there were many displays of African culture. Some included playing instruments, such as the kora, djembe, kalimba, udu, and the talking drum. When my mom and I were on the set, one of the other people visiting was a man from Africa who brought a kora. He was a griot, a Mandinka storyteller. We learned that in Africa, a griot memorizes the entire history of a village and that is how the people know their story. The kora is sometimes played during the verbal history. As all of the guests ate lunch, he played a wonderful song for us. The kora is an instrument that stands out as one of the most famous string instruments. It basically looks like a very big, weird looking guitar. After the man was done with his song, I talked to him about it, and he even let me play it. He told me I was a natural at it. Playing the kora and hearing the wonderful music it made, I really did feel connected to my ancestors and felt pride in knowing so.

Unfortunately, because of slavery so many African American families were torn apart and only a few of us know our own family's history beyond our great-grandparents. Pride comes with being connected to your family's accomplishments. *ROOTS* teaches people in my generation that as African Americans we have a rich history – something to really be proud of. But more than anything, I remember thinking about how *ROOTS* reminded me of how important family is. Family is where you come from, your identity, who you are, and something that will always be a part of you. Without your family, your history, we are lost not knowing who we are. Sometimes when I complain to my mom about what others get to do she says, "I would only care if their last name was Hostin." I realized after watching *ROOTS*, that what she means is that my family identity matters.

Knowing that you are connected with all of your family and culture's and accomplishments gives oneself pride and something to strive for. Our culture and our family is what makes us who we are. This is what makes us unique and different from all the other people in the world. I hope teenagers all over the world watch *ROOTS*. I know I am going to tell all my friends about it.

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TWEET and POST along with us while watching **ROOTS** – a virtual watch party! Tune in to **HISTORY®** May 30th–June 2nd. Join us each night and share your thoughts about **ROOTS**.

PREPARE by viewing video clips, interactives, discussion guides, background information and more at roots.History.com.

DISCUSS **ROOTS** and the role of slavery in American history. This can be a difficult topic to talk about, but an important one. As you learn from watching **ROOTS**, the history of slavery affects all of us. Visit roots.History.com for discussion guidelines and resources.

SHARE your own family history. Search for a photo of the oldest relative in your family and share it using #roots.

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EXPLORE the history of **ROOTS** by reading a background article about the topic: www.History.com/news/remembering-roots

REMEMBER that everyone can define their roots in more than one way. If you do not have access to parts of your family history, research the history of your hometown or interview an elder you admire.

KNOW HIS NAME Kunta Kinte is mentioned in dozens of songs and movies. Learn more about this important **ROOTS** character: www.History.com/shows/roots/videos/roots-know-his-name

YOUR NAME IS YOUR SHIELD. The power of one's name is a key theme in **ROOTS**. Explore the story or meaning of your own name or the name of one of your ancestors.

VOLUNTEER your time to Reading For Roots, an initiative to transcribe important Freedmen's Bureau documents. Visit www.History.com/readingforroots to get started.

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Viewer discretion is strongly advised.

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