

## Elizabeth Alexander

### The Negro Digs Up Her Past: “Amistad”

Whenever I teach fiction or poetry that could be called historical, I always ask my students, why then? As Ishmael Reed engages 1920s Harlem in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to ask questions about the new New Negro politics of the early 1970s in which the book was written, the possibilities and limitations of racialist thinking in the Black Arts era are well served by considering the changing same (to borrow Amiri Baraka’s phrase) in the 1920s. Of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, an interesting question might be, Why did this particular envisioning of slavery meet its zeitgeist moment in 1987? Yes, Morrison is a majestic writer, but clearly that book was born at the right time. Why is *Beloved* seen as more “historical” than *Sula* or *Song of Solomon*, which appear to be equivalently researched and detailed regarding everyday life in time and place? And so forth.

I live in New Haven, Connecticut. One day several years ago I was pushing my then-baby in the stroller and stopped in front of the New Haven Historical Society. Why hadn’t I ever been inside? I thought, so in we went. The society has a more or less permanent *Amistad*

exhibit on display. Of course, I have long known the story of the *Amistad* rebellion, but there at the historical society I saw things new to me: the letter the young boy Kale wrote to thank his Christian benefactors, newspaper clippings with detailed physical descriptions and silhouette illustrations of the captives, accounts of how they were let out to exercise on the New Haven Green during their long incarceration in the city while awaiting trial, and much more. A million questions grew from this story, which is such a centerpiece of African American history. Children on the *Amistad*? I only ever thought about Cinque. Kale's letter was in English cursive. Who taught him English, and how? What is the relationship between the Mendeland of 1839 and Sierra Leone of today? What became of the three little girls on board? How does a community survive without grown women? What was the role of Yale University professor Josiah Willard Gibbs, whose rudimentary translations helped the captives tell their story in court, and his Yale students? What did the New Haven Green I daily cross look like in the mid-nineteenth century? These were the kinds of very basic material questions about time, place, and people that led me to research more. What really happened to Cinque? I scrutinized Nathaniel Jocelyn's beautiful, quietly idealized portrait of the rebellion's storied hero and thought harder. Who was he and who was he not? What might he think of what's been done in his name? There is Cinque, and there are the many ideas of Cinque-as-Negro-Hero. A poem felt like the only way to explore all these questions simultaneously.

The more I learned—at the New Haven Historical Society and at other archives and libraries—the more I was able to take the imaginative leap into the poem. And I was able to think about the ground on which I walk every day, and what happened there. Now that we have come through the historical revisions of several black arts movements, and now that the academic field of history as such has expanded to give us a more readily available accounting of those stories, how might we imagine differently? Need we still be reverent toward our Negro heroes, or might we imagine their complexities and flaws? Are we able to hold on to all of our history, or is writing the continual reminding of what we once knew but need to repeat in order to continue knowing? Even the word *ancestor* has a heft to it, an unassailable gravitas, a stentorian demand. But I wanted to write a black history poem that was not just about stoicism. I also wanted to explore the past in the face of the aggressive ahistoricity that plagues and misnames this nation and is a tool for misleading the people.

One of the obvious predecessors of "Amistad" is Robert Hayden's short

epic "Middle Passage," which he first published in 1943 and continued to publish in revision as late as 1962. He researched the poem extensively in the 1930s and early 1940s, both at the Schomburg Collection (then known as the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library) and in his capacity as a researcher for the Federal Writers' Project in Michigan. "Middle Passage" was first published in *Phylon*, the preeminent journal W. E. B. Du Bois founded in 1939. The poem calls on archival materials to imagine life aboard those slave ships during the Middle Passage and features the character "Cinquez."

In his great 1940s sonnet "Frederick Douglass," Hayden meditated on the utility and shortfalls of heroism. The poem is about love, as the sonnet has always been, but of a love profounder than the romantic variety. Hayden is interested in the kind of difficult love of community that is not about answers, per se, and not about heroes, solely, but rather about the hard processes of living, facing struggle, and imagining strategies, the kind of heroism that is not about pedestals. Poetry is always implicitly enacting, "I don't want to forget this," which in the end works the same as the grander "This must be remembered."

In 1925 in *The New Negro*, the great collector Arthur Schomburg published the essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past." His opening still resonates: "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future." That's what the old folks say, and I think it is still true. Never have we had more material to work with, more archival sources and resources with which to explore and then imagine the past. And the imagination, in the history poem, can take up where written history stops. If we measure out Linda Brent's crawl space and let ourselves imagine seven minutes, let alone seven years, in such confines; if we contemplate the *Amistad* as a ship without mothers, the utter absence of mothers in a violently formed society; if we wonder what people dreamed in their captivity, we might begin to understand what they lost, what it took to build themselves up again, and what it might take to move forward. It is the unique potential of poetry to be able to locate and activate what is in the imagination. Art takes us to knowing that may have no other way of being found, and that is one of the very things we need in order to move more intelligently forward.

**Amistad*****Beginning***

After the tunnel of no return

After the roiling Atlantic, the black Atlantic, black and mucilaginous

After skin to skin in the hold and the picked handcuff locks

After the mutiny

After the fight to the death on the ship

After picked handcuff locks and the jump overboard

After the sight of no land and the zig-zag course

After the Babel which settles like silt into silence

and silence and silence, and the whack

of lashes and waves on the side of the boat

After the half cup of rice, the half cup of seawater

the dry swallow and silence

After the sight of no land

After two daughters sold to pay off a father's debt

After Cinque himself a settled debt

After white gulf between stanzas

the space at the end

the last quatrain

***The Blue Whale***

swam alongside the vessel for hours.

I saw her breach. The spray when she sounded  
soaked me (the lookout) on deck. I was joyous.

There her oily, rainbowed, lingering wake,  
ambergris print on the water's sheer skin,  
she skimmed and we skimmed and we speeded  
straight on toward home, on the glorious wind.

Then something told her, Turn (whales travel  
in pods and will beach themselves rather than split)—  
toward her pod?—and the way she turned was not  
our way. I begged and prayed and begged for her  
companionship, the guide light of her print,  
North Star (I did imagine) of her spout.

But she had elsewhere to go. I watched  
the blue whale's silver spout. It disappeared.

**Absence**

In the absence of women on board,  
when the ship reached the point where no landmass  
was visible in any direction  
and the funk had begun to accrue—  
human funk, spirit funk, soul funk—who  
commenced the moaning? Who first hummed that deep  
sound from empty bowels, roiling stomachs,  
from back of the frantically thumping heart?  
In the absence of women, of mothers,  
who found the note that would soon be called "blue,"  
the first blue note from one bowel, one throat,  
joined by dark others in gnarled harmony.  
Before the head rag, the cast-iron skillet,  
new blue awaited on the other shore,  
invisible, as yet unhummed. Who knew  
what note to hit or how? In the middle  
of the ocean, in the absence of women,  
there is no deeper deep, no bluer blue.

**boy haiku**

the motherless child  
rests his hand on a dead man's  
forehead 'til it cools.

**Poro Society**

Without leopard skin, leather,  
antelope horns, warthog tusks,  
crocodile jaws, raffia muffs,  
without the sacred bush,  
the primordial grove,  
our ancient initiations,  
we will find a way  
to teach the young man  
on board with us.  
We contend  
with the forces of evil  
in the universe.

Aggressive magic  
addresses the need for control  
in an imperfect world.

**Approach**

With shore in sight, the wind dies and we slow.  
Up from the water bobs a sleek black head  
with enormous dark eyes that question us:  
Who and what are you? Why? Then another  
and another and another of those  
faces, 'til our boat is all surrounded.

The dark creatures reveal themselves to be  
seals, New England gray seals, we later learn.  
They stare. We stare. Not all are blackest black:  
Some piebald, some the dull gray of the guns  
our captors used to steal and corral us,  
some the brown-black of our brothers, mothers,  
and two milky blue-eyed albino pups.  
Albino: the congenital absence  
of normal pigmentation. Something gone  
amiss. Anomaly, aberration.

**Connecticut**

They squint from shore  
at scarlet-shirted blackamoors.  
The battered boat sails in:  
White sky, black sea, black skin,  
a low black schooner,  
armed black men on deck  
in shawls, pantaloons,  
a Cuban planter's hat—  
Parched, starved,  
dressed in what they found  
in the dry goods barrels,  
the Africans squint

at trees not their trees,  
at shore not their shore.

**Other Cargo**

Saddles and bridles,  
bolts of ribbon,  
calico, muslin, silk,  
beans, bread, books,  
gloves, raisins, cologne,  
olives, mirrors, vermicelli,  
parasols, rice, black bombazine.

**Education**

In 1839, to enter university,  
the Yale men already knew Cicero,  
Dalzel's *Graeca Minora*, then learned more Latin prosody,  
Stiles on astronomy, Dana's mineralogy.  
Each year they named a class bully  
who would butt heads with sailors in town.  
"The first foreign heathen ever seen,"  
Obookiah, arrived from Hawaii in '09  
The most powerful telescope in America  
was a recent gift to the school  
and through it, they were first to see  
the blazing return of Halley's comet.  
Ebenezer Peter Mason  
and Hamilton Lanphere Smith  
spent all their free time at the instrument  
observing the stars, their systems,  
their movement and science and magic,  
pondering the logic of mysteries that twinkle.  
Some forty years before, Banneker's  
eclipse-predicting charts and almanacs  
had gone to Thomas Jefferson  
to prove "that nature has given our brethren

talents equal to other colors of men.”  
Benjamin Banneker, born free,  
whose people came from Guinea,  
who taught himself at twenty-two (the same age  
as the graduates) to carve entirely from wood  
a watch which kept exquisite time,  
accurate to the blade-sharp second.

***The Yale Men***

One by one the Yale men come  
to teach their tongue to these  
caged Africans so they might tell  
in court what happened on the ship  
and then, like Phillis Wheatley,  
find the Yale men's God  
and take him for their own.

***Teacher***

(Josiah Willard Gibbs)

I learn to count in Mende one to ten,  
then hasten to the New York docks to see  
if one of these black seamen is their kind.  
I run to one and then another, count.  
Most look at me as though I am quite mad.  
I've learned to count in Mende one to ten!  
I shout, exhausted as the long day ends  
and still no hope to know the captive's tale.  
Is any of these black seamen their kind?  
I'd asked an old Congo sailor to come  
to the jail, but his tongue was the wrong one,  
I learned. To count in Mende one to ten  
begin *eta, fili, kian-wa, naeni*.  
I spy a robust fellow loading crates  
Is this the black seaman who is their kind?

He stares at me as though I am in need,  
but tilts his head and opens up his ear  
and counts to me in Mende one to ten,  
this one at last, this black seaman, their kind.

**Translator**

(James Covey)

I was stolen from Mendeland as a child  
then rescued by the British ship *Buzzard*  
and brought to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

I love ships and the sea, joined this crew  
of my own accord, set sail as a teen,  
now resupplying in New York Harbor.

When the white professor first came to me  
babbling sounds, I thought he needed help  
until *weta*, my mother's *six*, hooked my ear  
and I knew what he was saying, and I knew  
what he wanted in an instant, for we had heard  
wild tales of black pirates off New London,  
the captives, the low black schooner like  
so many ships, an infinity of ships fatted  
with Africans, men, women, children  
as I was. Now it is my turn to rescue.

I have not spoken Mende in some years,  
yet every night I dream it, or silence.

To New Haven, to the jail. To my people.  
Who am I now? This them, not them. We burst  
with joy to speak and settle to the tale:

*We killed the cook, who said he would cook us.  
They rubbed gunpowder and vinegar in our wounds.  
We were taken away in broad daylight.*

And in a loud voice loud as a thousand waves  
I sing my father's song. It shakes the jail.  
I sing from my entire black body.

### Physiognomy

Monday, September 16, 1839

*Another of the captured Africans named Bulwa (or Woolwah) died on Saturday night. This is the third who has died in this city, and the thirteenth since their leaving Havana. One more remains sick in this city, the others having been removed to Hartford on Saturday, to await their trial on Tuesday the 17th. Several are still affected with the white flux, the disease which has proved fatal to so many of them.*

— *Daily Herald*, New Haven

Kimbo, 5 feet 6 inches, with mustaches and long beard, in middle life, calls himself Manding. Very intelligent, he counts thus: 1. eta, 2. fili, 3. kian-wa, 4. naeni, 5. loelu, 6. weta, 7. wafura, 8. wayapa, 9. ta-u, 10. pu.

Shuma, 5 feet 6 inches, spoke over the corpse of Tha after Reverend Mister Bacon's prayer.

Konoma, 5 feet 4 inches with incisor teeth pressed outward and filed, with large lips and projecting mouth, tattooed on the forehead.

Calls himself Congo (Congo of Ashmun's map of Liberia, or Kanga, or Vater)

They are represented by travelers as handsome. They are supposed to be more ancient of the soil than Timmaris. Their language, according to Port Chad, is distinct from any other.

Biah, 5 feet 4½ inches with remarkably pleasant countenance with hands whitened by scars from gunpowder. Calls himself Duminah (Timmari).

Counts also in Timmari.

He counts in Bullom thus:

He counts in Manding like Kwong.

With face broad in the middle  
With sly and mirthful countenance (rather old)  
With full Negro features  
With hair shorn in rows from behind  
With permanent flexion of two fingers on right hand  
A mere boy, calls himself Manding  
With depression of skull from a wound from the forehead  
Tattooed on breast  
With narrow and high head  
With large head and high cheekbones  
Marked on face by the smallpox  
Stout and fleshy  
Teme, 4 feet 3 inches, a young girl  
calls herself Congo but when further interrogated  
says her parents were Congo, she a Manding.  
Observe that in this examination  
no one when asked for his name  
gave any other than an African name.  
No one when asked  
to count counted in any  
language other than African.  
There was no appearance in any of them,  
so far as I could judge,  
of having been from Africa more than two or three months.

**Constitutional**

Mary Barber's children beg their mother  
to take them into town each day to see  
the Africans on the New Haven Green  
let out of their cells for movement and air.  
A New York shilling apiece to the jailer  
who tucks away coins in a full suede purse.  
The children push through skirts, past waistcoats,  
to see the Africans turn somersets.

In the open air, in the bright sunlight,  
the Africans chatter, and sound to  
the children like blackbirds or cawing gulls.  
The Africans spring. The Africans do not smile.

***Mende Vocabulary***

they  
my father  
our father  
your father  
my mother  
our mother  
my book  
his house  
one ship  
two men  
all men  
good man  
bad man  
white man  
black man  
  
I eat  
he eats  
we eat  
they sleep  
I see God  
did I say it right?  
we sleep  
I make  
he makes  
they have eaten  
this book is mine  
that book is his  
this book is ours  
I am your friend  
here  
now

that  
there  
then

**The Girls**

Mar-gru, Te-me, Ke-re,  
the three little girls onboard.  
In Connecticut  
they stay with Pendleton  
the jailer and his wife.  
Some say they are slaves  
in that house. The lawyer  
comes to remove them,  
but they cling to their hosts,  
run screaming through the snow  
instead of go. Cinque comes  
and speaks in their language  
with much agitation.  
Do you fear Pendleton? *No.*  
Do you fear the lawyer? *No.*  
Do you fear Cinque? *No.*  
Who or what do you fear?  
*The men, they say, the men.*  
The girls will become Christians.  
They will move to Farmington  
with the Mende mission  
and return to Sierra Leone.  
One will return to America  
to attend college at Oberlin.  
They will be called Sarah,  
Maria, and Charlotte.

**Kere's Song**

My brother would gather the salt crust.  
My grandmother would boil it gray to white.  
My mother boated in the near salt river,  
grabbed fat fish from the water with bare hands.

Women paint their faces with white clay and dance  
 to bring girls into our society, our  
 secrets, our womanhood, our community.  
 The clay-whitened faces of my mothers  
 are what I see in my dreams, and hear  
 drum-songs that drown girls' cries after  
 they have been cut to be made women.  
 If someone does evil, hags ride them  
 all night and pummel them to exhaustion.  
 Hags slip off their skins and leave them  
 in the corner during such rambles.  
 At my grandmother's grave, cooked chicken, red rice,  
 and water to sustain her on her journey.  
 I was learning the secrets of Sande  
 when they brought me here, before my dance,  
 before my drum, before my Sande song.

**Judge Judson**

These negroes are *bozals*  
 (those recently from Africa)  
 not *ladinos*  
 (those long on the island)  
 and were imported  
 in violation of the law.  
 The question remains:  
 What disposition shall be made  
 of these negroes?  
 Bloody may be their hands  
 yet they shall  
 embrace their kindred.  
 Cinqueze and Grabeau  
 shall not sigh for Africa  
 in vain

and once remanded  
they shall no longer  
be here.

***In Cursive***

Westville, February 9, 1841

Miss Chamberlain and others,  
I will write you a few lines  
because I love you very much  
and I want you to pray to the great God to make us free  
and give us new souls and pray for African people.

He sent his beloved son into the world  
to save sinners who were lost. He sent  
the Bible into the world to save us  
from going down to hell, to make us turn from sin.

I heard Mr. Booth say you give five dollars  
to Mr. Townsend for African people. I thank you  
and hope the great God will help you and bless you  
and hear you and take you up to Heaven when you die.

I want you to pray to the great God make us free  
and go our home and see our friends in African Country.  
I want the great God love me very much and forgive all my sins.  
All Mendi people thank you for your kindness.

Hope to meet you in heaven. Your friend, Kale

***God***

There is one God in Farmington, Connecticut,  
another in Mendeland.

None listen.

None laugh, but none have listened.

We will sail home carrying Bibles  
and wearing calico.

The journey this time  
is seven weeks.

If we find our mothers,  
children, fathers, brothers,  
sisters, aunties, uncles,  
cousins, friends,  
if we find them,  
we will read to them  
(we read this book)  
the God stories in our Bibles.  
That is the price for the ticket home  
to Mendeland  
for us the decimated three years hence.

***Waiting for Cinque to Speak***

Having tried,  
having tried, having failed,  
having raised rice  
that shimmered green, green,  
having planted and threshed.  
Having been a man, having sired children,  
having raised my rice, having amassed a bit of debt,  
having done nothing remarkable.  
Years later it would be said  
the Africans were snatched into slavery, then,  
that we were sold by our own into slavery, then,  
that those of our own who sold us  
never imagined chattel slavery,  
the other side of the Atlantic.  
Having amassed debt, I was taken to settle that debt.  
(Not enough rice in the shimmering green.)  
Better me than my daughter or son. (I was strong.)  
And on the ship I met my day  
as a man must meet his day.  
Out of the Babel of Wolof and Kisse  
we were made of the same flour and water, it happened,  
on the ship, I met my day.

**The Amistad Trail**

The Amistad Trail bus  
leaves from the commuter parking lot,  
exit 37 off Highway 84.  
There is interest in this tale.

See where the girls lived while waiting  
for the boat to sail home, see Cinque's room,  
the Farmington church where they learned  
to pray to Jesus, Foone's grave.

Good things: Eventual justice, John Quincy Adams,  
black fighting back, white helping black.  
Bad things: the fact of it, price of the ticket,  
the footnote, the twist, and the rest—

Done took my blues  
Done took my blues and  
—the good and the bad of it.  
Preach it: Learn. Teach it: Weep.

Done took my blues.  
Done took my blues and gone.  
The verse will not resolve.  
The blues that do not end.

**Cinque Redux**

I will be called bad motherfucker.  
I will be venerated.  
I will be misremembered.  
I will be Seng-Pieh, Cinqueze, Joseph,  
and end up CINQUE.  
I will be remembered  
as upstart, rebel, rabble-rouser, leader.  
My name will be taken by black men  
who wish to be thought RIGHTEOUS.  
My portrait will be called "The Black Prince."  
Violent acts will be committed in my name.  
My face will appear on Sierra Leonean currency

I will not proudly sail the ship home  
but will go home, where I will not sell slaves,  
then will choose to sail off  
to a new place: Jamaica, West Indies.  
In America, they called us "Amistads."  
The cook we killed, Celestino, was mulatto.  
Many things are true at once.

Yes I drew my hand across my throat  
in the courtroom, at that cur Ruiz  
to hex his thieving, killing self.  
Yes I scuffled here and there instead of immolate.  
Yes I flaunted my gleam and spring.  
No I did not smile.  
No I never forgot the secret teachings  
of my fathers. No I never forgot  
who died on board, who died on land,  
who did what to whom, who will die  
in the future, which I see  
unfurling like the strangest dream

***The Last Quatrain***

and where now  
and what now  
the black white space