

Introduction

Rebellious Histories

One-hundred-fifty-three years after the *Amistad* shipboard slave rebellion, young Sierra Leonean men celebrated the country's April 29, 1992, military coup by parading a twenty-foot-long papier-mâché replica of the *Amistad* schooner through their capital city's streets.¹ With a measure of success as improbable as the 1839 slave uprising, the twenty-seven-year-old army captain Valentine Strasser and a cadre of fellow junior military officers had just toppled the seemingly omnipotent governing regime whose twenty-four-year reign of profiteering had driven the country to civil war. Self-described revolutionaries, the new military rulers promised a quick end to the war and to political vice. For the country's young male celebrants, the *Amistad* slave rebellion captured all the symbolism of the coup: resistance to dehumanizing economic exploitation, self-rule over illegitimate governance, and youthful idealism over aged corruption. The *Amistad* history also offered the young men a direct lineage to the nineteenth-century slave rebels with whom they shared a common history. Like the coup's young supporters, Sengbe Pieh and his fellow rebels hailed from communities inside the modern boundary lines of the Sierra Leonean nation-state and could be claimed as fellow Sierra Leoneans. In a nation whose capital, Freetown, was established by successive waves of Africans liberated from American plantations and from slave vessels captured by the British navy after the diplomatically negotiated end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the *Amistad* mutineers' narrative of escape from enslavement in the Americas and return to Africa as free men and women resonated all the more powerfully. As one young man exclaimed, "Sengbe Pieh and Captain Strasser are the same person—both revolutionaries" (Opala 10). For nearly a year after the coup, Sierra Leone's young, mostly urban, often undereducated and underemployed young men used the *Amistad* revolt to shape the popular interpretation

of their government with plays about the slave rebellion and a public art campaign that covered city walls throughout the country with portraits of *Amistad* leader Sengbe Pieh, Valentine Strasser, and a panoply of supporting heroes.

For the young Sierra Leonean men who reclaimed the history of the *Amistad* rebellion in this moment of political upheaval, the 1839 slave revolt resonated both politically and culturally. But it did so far more deeply, however, than as a simple political warning sign to corrupt politicians or as a cultural marker of an “imagined community” constructing a heroic past for itself (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*). The exuberant rhetoric of revolution broadcasted by the young participants overshadowed a more carefully considered examination of the libratory narratives of postcolonial nationalism in light of the reterritorializing imperatives of global capitalism. Discussing his reasons for featuring *Amistad* leader Sengbe Pieh among the public portraits he painted in Freetown in the months following the 1992 coup, visual artist and secondary school history teacher Josee Lahai explained:

You go to school, come to the United States, because the United States is like really the heaven where you come, educate yourself, and go back to Sierra Leone, get a good job, you know have your family, live well. So, now when we thought about Sengbe Pieh . . . we thought other Sierra Leoneans have come to the United States and have survived and succeeded . . . So we youngsters thought . . . one day Sierra Leoneans would have easy access to the United States like the United States people have easy access to Sierra Leone. (Lahai interview)

For Lahai, Sengbe Pieh’s refusal to submit to an earlier manifestation of global economic exploitation symbolizes the possibility of harnessing U.S. political and economic hegemony. With this argument, Lahai simultaneously frames the modern condition of postcolonial national citizenship in Sierra Leone as one in which physical presence within the geographical boundaries of the nation-state is replaced by a citizenship of extended transnational migration. Implicit in Lahai’s declaration that young Sierra Leoneans see their best chances for individual betterment in an economic sojourn to the United States is a sense that the long-term success of the Sierra Leonean nation itself requires the migration of its most able bodied. Given the general patriotic fervor of the arts movement

as a whole, Lahai's *Amistad*-informed redefinition of citizenship reveals a complicated understanding of the nation and global capital and of the way that the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is apprehended. More than a simple heroic narrative for the young manufacturers of a new national imaginary, the history of the *Amistad* slave rebellion functions allegorically to help frame a critique of the postcolonial nation under global capitalism.

By no means are the young Sierra Leoneans alone in recognizing the resonance of the *Amistad* rebellion in the workings of contemporary transnational culture. Twenty-two years prior to the celebratory march through Freetown and several thousand miles to the west in California, San Quentin Prison-inmate Ruchell Magee began signing his name Ruchell "Cinque" Magee to articles published in *The Black Panther Paper* and *The Berkeley Barb*, adopting *Amistad*-rebellion leader Sengbe Pieh's Hispanicized moniker, *Joseph Cinque*, as his own. In the U.S. context, the *Amistad*'s story of armed liberation from illegitimate servitude offers a potent retelling of the American foundational myth of revolutionary struggle, and does so in a way that incorporates—rather than excludes—acts of rebellion by people of color. What is particularly striking for Magee is that the *Amistad* also functions in much the same way as it does for Lahai to comprehend the racialized effects of global capital. Incarcerated almost continually since he was fifteen, the thirty-year-old Magee chose Cinque's name at the moment he faced his most serious criminal charges and his political critique of the racist and capitalist structure of the American penal system gained a public audience. Led by Jonathon Jackson, brother of famed prison revolutionary George Jackson, Magee and two other African American inmates took over the San Rafael courthouse in California's Marin County in August 1970. Proclaimed by the Black Panthers and other radicals on the American Left to be the first shot in the imminent revolution ("We Are the Revolution" 2), the armed action in San Rafael ended abruptly in a hail of bullets that left one hostage and all three of Magee's accomplices dead and Angela Davis famously charged with conspiracy. For Magee, the relative fame stemming from the Marin events gave new impetus to his efforts to historicize incarceration—which he argued was a component of U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia and elsewhere—as a direct outgrowth of plantation slavery and the trans-Atlantic capitalism that perpetuated it. Imprisonment, then, was nothing less than a modern-day form of slavery within a global capitalist system. And, as Cinque, Magee cast himself as a twentieth-century slave

rebel at the helm of an incipient worldwide revolution to end enslavement once and for all.

While slave rebellions often live on for generations in the cultural memory of the communities with the most at stake in the outcome of the uprising, the memory often slips to the back of the collective consciousness only to resurface and take on new life in moments of danger when the circumstances and utopian aspirations of the earlier slave rebellion resonate particularly strongly, as the *Amistad* did in Sierra Leone during the year following the 1992 military coup or as it did for Ruchell Magee in 1970. Retaining such images “of the past which unexpectedly [appear] to man singled out a moment of danger,” Walter Benjamin asserts, protects both “the tradition and its receivers . . . from becoming tools of the ruling classes” (Benjamin 255). For Benjamin, isolating that moment when the image of the past appears, comprehending its content, and analyzing the historical condition of its recipients safeguards a counterhistory resistant to capitalism’s totalizing narratives. As especially adept vehicles for conceptualizing “the telos of black struggles” (Adé̀kò 1), armed uprisings against enslavement remain among the most potent expressions of the will to freedom from the subjugating forces of individual slave owners, the legal and economic structures in which those slave owners operate, and the philosophical discourses governing state-sanctioned global slave economies. C. L. R. James, for whom the memory of the Haitian Revolution was singled out during the global tumult of the 1930s, asserts this point forcefully in *The Black Jacobins* when he proclaims that “the transformation of slaves, trembling in the hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle” (ix), and as such must serve as a powerful example to colonized Africans and trembling Europeans alike.² For as easy as it is to celebrate slave revolts, James is careful to note, however, that if the black Jacobins of San Domingo “could seize opportunity they could not create it” (25). In other words, the slave rebel’s unequivocal claim to his or her liberty obliges subsequent historians, cultural producers, and activists alike to consider also the problems of agency and resistance within the dominant epistemologies underwriting chattel slavery, colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism. In moments of heightened danger, slave rebellions crystallize the historical conditions of possibility, enabling and limiting alike.

During Jim Crow, the Great Depression, and the militant black nationalism of the late 1960s, slave rebellion texts proliferated as writers

and artists grappled with the unrealized promises of the freedom imagined by enslaved Africans in centuries past.³ Given that slave rebellions so powerfully evoke utopian longings and the problems of agency, resistance, race, nation, and historical practice, even interrupted uprisings such as those associated with Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and the Stono plantation served as forceful symbols of the will to freedom in bleak times. In fact, their “failure” provided the added opportunity to reflect on the economic and social structural obstacles to effecting societal transformation. For Arna Bontemps, for example, who wrote novels during the 1930s about both the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel Prosser’s 1800 aborted uprising in Virginia, organized slave rebellion on the scale that the two men envisioned offered a model of revolution for a radicalized global proletariat. But, in Bontemps’ estimation, Prosser’s failure to account for the African cosmologies that still shaped the slaves’ worldview was equally instructive for leaders of the 1930s who would need to work as much with the cultural consciousness of the proletariat as to radicalize it.⁴ For Aimé Césaire, too, developing a political consciousness attentive to possibilities and limits of slave rebellion was key to achieving freedom from racism and colonialism. In his epic poem “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal,” begun in 1939, Haiti is where “negritude got up on its feet for the first time and said it believed in its humanity” (Césaire 67), and Toussaint Louverture “is the medium through which Césaire acquires self-knowledge and envisions the consciousness necessary for liberation within the context of colonization” (Hurley 111).⁵

As my opening examples about Josee Lahai and Ruchell “Cinque” Magee attest, the *Amistad* slave rebellion gives artists a multivalent Atlanticwide counterhistory to capitalism’s totalizing narratives during moments of acute danger just like the Haitian revolution and Gabriel Prosser’s uprising did for Césaire and Bontemps. In the same way that the crises in Europe and its colonies, mass poverty at home, and the radicalization of American intellectuals and workers catalyzed counterhegemonic historical narratives in the 1930s, a civil war fought in Sierra Leone over the spoils of the global diamond trade and the disproportionately racialized violence of the American carceral system, itself symptomatic of globalizing capitalist forces, triggered explorations of the historical and allegorical meanings of enslavement and resistance during the final decades of the twentieth century. Between 1970 and the late 1990s, Lahai and Magee were joined in revisiting the *Amistad* rebellion by a wide cast of actors with divergent, and sometimes competing, claims to the emergent order

of late capitalism: the Sierra Leonean playwrights Charlie Haffner, Raymond DeSouza-George, and Yulisa Amadu Maddy; the Sierra Leonean artists Alusine Bangura, Amadu Tarawalie, Mustapha Lawal Turay, and Chernoh Bah; the Sierra Leonean government; the United States Information Service in Sierra Leone; the African American novelists Barbara Chase-Riboud and Clifford Mason; Hollywood filmmaker Steven Spielberg; and even the cultish Symbionese Liberation Army. The three-decade span also generated an opera libretto, a comic book, two collections of essays on African American culture and politics, numerous popular histories, sculptures on both sides of the Atlantic, and an art gallery and publishing imprint named after the shipboard rebellion.⁶ In an era defined by the global reterritorializations of late capitalism, the collapse of the narratives of decolonization, and the rhetoric liberal multiculturalism, the specter of the *Amistad* rebellion flashed up again and again in novels, on stage and screen, in murals, and in political writing in what may be the two most geopolitically distinct locations at this time—Sierra Leone and the United States—to lay bare the racialized, regional stratifications undergirding the seemingly triumphant advance of the capitalist world order.

That the *Amistad* rebellion would capture popular attention at this time, like the Haitian Revolution did in the 1930s, is not surprising because few individual uprisings illuminate the material history of Atlantic capitalism and its symbolic imaginary more than the revolt that took place in the early morning hours of July 1, 1839, when fifty-three Africans broke their chains, took up a cache of cane knives, and escaped a ship's hold to kill the captain and cook, force two ship hands overboard, and shackle the two Spaniards who had recently purchased them at auction. Once liberated, the Mende and Temne men and women attempted to sail the schooner from Cuba back to their home in West Africa. While the mutiny ultimately resulted in the successful completion of the return trip, the initial freedom that it secured was short-lived. Unschooled in navigation, Sengbe Pieh, Grabeau, Burnah, and the other mutineers found themselves at the mercy of the Spaniards, Pedro Montes and José Ruiz, to sail the ship. With radically opposing interests to their African masters, the Spaniards sailed east by day and west by night, ensuring that the *Amistad* never strayed far from North America. On August 25, after slowly zigzagging northward for nearly two months, during which time eight of the Africans died, the *Amistad* dropped anchor near Montauk, New York, where the rebels hoped to find fresh water and a skilled captain who would be willing to trade his services for possession of the

schooner. While a delegation of the rebels sought out resources on shore, the *Amistad* was sighted, approached, and boarded by the crew of the U.S. naval ship *Washington*, who hoped to make a salvage claim for the ship as well as for its flesh-and-blood occupants. Hurriedly rowing back out to the *Amistad*, the shore party arrived too late to avoid capture and were seized anew and transported to New London, Connecticut, where they were jailed on piracy charges and made the curious objects of a legal battle over the regulation of international commerce, national sovereignty, and, of course, the natural right to liberty. By its conclusion a year and a half later in the U.S. Supreme Court, the drama involved no less than the queen of Spain and U.S. presidents Martin Van Buren and John Quincy Adams.⁷

In a nation riddled with the tense contradictions of enslavement and still shaken by the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, the Africans aboard the *Amistad* sparked a firestorm of media attention, but none more than the vocal and charismatic Sengbe Pieh. Identified later by the other mutineers as the leader of the revolt, Sengbe gained added fame for imploring his fellows to one last stand against the U.S. naval officers even as they were being reshackled, a fiery speech that though indecipherable by the Americans present was widely reported in the press. Declared a savage pirate by the proslavery papers and a “lover of liberty” in the tradition of “Webster,” “Washington and the heroes of the revolution” by the antislavery press, Sengbe Pieh was singled out as either a dangerous threat to the fabric of American society or a noble embodiment of the core values of the American revolutionary spirit (Sale 101, 108). For the abolitionists in particular, Sengbe Pieh’s ascension from a modest farmer to a captive of roving slave merchants and, ultimately, to a leader of a rebellion against tyranny fueled their cause by powerfully legitimating the natural rights claims with which so many of them justified their demand for the end of slavery.

The public contest over the *Amistad* rebellion’s symbolic significance unfolded against the backdrop of a courtroom battle in which claims over the Africans’ right to resist slavery and, in fact, their very status as human beings competed with, and were often overshadowed by, legal wrangling over the regulation of international commerce. In many ways, the case served as a much more important juridical test for nineteenth-century global capitalism than for the constitutionality of slavery. Ruiz and Montes, the *U.S.S. Washington*’s captain, and the white men the Africans encountered near Montauk all filed salvage claims for the ship

and its human cargo. Quickly, both the queen of Spain and prominent U.S. abolitionists entered the fray. Wanting neither to give up its sovereignty rights nor to cede economic power over Caribbean trade, the Spanish monarch invoked a treaty that would force the United States to give up the mutineers and the ship (Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad* 52). The abolitionists sensed an opportunity in the plight of the mutineers to generate a nationwide emotional and moral debate over the problem of slavery. Hence, they submitted writs of habeas corpus, which, if acted upon by the judge, would force the courts to concede that the Africans were human and, therefore, not property on which salvage claims could be made (63). Moreover, once James Covey, a Mende interpreter, was found, and the Africans told their version of events, revealing that they had been born in the Mende region of West Africa and not Cuba as the Spaniards claimed, the abolitionist supporters fashioned a much more advantageous second line of legal defense predicated on a series of international treaties that had banned all transatlantic slave trading. In the end, attorney Roger Baldwin's unflagging efforts to prove that the Africans had been transported in violation of the treaties banning the transatlantic slave trade and former president John Quincy Adams' argument that President Van Buren had exceeded executive power in his attempts to sway the outcome of the case culminated in legal victory. The abolitionists prevailed, and the *Amistad* mutineers, against overwhelming odds, were set free.⁸

Theirs was not, nor would ever be, a completely unqualified triumph. For the next half year, Sengbe Pieh and his comrades traveled throughout New England to raise funds for the return trip by speaking and performing in front of church congregations and antislavery societies, where they recited the prayers and hymns that their Christian abolitionist allies compelled them to memorize, performed acrobatics, sang songs in their native Mende language, and otherwise subjected themselves to involuntary self-display and the performative racial spectacle typical of the nineteenth century (Sale 96).⁹ Their return, too, underscores what an ambivalent success the revolt was, for it highlights how deeply the trans-Atlantic slave trade decimated the African political and economic landscape and how drastically the continent was about to be radically transformed by colonialism. Upon his long-awaited return to his village, Sengbe Pieh found his wife, children, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and his entire village, in fact, vanished, all swallowed by the voracious appetite of the slave trade. Their disappearance derogated the

victories that he won in his quest to attain the anticipated pleasure and relief of homecoming. Moreover, neither he nor the other mutineers, nor any other inhabitant of Mendeland for that matter, would ever be able to escape fully the patronizing and paternalistic oversight by white Westerners, for the Christian mission set up by the white Americans accompanying the *Amistad* mutineers would eventually blossom and later be turned over to the British-based United Brethren of Christ Church (UBC), which, in turn, paved the path for British colonization of what was to become Sierra Leone (Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt* 64, 67).¹⁰ Even though Sengbe Pieh quickly abandoned the mission, he never really escaped its shadow. His unwillingness to aid the missionaries led them to brand him a heathen and a slave trader in their reports; and while never substantiated, the rumors highlight the hypocritical racial paternalism embedded in the rhetoric of civilization and conversion that the British colonial invaders were beginning to deploy in justifying their scramble for Africa.¹¹

When this image of the past flashed up one-hundred-fifty years later, its primary recipients were writers, visual artists, activists, and other organic intellectuals on the streets of cities like Freetown, behind bars in U.S. prisons, or otherwise severed from global intellectual communities. With the exception of Hollywood director Steven Spielberg and, perhaps, novelist Barbara Chase-Riboud, they were also among the most vulnerable to the violence of emergent forms of economic production and accumulation. As a historical antecedent to contemporary racialized capitalist exploitation and as an allegory for how individuals adapt, appropriate, and deflate those global economic forces to their own lives, the *Amistad* slave rebellion, I argue here in *Rebellious Histories*, provides these writers and artists a crucial locally resonant formulation to analyze the social conditions of late capitalism. As a revolt that took place on the open waters of the Atlantic by Africans yet to see a plantation, and as a revolt that led its protagonists into the heart of a legal battle over questions of national sovereignty and the legalities of international trade, the *Amistad* rebellion focuses attention, in ways that, say, Nat Turner's rebellion or Denmark Vesey's cannot, on how both continental and diasporic Africans engage and are engaged by the global flows of bodies, cultural practices, nationalist ideologies, and capital. Carried out on a slave ship—that vessel that Paul Gilroy describes as the defining chronotope of Atlantic capitalism and the forms of dissent organized against it (17)—by men and women who only recently had been captured and redefined as chattel, the *Amistad* rebellion powerfully symbolizes contemporary

patterns of racialized, global inequality as well as the complex dynamics of black transnational subject formation within the global networks of capitalist production, past and present.¹² For all the triumph the young Sierra Leonean men saw in the *Amistad* victory, the narrative also signals the fraught dynamics of resistance. After all, the *Amistad* mutineers' efforts to claim their freedom placed them in complicated position to the white American abolitionists, including former U.S. president John Quincy Adams, on whom they were dependent to navigate the U.S. legal system. To contemporary African communities subject to NGOs, foreign aid packages, visa application officers, and IMF programs, the *Amistad* mutineers' situation rings strikingly familiar.¹³

In the way that Toussaint L'Ouverture's assertion of a radical vision of Enlightenment freedom in San Domingo repeatedly sparks efforts to work through the Enlightenment's problematic racial and colonial legacies, the *Amistad* rebellion potently indexes a range of material and epistemological tensions at the heart of contemporary global capital's reconfiguration of culture and subjectivity.¹⁴ As the frisson of Josee Lahai's patriotic nation-state nationalism and simultaneous faith in the redemptive promise of transnational migration reveals, the *Amistad* narrative speaks directly to the persistent incommensurability of liberal national citizenship and black transnationalism. Despite the disciplinary efforts of modern nationalism to produce "compliant national citizens" (Appadurai 190), subjectivity for Africans and African Americans alike continues to operate along different sets of borders than national citizenship, overlapping in significant ways, but nevertheless exceeding and transgressing the boundary markers laid out by the interpellating powers of the state. Subjectivity in this regard is transnational: rooted in the nation-state and simultaneously routed across its borders, mirroring the transatlantic, transnational circuits taken by the *Amistad* mutineers and their supporters. As a result, postcolonial Africans such as Lahai and their counterparts in the diaspora continue to negotiate the conflicting forces of national citizenship and transnational subjectivity. In the United States, the intersection of Enlightenment claims that blackness is incompatible with the modernity of national citizenship with the state-sponsored violence of chattel slavery and segregation have left "the African diaspora's consciousness of itself . . . defined in and against constricting national boundaries," thereby "making Afro-diasporic people's relation to the nation-state 'contingent and partial'" (Hanchard 248). As scholarship on citizenship and political subjectivity in Africa shows, colonial policy and pedagogy, postcolonial patrimonial politics,

and the transnationalization of primary production have generated similar disjunctures.¹⁵ However, the enduring hegemony of nation-state nationalisms reproduces the binaries insider/outsider, citizen/foreigner, nation/race that make critical analysis of political and subject formations that cross borders and resist binary categorization so challenging. Moreover, postcolonial nationalism's persistent grip on the practices of epistemological decolonization—that is, to define “a discursive space outside of the Western way of knowing” (George 75–76)—still delimits efforts to imagine transformation outside the rubric of the nation-state.¹⁶ In its elaboration of the dynamics of black transnationalism as it is produced at the intersection of local and global hegemonies, the *Amistad* narrative offers its contemporary interpreters rich critical valences for exploring contemporary modes of knowing and interpreting in the wake of the unrealized and, likely, unrealizable promise of nationalist decolonization.

In the process of forging locally specific, historically informed analytical frameworks for theorizing place, nation, and globalization, the American and Sierra Leonean authors who turn their attention to the *Amistad* history face the challenge of developing a historical practice attentive to the material legacy of slave-trade-era capitalism in the present, without, however, emptying the signifier *enslavement* of its historical and political specificity. Some, such as African American prison writer and antiprison activist Ruchell “Cinque” Magee, unapologetically assert that labor conditions in the contemporary global economy continue undifferentiated from plantation slavery. Others, such as African American detective novelist Clifford Mason whose protagonist, Joe Cinquez, uses his sleuthing skills to halt the economic exploitation of African and African diaspora communities, do not go so far as Magee but do suggest that neoliberal capitalism's production of contemporary black communities and black subjectivities shares clear affinities with the slave-trade economies of the past. In Sierra Leone, where the capital city was founded by liberated slaves from the Americas and where those liberated slaves were almost immediately placed under colonial control by their British benefactors even while the trans-Atlantic slave trade raged on unabated just outside of the city's environs, playwrights such as Charlie Haffner and Raymond DeSouza-George do not so much disentangle the historical forces of enslavement, colonial governmentality, and neoliberal late capitalism as they use the *Amistad* narrative to highlight their ongoing mutual constitution. As cultural texts mining and shaping the material of the cultural imaginary, neither the North American nor African *Amistad*

works shy away from making historical claims about global capitalism's history in the trans-Atlantic slave trade or about colonialism's entanglement in this genealogy. Thus, they are no less valuable for the ethical demands they place on historians or for intervening in debates about colonialism's place in the longer history of global capitalism or over the "value of postcolonial studies in our globalizing world" (Loomba et al. 2). Moreover, by contrasting the utopian ideals of the *Amistad* mutineers with contemporary conditions of poverty, inequality, and "failed" nationalisms in places like Sierra Leone, their texts reveal how incomplete the projects for liberation remain and demonstrate, too, the persistence of specific structural inequalities inherent to the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the practices of contemporary global capitalist production, accumulation, and consumption.

The one other scholarly work that compares contemporary Sierra Leonean and American *Amistad* revolt narratives, Iyunolu Folayan Osagie's *The Amistad Revolt: Memory, Slavery, and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone* (2000) provides a valuable employment of the multiple avenues by which the revolt history has reentered collective memory. Osagie's analysis does not, however, interrogate its assumption that all humanity strives toward stable, coherent national identity. Arguing that the revolt's "reappearance as a collective act of memory is influencing and revitalizing nation-building and cultural identity" (xiv), Osagie proposes that we read these texts as critical interventions seeking to resolve the racial crises confronting the United States and the impoverishing effects of postcolonial tyranny in Sierra Leone, without, however, investigating the ways in which the works might critique the very foundations on which the nation-state rests as a political construct. Therefore, Osagie's otherwise compelling thesis that the work of collective memory involved in recovering the *Amistad* history represents an important development in the production of African American and Sierra Leonean national identities leaves the nation-state itself unproblematized and the cultural effects of globalization obscured. For me, the *Amistad* texts demand our critical attention precisely because they challenge the very national categories and transnational effects that Osagie takes for granted.¹⁷

By assessing the material and epistemological tensions produced where global capitalism exacerbates contradictions of subjectivity and citizenship as they are explored in this body of texts, I trace in *Rebellious Histories* the contours of a popular cultural critique of modernity and its history as a part of the global capital networks of the Atlantic world. The

writers, visual artists, and activists for whom the *Amistad* rebellion resonates most are not those whose voices are typically heard in debates over the meanings of globalization and modernity. Some, like Sierra Leonean street art painter Josee Lahai and African American detective novelist Clifford Mason, have been overlooked by scholars altogether. Others, like Steven Spielberg and Barbara Chase-Riboud, are well known but not commonly recognized as participants in a discourse on transnationalism. By looking at the writings, actions, and visual art by such culture producers, *Rebellious Histories* explores the way that Atlantic capitalism, modernity, and their histories are understood by individuals and groups outside the structures of authority that shape hegemonic discourse—by this I mean both political and economic authorities as well as transnational theorists working in the academy. *Rebellious Histories* is also attentive to the publics for which their *Amistad* texts were, and, in some cases, continue to be produced.¹⁸ With the exception of Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* and, perhaps, Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel *Echo of Lions*, the texts I examine target highly localized audiences and, thus, facilitate the formation of local public spheres—Lahai's paintings, for example, were seen by few outside of the rough-and-tumble area around Freetown's dockyards (made famous in the global north by Graham Greene's novel *The Heart of the Matter*) where they generated discussion and debate about the slave-trading past and the natural resource- and arms-trading present.

Rebellious Histories reads the body of *Amistad* texts as a counterdiscourse to hegemonic intellectual formulations of globalization's modernity and its history, in other words, as rebellious histories. But, like any discourse, it is only legible and its governing structures only apparent when the individual texts are read in tandem. Of the dozen texts I examine, only Sierra Leonean playwright Raymond DeSouza-George's play *The Broken Handcuff*, Clifford Mason's novels *The Case of the Ashanti Gold* and *Jamaica Run*, and Ruchell "Cinque" Magee's antiprison writings explicitly reference contemporary modes of capitalist accumulation or practices of black transnationalism. Yet even texts that do not overtly signal the context of their production, like Spielberg's film *Amistad*, reveal their ideological investment in debates over U.S. national sovereignty and black transnationalism when read within the larger body of works. Focused as I am on the confluences of the *Amistad* materials, I am no less alert to the fissures, disjunctures, and gaps between and among individual texts, especially across the Atlantic divide where historical, economic, and political disparities radically differentiate lived experience. In fact, while

connected historically via the rebellion they recall and via the liberated African American slaves who returned to Africa to settle Freetown in the eighteenth century, the Americans and Sierra Leoneans produced their works on the *Amistad* slave revolt largely in isolation from each other. It was not, in fact, until the mid-1990s when Steven Spielberg hired the Sierra Leonean author of a United States Information Service pamphlet on the rebellion as a consultant for his film *Amistad* that Americans and Sierra Leoneans actively collaborated across the Atlantic, and only then because of Hollywood's disproportionate global influence and capital. The absence of direct dialogue is itself symptomatic of the stark economic inequalities that hinder African access to global publishing and distribution markets and obstruct all but the most mainstream Hollywood products from circulating in places like Sierra Leone. To read the trans-Atlantic discourse generated by the *Amistad* texts with recognition of the disjunctures and gaps is to articulate, as Brent Hayes Edwards does in *The Practice of Diaspora*, a discourse "of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor" (13).

Like literary critic and theorist Simon Gikandi, I argue that globalization and modernity are often defined and understood outside the centers of economic, political, and intellectual authority quite differently than from inside. While some of the texts gesture toward an instrumental, delocalized understanding of national identity in line with popular academic arguments about flexible citizenship and alternative modernities, they might simultaneously express a deep faith in the redemptive possibilities of the nation-state quite at odds with hegemonic intellectual discourse. Moreover, while the texts are keen to draw attention to the newness of the new imaginaries generated by the shifting global flows of capital, ideologies, culture, and human bodies, their focus on the nineteenth-century *Amistad* rebellion suggests that these new figurations of self and diaspora are not so different from those of the past. For these reasons, I share Gikandi's claim that new global cultures cannot be understood without recognition of their "genesis in modernity" (Gikandi 642). However, given the way that many of the *Amistad* texts themselves locate that genesis in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, I challenge Gikandi's contention that modernity "cannot be conceived outside colonial governmentality" (642).

Despite *Rebellious Histories'* genealogical debts to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, I shy away from the term *black Atlantic*, preferring instead variations on the term *transnationalism*. Without a doubt, Gilroy's theorization of the Atlantic as a single unit of analysis offers a compelling

analytical framework for conceiving a politically transformative racialized subject formation that takes shape through the process of “intercultural positionality” (6) and of “the fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange” (15) across the overlapping spaces of racial, cultural, intellectual, and political borders. However, as I detail in chapter 4, Gilroy’s formulation of modernity makes no room for theorizing the modernity of those Africans who remained on the African continent during and after the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover ‘black Atlantic’ obscures the broader Indian and Pacific Ocean networks alongside which the Atlantic slave trade operated and the Enlightenment took shape. With the encompassing word ‘transnationalism’ I hope to preserve a sense of the larger economic and cultural forces at work, even if the focus of my study is, in fact, very much an African and African diasporic Atlantic world. Moreover, while ‘transnationalism’ signals a more generic framework than ‘black Atlantic,’ it simultaneously specifies a very particular condition of modern subjectivity. Defining transnationalism as a mediator “between nationalism and globalization,” Emily Apter posits that transnationalism is “a way to designate the claims of minoritarian languages and cultures and of diasporic communities” (Apter 70). This understanding of transnationalism as a contradictory space of mediation recognizes that the clash of global capital and the nation-state produces the conditions for the articulation of altogether original forms of identification and resistance just as readily as it engenders new and aggravated practices of domination. Dislocated from the home nation-state (or simply from nation-state citizen-subjectivity) by force, desire, or imagination, the individuals situated at the interstices of global capital and cultural flows give shape to distinct, if fluidly provisional, transnational cultural practices—what Arjun Appadurai terms “diasporic public spheres” (21)—to negotiate their feelings of displacement and belonging as transnationals. These territorially contingent transnational cultural practices defy the logic of coherence and stability that underwrite hegemonic conceptions of nation-state and racial identity; therefore, they constitute transgressive and destabilizing alternatives to the modernities of the Enlightenment and the nation-state.

Taken together, the *Amistad* texts form a unique body of cultural work that interlinks the histories of colonialism, trans-Atlantic slavery, postcolonial independence, civil rights and black power struggles, and global capitalism. In order to capture the complex critical questions that necessarily arise out of this constellation, *Rebellious Histories* brings the theories of postcolonialism, diaspora, and globalization into a productive

encounter to explore a more complex understanding of modernity and of the relationship between Africa and the United States. Individually, these theoretical frameworks refashion hegemonic definitions of modernity, which still too often pose Africans and African Americans as Euro-America's inescapably premodern others. Yet, diaspora studies too often holds the moment of terrifying rupture of the Middle Passage as the constitutive element of slavery's modernity, which effectively renders those who remained on the African continent spatially outside of and temporally prior to that modernity. Similarly, despite Achille Mbembe's declaration that "the [slave] trade was *the* event through which Africa was born to modernity" (Mbembe 13), trans-Atlantic slavery rarely features in African discourses of modernity. Rather, postcolonial African studies routinely subsume the transformative effects of Atlantic slavery to colonization as the determinate factor in the formation of African modernities. *Rebellious Histories* charts a more expansive cartography of the Atlantic world with its ever-morphing circuits of exchange—of which colonialism represents but one spatiotemporal element—to bring a new focus to the residual traces of the trans-Atlantic slave trade's remaking of village social structures, practices of violence, and definitions of personhood in Africa. With this focus on the modernity of the slave trade in Africa, *Rebellious Histories* opens up diaspora and postcolonial African studies more fully to each other and to a more nuanced understanding of modernity in the Atlantic world. Moreover, I argue that with closer attention to colonialism's global capitalist slave-trading past, postcolonial critiques of globalization can be more effectively mobilized to historicize global capitalism and to theorize its reconfiguration of culture and subjectivity.

For all the trans-Atlantic correspondences linking the Sierra Leonean and American *Amistad* texts, differences in history, political economy, and relative geopolitical power produce distinct, if overlapping, transnational effects in the two locations and, thus, produce different stakes for claiming the *Amistad* history. For these reasons I begin the book with two comparative chapters. The first reads African American and Sierra Leonean acts of claiming the revolt leader's name as a discursive process of naming the material conditions and racialized effects of global capitalism. In the chapter, I examine African American texts by antiprison activist Ruchell "Cinque" Magee and detective novelist Clifford Mason in which the author or his fictional character inhabits the name and persona of *Amistad* slave revolt leader Joseph Cinque. Alongside these American texts, I decode a Sierra Leonean visual arts movement that aimed to

reclaim Cinque's birth name, *Sengbe Pieh*. Renaming practices like these are, of course, part of a long history of shedding "slave" names, forging Pan-African or diasporic identities, and preserving histories of resistance. These dynamics are at work in the act of taking Cinque's name and in asserting his birth name, but I argue that such acts also discursively locate the self or selves historically in new economic and political conditions. Reclaiming the name 'Cinque/Sengbe,' I argue, charts the recognition of how the neoliberal denationalization of "legitimate" capital and the expansion of "phantom" global economies trading clandestinely in diamonds, drugs, and arms have disproportionately impacted material security and practices of self-representation. However, by juxtaposing Magee's writings with Mason's novels, and by counterposing their U.S.-based works with the Sierra Leonean paintings, I assess the productive possibilities and the limits of formulating a transnational black subjectivity vis-à-vis the differential privileges afforded Africans and African Americans under global capital.

Through an examination of publications by the Sierra Leonean president's office, the United States Information Service, and Sierra Leonean playwright Charlie Haffner, chapter 2 traces how the narrative of the *Amistad* revolt emerged in the late 1980s as a key modality through which meanings of Sierra Leonean nationalism and claims to state power were contested in a global frame. I argue that through its dialogic engagement with the two governmental texts, Charlie Haffner's play *Amistad Kata-Kata* transforms the fear of cannibalism that sparked the rebellion into a politically charged trope whereby it couples cannibalism as a name for the excesses carried out by local authorities with cannibalism as a description of the dehumanizing consumption of African bodies within the Atlantic slave system. The trope thus forms a key for translating the slave revolt into a discrediting, disrupting critique of the complex interrelations between global capitalism and excessive elite consumption in the postcolony.

In my effort to most effectively attend to the differential demands placed on the rebellion history by the Sierra Leoneans and Americans, chapters 3 and 4 focus individually—rather than comparatively—on U.S. and Sierra Leonean texts, thereby permitting me to better contextualize works coming from the two locations. In chapter 3, I read Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* (1997) and Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel *Echo of Lions* (1989) as mass culture artifacts produced in the wake of black nationalism and in the context of intensified anxiety about the United

States' place in an increasingly globalized world. In each text, I argue, the *Amistad* leader's presence inside U.S. nation-state borders threatens the hegemonic narratives of U.S. nationalism. As a figure that refuses incorporation into the body politic and that simultaneously offers African Americans a transnational mode of affiliation, Sengbe/Cinque reinvigorates the specter of black nationalism, but in a fashion that has as much to do with early 1970s' militancy as it does with the new diasporas forming in the 1980s and '90s. Where Spielberg's *Amistad* contains this threat to the white, patriarchally defined nation by characterizing Cinque as the quintessential neoliberal individual and by denying him a transnational affiliation with America's black population, I show how Chase-Riboud foregrounds how black subject formation has historically taken shape transnationally in the shadow of the global capitalist slave trade and thereby highlights how such formations destabilize the monologic nationalism and neoliberal individualism the film's gendered constructs reproduce.

During the first years of Sierra Leone's civil war (1991–2002), at least two playwrights and dozens of visual artists depicted the *Amistad* revolt or its leader Sengbe Pieh as part of what I contend was an effort to develop a new explanatory framework for historicizing the corruption, exploitation, and violence of political life in the country. The war was fought largely over control of the country's diamond mines and, consequently, over access to global markets. Where earlier Sierra Leonean and American *Amistad* texts call attention to the intersections of local and global hegemonies at work in the nation-state and to the racialized configurations of national citizenship, they do not fundamentally question the centrality of the state itself to modern subjectivity. Impending state collapse and mass population displacement across national borders, however, focused attention sharply on the genealogical birth of the nation-state in the modernity of Atlantic slave-trade capitalism and on the tenability of transnational citizenship under late capitalism. My analysis in the final chapter turns to texts produced during the civil war that make a more explicit critique of the categories of the nation-state and citizenship. In chapter 4, I assess Sierra Leonean writer Raymond DeSouza-George's 1994 play *The Broken Handcuff* and his compatriot Josee Lahai's commentary about his 1993 public portrait of Sengbe Pieh given retrospectively in December 2000 from a West African diaspora community just outside Atlanta, Georgia. Their texts, I assert, deploy the rebellion to develop a historically informed postcolonial critique of globalization to account for its history in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Lahai, I contend, filters

his understanding of citizenship and temporality for the contemporary transnational Sierra Leonean through the history of the *Amistad* slave rebellion. DeSouza-George, similarly, brings a new focus to the residual traces of the trans-Atlantic slave trade's remaking of village social structures, practices of violence, and definitions of personhood to historicize the violence and fragility of the nation-state.



In the subsequent pages, I deploy the terms *Amistad history* and *Amistad narrative* to identify the collection of events and experiences beginning with the *Amistad* rebels' initial capture in and around their homes and ending with their return and the establishment of the Christian mission by their American benefactors. As a necessary shorthand, the term simplifies a complex history of motivations, desires, tactics, and effects. It also risks obscuring the chronologies that the writers and artists privileged. Ruchell "Cinque" Magee, for instance, showed no interest in the narrative beyond the point of the Supreme Court decision, whereas Raymond DeSouza-George makes the tragic denouement of Sengbe Pieh's return to the destruction of his family and village a fundamental element of his thematic. I do my best to specify the author's usage and my own. Where I do not, I trust that the context will. For similar reasons but with opposite effect, I identify the rebellion leader by the names *Joseph Cinque*, *Joseph Cinqué*, *Joseph Cinquez*, and *Sengbe Pieh* to reflect how each author or artist chooses to name him and when they choose to name him by which name. At times, this mixing of names and spellings can get unwieldy. In chapter 3, for example, I use the spelling *Cinqué* to describe the character who appears in Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* and *Cinque* and *Sengbe Pieh* in accordance with Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel where the name shift signals a period when he verges on succumbing psychologically to enslavement. When making general comments or when describing the historical figure, I typically use *Sengbe Pieh*, attempting as best possible to respect the man so fiercely dedicated to preserving his liberty.